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Co-Starring God
Religion, Film, and World War II

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ABSTRACT

Motion pictures played a significant role in American society during the Second World War. Hollywood studios, as well as United States Army, used movies to educate audiences about the reasons for the war; to define America’s allies and enemies; address the changing roles of women and African-Americans in society; and to build up morale. Filmmakers deliberately used religious characters, imagery, and dialogue to help them accomplish their propaganda goals. This dissertation explores how Hollywood studios and the United States Army employed religion in World War II-era films. It examines the role that film censors, the Production Code Administration, and the Office of War Information played in shaping and limiting the ways that religion could be used by filmmakers. This dissertation also highlights how the actions and attitudes of American clergy before and during World War II impacted how screenwriters and producers used religious character, images, and dialogue in their motion pictures. Finally, this dissertation looks at the legacy that these films had with regards to the relationship between religion and World War II.
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## INTRODUCTION
To truly explain the relationship between film and religion during the Second World War--the purpose of this dissertation--it is necessary to start in December 1939, far away from the bright lights of Hollywood. Out of more than two hundred thousand clergy in the United States, the editors of *Fortune* magazine chose to profile the 31-year-old Reverend Edwin Daniels and his congregation, the First Presbyterian Church of Fulton, New York. There was neither anything special about First Presbyterian, nor was their anything that made this congregation stand out from any other in the country. The church was populated by solid, conservative, middle-class Americans: businessmen, bankers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and workers from various other occupations. Each Sunday, approximately two hundred of these average Americans gathered at First Presbyterian to worship God and hear Rev. Daniels preach the gospel. Each Sunday, the service was conducted in good order, after which the good people left the church to resume their lives much as they had week after week, year after year before.

That First Presbyterian seemed indistinguishable from other Protestant churches in the late 1930s made it appealing to the editors of *Fortune*. The members of the congregation reflected the values and aspirations of people all over the United States: hard work, faith, and patriotism. The same could not be said, however, of its young pastor, Edward Daniels. Daniels had been reared in Long Island, gone to college in Indiana, and then returned to New York to attend Union Theological Seminary. As a seminary student, he ministered to some of the poorest areas of the city while learning from some of the most able theological minds in the country. After completing his formal education, Daniels was called to a church in upstate New York where he labored in the service of the Lord until he was invited to fill the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church. Daniels displayed a secure, steady faith that was well-suited for his
congregation, with one notable exception. Unlike most of the members of his congregation, Edwin Daniels was an ardent pacifist.

Edwin Daniels was in ministry when American clergy were struggling with the morality of war. The death and disillusionment created by the First World War made it difficult for religious leaders to reconcile faith with war. Yet the troubling events in Spain, Ethiopia, China, Austria, and Czechoslovakia demanded that theologians rethink their beliefs about armed conflict. By the late 1930s, the opinions of American clergy about war and peace ran the full spectrum. Some hung to their earlier conclusions that God required a complete and total rejection of military solutions to solve world problems, while others began to move towards a position that recognized that armed conflict was a hideous, yet sometime necessary, evil. Finally, a few saw no conflict between war and religion, arguing that the Bible was full of references to God sanctioning and supporting Israel as it went to war with its neighbors.

Edwin Daniels was part of a shrinking yet still influential group of clergy who were unable or unwilling to concede that there was such a thing as a just war. This troubled the editors of *Fortune*, who used Daniels to represent those spiritual leaders whose dogmatic rejection of war placed them outside of the mainstream (at least *Fortune*'s definition of the mainstream). The horrors of World War I, atrocities that still troubled and paralyzed American clergy, were in the past. By December 1939, death and destruction were a new and serious reality in Europe and China. What Daniels failed to understand, the editors implied, was that something evil was moving in the world, something that required the United States to do more than offer a prayer for peace and certainly to do more than to turn the other cheek. The editors of *Fortune* were frustrated
that Daniels and his antiwar contemporaries failed to take seriously the threat that fascism posed to the world.¹

_Fortune_ was not alone in asking questions about American clergy and the stand they took on war and peace. In November 1939, _Time_ magazine raised similar concerns about the direction American Catholics were headed:

Although the Roman Catholic Church hates war as much as the next Christian, its attitude towards war has always been realistic. Modern simon-pure pacifism, as unrealistic as it is high-minded, has been fostered more by Protestants than by Catholics. Yet as World War II began to loom, widespread signs of pacifist leanings appeared among U.S. Catholics.²

That national publications such as _Fortune_ and _Time_ would devote pages to complaining about ministers’ opinions on international relations is a telling sign about the authority the public gave to religious leaders on the eve of the Second World War. Though it may be difficult for some contemporary readers to understand, before and during World War II, clergy in America held an important place in society. Their opinions, even about issues such as foreign policy, mattered. There were, of course, critics who opposed religious leaders for having too much power in the political process, but, in general, clergy held a respected and important place in American society. Their authority was not necessarily tied to the number of people that went to church or to synagogue each week. Less than 50 percent of the population, in fact, did so during the Depression. Rather, it was grounded in a widely shared conviction that clergy were the moral voice of the nation. People disagreed about what ministers, priests, and rabbis said in public, but they took seriously their right, indeed their obligation, to speak out. That is why this dissertation is relevant. Religion, and religious leaders, mattered in America

¹ “Presbyterian Church,” _Fortune_ (December 1939): 69-72, 123-124.
and needs to be accounted for in order to fully understand American society during the war.

Which leads to my second point: the Hollywood film industry at this time understood the importance of religion. Just like the editors of newsmagazines, studio executives, producers, and screenwriters paid attention to what clergy members said and what they believed. Yet studio heads also lived with the reality that religion and religious leaders were dangerous subjects to project on the silver screen. Unlike print journalists, filmmakers were not able to be as direct in their portrayal of the spiritual. In 1915, the United States Supreme Court ruled that movies were not protected by the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech, a decision that would not be overturned until the 1950s. Newspapers and magazines had a constitutional right to print what they wished without interference from the government, though they could be sued if the information they published was erroneous or slanderous. The state, however, could censor motion pictures before the public ever saw them.\(^3\)

There were numerous topics that almost all state and local censorship boards considered unacceptable in films. These included sex scenes, criminals not being punished for the crimes they committed, and excessive violence. Censors were extremely sensitive about religion. Film censors would not allow any actions or dialogue that made fun of or mocked a particular religion or a clergyperson. Because of this, the Production Code, Hollywood’s self-created and self-enforced censorship guideline, placed severe restrictions on how religions and their leaders could be portrayed on screen.

Even with these limitations, scriptwriters and producers still found ways to incorporate religion into their films. In fact, religious language, images, and characters

\(^3\) Mutual Film Corporation vs. Industrial Commission of Ohio 236 U.S. 230 (1915).
appear with a great deal of regularity in films produced during the golden age of Hollywood. This includes World War II-era movies. Over the past few decades, historians have made remarkable contributions to our understanding of the role that motion pictures played during the war. They have significantly added to our understanding of the relationship between Hollywood, the Production Code Administration, and the Office of War Information; the portrayal of women and African-Americans; and the structure and meaning of combat movies.⁴

Yet, with only a few exceptions, these same historians have overlooked or ignored both the religious content in World War II films and the reasons why Hollywood overcame so many obstacles in order to include religion in wartime motion pictures. There are occasional mentions of religion, but none of the major works on film and World War II includes any religious term in its index. Michael Shull and David Wilt’s comments about religion are representative of other authors: “While religion plays an important part in many wartime films, Hollywood chose to elevate such discussions above individual religious groups, preferring to cast its films in a ‘good vs. evil’ light, i.e. ‘God is on our side because the Axis is evil.’” Though they mention the importance of religion in wartime films, Shull and Wilt fail to include it when they create over 100 categories for analyzing World War II-era films.⁵ The one bright spot among such books is the recent work by Judith Weisenfield, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American

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⁵ Shull & Wilt, *Hollywood War Films*, 174. They do include the term “Jew” but it tends to take on an ethnic and not necessarily religious meaning.
Religion in American Film, 1929-1949. In particular, her chapter on World War II recognizes that religion played a propaganda role well outside of the “God is on our side” motif.⁶

If historians have been slow in examining the relationship between religion and film during the Second World War, those scholars who work in the field of religion and film have done even less. There is a growing body of literature on religion and motion pictures, but a complete lack of interest in films produced during the war (even though nearly 75% of all films ever made were made between 1937-1945). The reason for this lies in the methodological approach these scholars bring to the subject. In their groundbreaking book, Religion and Film, John R. May and Michael Bird argue that the theories developed for the study of literature and film should be the primary guide for those who want to truly understand how religion and film interact. Their argument has had a profound impact on the works that have followed. There is no interest in the historical method among film and religion scholars, no work done in the film archives, no attempt to place films within a broader historical framework.⁷

Instead, the emphasis on a literary approach has led to a focus on individual directors or artists. The auteur theory, or variations on this approach, has dominated the field. This makes wartime films very unattractive subjects to study. The studio system, which was in its heyday during the war, makes it difficult to discern exactly who was

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⁷ John R. May & Michael Bird, eds., Religion in Film (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Joel W. Martin & Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds., Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); Margaret R. Miles, Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Clive Marsh & Gaye Ortiz, Explorations in Theology and Film (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997); John May, ed., New Images of Religious Film (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997). There has been some growing interest in using the historical method in conjunction with religion, but almost all of this work is concentrated either early cinema (pre-talking) or post-war Biblical epics.
responsible for the content of a film. Even when the fingerprints of a particular screenwriter, director, or producer can be detected in a film, the role of the Production Code Administration, the Office of War Information, state and local censors, foreign governments, and outside organizations still have to be taken into account. Scholars of religion and film have shown little interest in sorting through this tangled web of influences.

This dissertation breaks new ground. It is one of the very first attempts to examine the relationship between religion and film during World War II from a historical perspective. In the following pages, I explore the messages Hollywood studios sent to audiences through their use of religion, including the types of characters and storylines that screenwriters and producers employed as well as the religious language and images that appeared in wartime films. I also place the use of religion within a wider historical context, including that of American religious history. Hollywood did not exist in a vacuum: studios, much like Time and Fortune magazines, paid attention to the words and actions of American religious leaders. Censors restricted the reactions of Hollywood screenwriters and producers, but, especially in the build-up to Pearl Harbor, several studios took pacifist clergy to task in their motion pictures.

Since Hollywood produced hundreds of motion pictures during the war years, it is impossible to deal with every film that contained some aspect of religion in it. My focus is limited to films that directly deal with the war, both before Pearl Harbor and after America’s official entry into the conflict. This includes movies that showed combat, films that dealt with the American home front, as well as pictures that portrayed our allies and enemies. While the majority of this dissertation is devoted to commercial feature films, I also examine the use of religion in government-sponsored motion pictures,
especially those produced by the Army Signal Corp unit that was under the command of Frank Capra.

Religion is a difficult term to define, especially when dealing with artistic expression. In film, religion can play a very important part without being directly represented on the screen. Religious characters are not necessarily clergy or individuals with an obvious commitment to an organized faith tradition. Religious language does not always reference God or quote from the Holy Scriptures. Ordinary objects can be made into powerful symbols of spiritual meaning. In truth, almost any movie can have some element of religion in it, however vague.

In this dissertation, I concentrate mainly on those aspects of religion that are immediately recognizable to the audience. These include characters like priests, ministers and nuns; prayers, sermons and other dialogue that is about spiritual matters; and physical symbols of religion (churches, crosses, Bibles, etc.). There are several reasons for this approach. First, when dealing with a new topic, it is best to address the obvious before moving onto the more obscure. Since there are almost no other works by historians that explore religion, film and World War II, there is more than enough evidence of straightforward religious language, symbols, and characters to fill the pages of this dissertation. Secondly, in World War II-era films, filmmakers often employed religion as a propaganda tool. Motion picture producers were not very subtle and frequently chose to make their statements about religion and the war in obvious ways. They used crosses, prayers, and priests as fully as the Production Code would allow. Finally, to focus on the hidden uses of religion is to assume that audiences were able and willing to invest energy into sorting out the symbolism. The films that I examine in this dissertation were massed-produced for a mass audience and for immediate consumption.
The religious symbols, language, and characters used by Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s were almost universally Christian. The United States has always been home to a large number of religious groups. The size of each faith varies greatly, as does their organizational structure and social influence. Historically the most dominant tradition has been Christianity, specifically Protestantism. This was as true in the middle decades of the 20th century as it was in earlier periods of American history. Yet Hollywood studio executives also paid close attention to the views of Roman Catholics. Neal Gabler has remarked that one of the great ironies of Hollywood is that a group of Jewish producers was making movies that reflected Catholic notions of morality for a Protestant audience.\(^8\) When I examine the impact of religious leaders on Hollywood, the focus will be on Christians. The religious content of the films often contained a very clear Catholic point of view.

I study the relationship between religion and film during World War II using the three basic questions. The first of these has to do with motivation. What were scriptwriters and producers responding to when they chose to insert religious objects, gestures, dialogue, and characters into their films? Why did Warner Bros. choose to produce the religious laden *Sergeant York* in 1941? Why did Fox choose to create a chaplain as a main character in *Guadalcanal Diary* when that character does not exist in the book that the film was based on? Why did RKO include a sympathetic German bishop in *Hitler’s Children*? Why did Warner Bros. resist the suggestion to create a religious dimension to the main character in *Pride of the Marines*?

The second set of questions involves content. What images, words, or characters were included in these films? What messages did these films send? Hollywood did more

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than assert that, “God was on our side.” Studios explored the religious life of GIs, used spirituality to remind audiences that African-Americans and women were inferior to white males, and created (often fictional) religious practices for America’s allies and enemies. Religion was also one of many propaganda tools that Hollywood and military film producers employed during World War II to downplay gender, racial, and ethnic tensions within the United States. Yet their religious propaganda ended up exposing as many inconsistencies in American culture as it succeeded in glossing over.

Finally, what impact did the religious content of these films have? Did these films change perceptions about our enemies? Were they able to help generate support for our allies? How did God and American society really expect soldiers and sailors to behave in the face of war and death? Were these movies responsible for creating a sort of general religion that played down differences in faith traditions and denominations? Did the religious content of these World War II-era films have any lasting impact on the way Americans viewed the last “Good War”?

Chapter one examines the anti-war debates before Pearl Harbor among American clergy and how two Warner Bros. films, *The Fighting 69th* and *Sergeant York* challenged isolationist ministers and their followers. Chapter two explores how the United States Army, under the guidance of famed Hollywood director Frank Capra, employed religious language and imagery to explain to the millions of servicemen that they were engaged in nothing short of a holy crusade. The third chapter focuses on Hollywood’s use of the religious conversion narrative and the American GI. I argue that the conversion narrative used religion to address underlying concerns about the war and not about the religious practices of American soldiers and sailors. Chapter four details how studios allowed
religion to function as a conservative reminder of the subservient place of African-Americans and women in American society.

The next chapter addresses films about our allies and enemies. I argue that Hollywood and the United States Army deliberately used religion to make America’s allies appear more sympathetic and worthy of support. Chapter six examines how these films presented the Germans and Japanese as both opponents of established religious traditions and devout worshippers of false human gods. Chapter seven examines the impact these films had on post-war American society, especially in their theology of non-denominationalism and their teaching of churchless, changeless reliance on God.
The summer and fall of 1941 were anxious times in Hollywood. Even as revenues (rising from $19.1 million in 1940 to $34 million in 1941) encouraged studio executives, the mounting political pressure applied by some members of the United States Senate caused these executives concern. It was not that problems with Congress were new to the men who ran Hollywood. Since its inception, the motion picture industry existed under a tenuous relationship with the federal government. The threat of a national censorship code, administered by bureaucrats in Washington, was repeatedly used to keep studios in check. No one—neither movie moguls nor levelheaded politicians—really wanted such a code. Yet just the idea that Congress could pass laws regulating the content of motion pictures was enough to cause sleepless nights for some Hollywood executives.

Still, something was different about this round of Congressional intimidation. When the Senate subcommittee on Interstate Commerce started its hearings on the motion picture industry, the stakes seemed a bit higher. In late 1941, the United States was headed for war, a fact that did not sit well with many Americans. So, in addition to using the hearings as a vehicle to attack Hollywood and all it stood for, isolationist Senators Gerald Nye and Bennett Clark also used the inquiry as a chance to attack those who supported American involvement in the Second World War. In the highly charged political atmosphere of pre-Pearl Harbor America, the motion picture industry was

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accused by Senators Nye and Bennett of deliberately making movies that encouraged the United States to enter the war in Europe. Nye and Clark even went so far as to testify before the subcommittee that movies like *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *Underground*, and *Sergeant York* were blatant pro-war propaganda.

The word “propaganda” evoked powerful memories of World War I. In the decades after the “War to End All Wars,” Americans had become increasingly disillusioned and skeptical about the merits of having fought in Europe. During the 1930s, the munitions corporations who manufactured weapons during World War I and the financiers who provided the funds necessary to buy those weapons were labeled “Merchants of Death” and blamed for luring the United States into the Great War in order to make money. All of the rhetoric about needing to fight to protect democracy was seen as a deadly propaganda ploy, a way to deceive Americans into supporting a war that they should never have been involved in. Thus, to accuse Hollywood studios of pro-war propaganda in 1941 was to suggest that moviemakers saw the latest European conflict as a way to once again turn a profit off of death and destruction.

The charge of making pro-war propaganda pictures was serious enough that Harry Warner, president of Warner Bros., joined other studio heads and industry executives in appearing before the subcommittee to answer the allegation. Warner did not shy away from the task of protecting his company’s reputation. During his testimony, Warner denied vehemently the “reckless and unfounded charges.” He was quick to point out that none of the Senators who testified before the subcommittee had even bothered to see the pictures that they swore were pro-war propaganda. Warner admitted that he had no love
for Nazi Germany and that his company had produced films that were openly anti-Nazi, but they were not, he contended, pro-war propaganda.\textsuperscript{10}

In true Hollywood fashion, Warner staged a public relations event to take his parting shot at the subcommittee. On October 9, 1941, Warner publicly “confessed” that his company’s films were in fact propaganda. He did invite members of the Senate subcommittee to the opening of \textit{One Foot in Heaven} (a movie about the trials and struggles of a faithful Methodist minister), though it’s unknown if any senators actually attended. Then he proclaimed that Warner Bros. did in fact make propaganda pictures—not for war, but for Christianity. Playing on the anti-Semitism that was evident during the Senate hearings, Warner, a devout Jew, tried to refocus public attention on religion. He embraced the term propaganda and turned it on his adversaries, challenging them to ridicule his pro-Christian film: “If the Senate committee is against movie propaganda, even when it is propaganda for good, we gladly admit that this picture proves the committee’s point.” None of Warner’s critics took the bait. Not that it really mattered: in less than two months the whole issue was moot. Soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, all of Hollywood’s major studios were producing pro-war propaganda films with the blessing and encouragement of the United States government.\textsuperscript{11}

Looking back, it becomes clear that Senators Nye and Clark were correct in some of their accusations. In the years right before Pearl Harbor, many Hollywood studios were making pictures that conveyed interventionist themes. Harry Warner’s protestations notwithstanding, Warner Bros. was making more than its share of films arguing that America needed to help stop the spread of fascism. Moreover, Warner’s studio was

\textsuperscript{10} Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate Commerce, \textit{Moving-Picture Screen and Radio Propaganda}, 77\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., 23 September 1941, 366-67.

willing to go where other Hollywood studios feared to tread—into the realm of religion.
In at least two pictures, *The Fighting 69th* and *Sergeant York*, Warner Bros. fought
directly against religious leaders who opposed entering another world war. This was no
small feat, considering the influence clergy had in American society. Yet Harry Warner
considered the threat posed by Adolph Hitler to be serious enough for God Almighty to
take sides.

Hollywood’s support for American involvement in World War II did not emerge
full-blown nor did it happen overnight. It came about slowly, over the course of the
1930s. There were several reasons why studio executives hesitated over making films
that advocated active participation in World War II. The first had to do with
Hollywood’s *raison d’être*: profits. During the Great Depression, the profit margins of
many films depended on revenues generated by foreign distribution. As film scholar
Robert Sklar notes, “During the interwar years, American pictures as a whole did no
better than break even at the domestic box office. But with production costs already
covered, every ticket sold outside of the United States, less overseas distribution costs,
produced profits.” If studios made motion pictures that angered leaders of other nations,
you faced the possibility that their movies might be banned. The cost of lost ticket sales
and rental fees could be millions of dollars. Most studio heads were fearful of making
pictures that might offend the Nazi government because the German-controlled market
was deemed too lucrative and too essential to the bottom line to risk losing.¹²

Secondly, the industry’s own Production Code Administration was loath to see
studios make films that were too political. Hollywood executives created the PCA in the
1930s as a means of warding off calls for the federal government to censure motion

pictures. Studios already dealt with a number of state and local censorship bodies, which they believed was difficult enough. They did not want a national organization telling them what kinds of pictures they could or could not make. By self-imposing a censorship code, studio executives hoped to reassure concerned citizens that Hollywood was capable of producing appropriate entertainment without the interference of the United States government.

During the late 1930s, when isolationist impulses were most powerful in America, the PCA warned studios not to make pictures that appeared to take sides in the growing global conflict. There were provisions in the Code that dictated that “the just rights, history, and feelings of any nation are entitled to consideration and respectful treatment,” and that “the history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.” This section of the Code was used as a justification by the PCA to strongly discourage studios from making films that appeared to support the arguments of interventionism. While this might seem cowardly of the PCA, it is necessary to bear in mind that the PCA was created to protect movie studios from attacks. The PCA opposed blatantly anti-Nazi films because they could have drawn too much negative attention to Hollywood. The Senate hearings in the fall of 1941 were exactly what the PCA wanted to avoid.\(^{13}\)

Finally, Hollywood executives were slow to make pictures in support of American intervention because they needed time to rethink their own positions on war and peace, positions that had shifted significantly since World War I. During the First World War, Hollywood producers had actively participated in portraying the conflict as a

struggle of good versus evil. Movies were not shy in presenting Germans as bestial Huns out to pillage Europe and rape its women. These films were purposely designed to illicit patriotic emotions among American audiences and in some instances were responsible for men entering the military.\footnote{Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, \textit{Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I} (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997): 196; Koppes and Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 21, 22, 26-27, 29.}

After World War I ended, many filmmakers had a change of heart. While there were occasional films that celebrated some aspects of the Great War—for example, Paramount’s 1927 Oscar winning \textit{Wings}—Hollywood attempted to atone for its enthusiastic support of the conflict with films that seriously questioned the usefulness of war, including the influential \textit{The Big Parade} (1925) and \textit{All Quiet On the Western Front} (1930). Depression-era anti-war movies reflected the disillusionment with World War I that permeated the nation as a whole. The “War to End All Wars” appeared to have solved nothing: millions of soldiers had lost their lives, including thousands of Americans, yet the same old European powers continued to rule their empires. Novels, plays, books and movies began to mock the idea that World War I had been a holy crusade to free the world from tyranny.\footnote{Doherty, \textit{Projections of War}, 87.}

During the late 1930s, as the evils of fascism became clearer and the film markets in Germany and elsewhere closed to American films, studio executives started producing movies that argued that America might need to enter the war. In a number of cases, the scriptwriters or directors for these films were themselves refugees from Germany who fled because of their opposition to the Nazi régime. The trendsetting studio for these films was Warner Bros. As early as 1938, Warner Bros. ceased operating in Germany,
even while other studio executives insisted that to abandon the German market would bankrupt them.\textsuperscript{16}

The decision by Warner Bros. to stop working in Nazi Germany was motivated by many factors, including religion. Through his own trips to Europe, Harry Warner, the president of Warner Bros., was well aware of what was happening to his fellow Jews in Germany. Though he often backed Republican candidates, Warner strongly supported Franklin Roosevelt’s plan to prepare for war. In his public statements, Roosevelt shared Warner’s conviction that the fascist threat had a religious as well as political dimension. In his State of the Union Speech in 1939, the President made an explicit link between religion and democracy:

Where freedom of religion has been attacked, the attack has come from sources opposed to democracy. Where democracy has been overthrown, the spirit of free worship has disappeared. And where religion and democracy have vanished, good faith and reason in international affairs have given way to strident ambition and brute force.

An ordering of society which relegates religion, democracy and good faith among nations to the background can find no place within it for the ideals of the Prince of Peace. The United States rejects such an ordering, and retains its ancient faith.

There comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone, but the tenets of faith and humanity on which their churches, their governments and their very civilization are founded. The defense of religion, of democracy and of good faith among nations is all the same fight. To save one we must now make up our minds to save all.\textsuperscript{17}

Warner used similar language in June of 1940, when, in front of some 6000 Warner Brothers employees and their wives, he delivered a rambling speech about the value of faith and the need for America to stand united against Hitler and his attack on


\textsuperscript{17} Gabler, \textit{An Empire of Their Own}, 343. As several authors have noted, Harry and his brother Jack, both Republicans, supported FDR in the 1932 election, but soon thereafter returned to the Republican Party. See Gabler, 317-318 and Birdwell, \textit{Celluloid Soldiers}: 8-9.
freedom. Included in the speech was a quotation from a German book entitled *Defilement of Race*:

> The mission of German nationality in the world is to free this world of JEWS AND CHRISTIANS...If we wish to create something new we cannot permit existence and operation of disorganizing factors such as Christianity...GERMANIC BLOOD AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISMAL WATER CAN NEVER MIX.

Warner went farther than Roosevelt when he claimed that opposition to Nazism was a defense of both Christianity and Judaism. While he may have been concerned primarily about Jews in Europe, Warner was wise enough to know that their vulnerability would mean little unless Christians in America understood that the danger was imminent. So Warner printed his speech for his employees to read and reflect upon, and he used his studio’s motion pictures as a vehicle to warn the rest of America of the impending danger of fascism. A number of those films would incorporate Christianity as a source of strength for Americans as well as a set of values that Nazism sought to destroy.18

Since the United States was not yet at war, studios like Warner Bros. were limited in the ways that they could portray this threat to democracy and religion. Before Pearl Harbor, neither the Production Code Administration nor Congress would have tolerated movies that placed American military personnel in actual combat scenes with contemporary German or Japanese forces. There was the possibility of making films located in Europe or China and placing non-military American characters in the midst of the fighting, much as Alfred Hitchcock did in his 1940 production *Foreign Correspondent*. The action could also be set in the United States with enemy agents lurking about, which was the approach Warner Bros. used in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*

18 Harry M. Warner, *United We Stand, Divided We Fall!* 5 June 1940: 6. Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California (hereafter WBA).
(1939). But if producers wanted to portray American men in combat there remained only one viable option: they had to return to the past and use World War I as a backdrop. The problem with this tactic was that, for the better part of a decade, Hollywood had used the First World War as a setting for its anti-war films. As long as Americans retained doubts about the value of the Great War, doubts Hollywood had helped to foster, they would be hesitant to support U.S. involvement in another world war. Studios had to find a way to rehabilitate the war movie and reinterpret the First World War as a necessary struggle for freedom and democracy, instead of as a senseless waste of men and materials.19

THE FIGHTING 69TH (1940)

Warner Bros. made its first attempt at reviving and redeeming the World War I movie when it released The Fighting 69th in January of 1940. The film featured one of Warner’s biggest names, James Cagney, co-starring with Pat O’Brien. Just a year before, Cagney and O’Brien had appeared on screen together in Angles With Dirty Faces, a film in which Cagney played a gangster and O’Brien an Irish-Catholic priest. In The Fighting 69th, O’Brien again assumed the role of a priest, but this time Cagney played Jerry Plunkett, a wisecracking, know-it-all soldier who talks tough but turns out to be a coward when it comes time to fight.20

The film begins with Plunkett and a group of other draftees reporting for service. From the moment he enters boot camp, Plunkett talks tough and acts tough, but his big mouth gets him in trouble with his superiors. In his first day in camp, Plunkett’s attitude so angers the sergeant of his unit that he ends up doing extra duties. Very early in the

19 Doherty, Projections of War: 87.
20 “Wild” Bill Donovan, the commander of the 69th during World War I, signed on early to help Warner Bros. develop their picture. He even sent a telegram to his friend Louis B. Mayer at MGM asking him to loan Spencer Tracy to Warner Bros. for the part of Father Duffy. The Fighting 69th story file #6, WBA.
movie Plunkett also finds ways to alienate himself from the other men in his regiment. When the draftees are in line to get inoculations Plunkett teases other men when they react to the shots, claiming that he is too tough to be affected. He passes out as soon as he gets his.

While everyone else wishes Plunkett would leave, Father Duffy, the regimental chaplain, sees him as a lost sheep in need of redemption. He reaches out to Plunkett, but his efforts seem to be in vain since nothing that the priest does makes a difference in Plunkett’s actions. Plunkett continues to boast of his own toughness and to refuse Duffy’s repeated requests to attend Mass. When the regiment travels to France and finally sees combat, Plunkett, who bragged about what he would do to the Germans, turns out to be a coward. Fr. Duffy never gives up and constantly encourages Plunkett to have faith in God so that he will have the strength and courage to fight. Yet Plunkett seems lost, beyond hope, until he observes Fr. Duffy displaying exceptional courage when a hospital is bombed. He then finds both faith and a backbone. He heads to the front and gives his life to save his regiment.

As often happens in Hollywood, the final version of the film was very different from the initial idea. When the movie was first conceived, it was supposed to center around O’Brien’s character, Father Duffy. There was a real Father Francis Duffy (1871-1932) who had served as a chaplain during World War I for the New York 69th, the famed Irish-Catholic regiment popularly known as the Fighting 69th. Duffy became a national celebrity when he published *Father Duffy’s Story*, detailing his adventures with the 69th. After leaving military chaplaincy, Fr. Duffy served a parish in New York City, and he was so well respected by the citizens of New York that they erected a bronze statue of him in Times Square in 1937.
Executives at Warner Bros. saw propaganda value and profit potential in Fr. Duffy’s life. It was not the only studio interested in the famed priest: 20th Century Fox actually purchased the rights to Fr. Duffy’s book before Warner Bros. could acquire them. Not to be outmaneuvered by its rival, Warner Bros. secured the exclusive cooperation of many of the living members of the 69th for their film, making it impossible for Fox to begin production. After months of arguing between the studios Fox executives finally gave up and sold the rights to Warner Bros. 21

The decision to shift the focus of the film from the historical Fr. Duffy to the fictional character of Jerry Plunkett partly came about when Cagney was cast for the part of the cowardly soldier. A movie star of James Cagney’s magnitude would not be used as a supporting character. However, complaints from Catholic priests also forced Warner Bros. to downplay the role of Fr. Duffy in the final version of the movie. At some point a group of priests saw copies of a draft script and expressed concern to the powerful Legion of Decency that Warner Bros. was using the character of Fr. Duffy to promote war. The Legion exerted a great deal of power in Hollywood. While it claimed it was not a censorship body, the Legion did issue ratings for each film that was released. If a movie received a negative review, the Legion would encourage Catholics to stay away from that particular picture. Hollywood studio heads, fearful that the Legion might actually be able to convince hundreds of thousands of Catholics to boycott a film, opted to negotiate potential changes with Legion officials before a film was released. Such a

policy established the Legion as one of the most powerful censorship bodies in the country.

In the case of *The Fighting 69th*, Legion officials agreed with the priests’ assessment of the script and advised Warner Bros. of their objections. It is possible that they based their concern on an outline written by Norman Reilly Raine in July of 1939. In that outline, Raine wrote, “War [Fr. Duffy] hates; and the only glory it possesses for him is that it calls out in the men the best they have in uncomplaining self-sacrifice and friendship.” This was not much to get upset about. Raine, however, continued by having Fr. Duffy say, “I am not a militarist, for that is a bad thing. But so long as liberties must be defended or aggression put down, honor demands that men shall be willing to die for these righteous causes.” Militarist or not, these lines left open the possibility that war might be acceptable, provided that the cause was righteous. Such language angered anti-war clergy and conjured up ghosts of World War I that many American ministers simply did not want to confront, on or off the screen. 

Warner’s solution was to make Jerry Plunkett the main character and to limit Fr. Duffy’s pontifications about war. The only direct comment that the priest makes about war happens at the end of the film, when, in the background, a parade of soldiers passes, many of whom died in the film. Pat O’Brien’s face is superimposed over these images, and he offers up a prayer for those who gave their life in the Great War:

O heavenly Father, here I beseech you the prayer of this, America’s lost generation. They loved life too, O Lord. It was as sweet to them as to the living of today. They accepted privation, wounds, and death that an ideal might live. Don’t let it be forgotten, Father. Amid turmoil and angry passions, when all worthwhile things seem swept away, let the tired eyes of a troubled world rise up and see the shining citadel at which these young lives form the imperishable stone. America. A citadel of peace. Peace forever more. This I beg of you, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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22 *Fighting 69th*, story file #7, WBA.
The Legion approved these changes as well as the final version of the film. This prayer, however, was a deceptive ending to a film in which the character Fr. Duffy never once questions the morality or place of war. If Fr. Duffy was not a militarist in *The Fighting 69th*, he was not a pacifist either.\(^{23}\)

While *The Fighting 69th* does not go so far as to say that God endorses war, neither does it claim that God condemns war. What the film does suggest is that God is a very real presence in the regiment. God is not disconnected from the military, and, through the wise counsel of Fr. Duffy, he even seems to guide the 69th. Part of what made *The Fighting 69th* such an attractive story was the ability to use a military chaplain as one of the main characters. Unlike a parish priest, a military chaplain could be placed right in the middle of battle. The effect could be quite powerful. In classical Hollywood films, audiences were often invited to see ministers as representatives of God. Where the clergy were, there was God; what the priest said, God said. Thus, if the chaplain was present on the frontlines, then so was God. That is why, throughout most of *The Fighting 69th*, Fr. Duffy wears a military uniform. He is an officer and is frequently present when the commander of the regiment, Major Donovan, makes big decisions.

Even with such weighty responsibilities, the character of Fr. Duffy is a likeable man, at times just one of the guys, though both enlisted men and officers always respect him. They are his flock, and his greatest moral concern is not over whether war is wrong or right, but whether he will have the strength to help lead them when they enter combat. He is not paralyzed by his religious convictions. Instead, they lead him to a deeper understanding of his responsibility to his men. When he learns that the troops are finally leaving for Europe, Fr. Duffy drops to his knees and prays to God:

\(^{23}\) Leab, “*The Fighting 69th*”, 113.
Almighty God, in thy infinite mercy grant unto me thy servant the wisdom to guide my young flock through the trials of war. Their need will be great O Lord, and I am weak. Therefore I beseech thee, through thy son Jesus Christ, grant me the strength to keep them steadfast in the faith, in decency and courage, to the glory of God and their country and their regiment in bad times to come.

There is a strong connection between faith and patriotism in *The Fighting 69th*: in the film, one needs to have faith in order to have courage in battle. This is the lesson that Jerry Plunkett does not get until the very end of the movie. Throughout the film, Fr. Duffy tries to get Plunkett back into the church because he knows that without faith Jerry does not have the strength to fight. The point is made explicit when every member of the regiment, including a Jewish soldier, attends a midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—everyone except Plunkett. Fr. Duffy pleads with Plunkett to go, but Plunkett refuses:

Plunkett: Now look here Chaplain, get this once and for all, I came over here to soldier not to pray. I don’t go for that holy Joe stuff so there is no use in trying to convert me.
Fr. Duffy: I’m not trying to convert you son, I’m asking you to come back to your religion and recognize the fact of Almighty God.

When the regiment gets to the front Fr. Duffy insists that he go into the trenches with the men even though he is unarmed. When the bullets start to fly, Plunkett, who has a gun but no faith, suffers a panic attack. Fr. Duffy finds him cowering in the trench and tries to get him to recognize, once again, the relationship between faith and courage:

Fr. Duffy: But Jerry, there is only one way you can lick it; that’s through faith and prayer.
Plunkett: Faith. Listen to those bullets. Can faith stop them? If a guy gets his pins blown off, will prayer put them back on again or bring the dead back to life?
Fr. Duffy: No, but faith and prayer can help you defeat the fear that is possessing you. Ah, Jerry, it’s peace and courage I’m offering ya. If only open your heart and take it.

Plunkett’s cowardly actions lead to the death of other members of his unit, and eventually he is arrested and court-martialed for his behavior. He is found guilty of desertion and sentenced to hang. Fr. Duffy goes to visit him one last time before his
execution. Plunkett does not ask the priest for prayers but for a good word to the commanding officer that will get him out of this situation. Fr. Duffy refuses, yet preaches to Plunkett once again about the importance of faith and courage. Then a bomb hits the building that is being used as a jail. Plunkett now has his chance to escape his death sentence. Fr. Duffy tries to convince him to take this opportunity to return to his regiment rather than to run away. Bombs continue to rain down around the two men. But Plunkett is still a coward inside; he does not have faith, and it is not at all certain that he will do the right thing and go back to the front and fight. It is at this point in the film that Plunkett has his long awaited conversion to faith and courage. He follows Fr. Duffy into a makeshift hospital located next to his jail cell. In the midst of an enemy attack, with bombs coming down on them, Fr. Duffy stands up in the middle of the hospital and keeps the wounded men calm by leading them in the Lord’s Prayer. Suddenly, Plunkett sees the connection between faith and courage. He kneels to pray and, emboldened by his newfound faith in God, heads off to the front. He ends up in the same foxhole as the sergeant who despises him and the sergeant is immediately suspicious of Plunkett’s motives. However, when Plunkett takes control of a mortar and begins firing shells into the enemy lines, the sergeant is convinced that something has happened to Plunkett. The climax of his conversion comes when a grenade lands in the foxhole and Plunkett falls across it, saving the sergeant’s life. The blast does not kill him immediately. The wounded Plunkett is carried to the hospital, where the sergeant, Fr. Duffy, and Major Donovan all praise his courage and valor. Redeemed at last, Plunkett dies a hero’s death.

In a supplemental story written by Brendan Wood Fr. Duffy not only leads the men in prayer during the attack he also hands out cigarettes which makes him very popular with the men. While Wood’s hospital
Even with the changes Warner Bros. made to the character of Fr. Duffy, some clergy were offended by the actions of the cleric in *The Fighting 69th*. What was the source of their concern? Why would a military chaplain who never argues explicitly that America should go to war be a problem? Part of the answer can be found in the fact that the film reminded clergy of their own participation in World War I. By most accounts, religious leaders, especially Christian ones, behaved in a manner that was anything but Christ-like during the Great War. They fell victim to the same government propaganda efforts that helped push America as a whole into war with Germany in 1917.\(^{25}\)

Their uncritical acceptance of the government’s reasons for going to war led American clergy to do two things that they would regret after the conflict ended. First, clergy erased the line between church and state and equated faithfulness to God with devotion to country. The famous revivalist Billy Sunday declared that, “Christianity and Patriotism are synonymous terms.” John E. Wickham, of the New York Apostolic Fathers, stated, “The man who is disloyal to the flag is disloyal to Christianity; the State must be obeyed under pain of incurring the guilt of mutiny against God.” Rev. James Vance of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville wrote that, “We must keep the flag and the Cross together, for they are both working for the same ends.” While the connection between religion and patriotism has often been associated with conservative Christians in the late twentieth century, liberals were just as vocal in their support of joining the cross and the flag during World War I. Some progressive clergy even saw the war as a God-given opportunity to promote universal peace. The irony of their argument—that war’s devastation and destruction were necessary precursors to peace—

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\(^{25}\) Not all ministers succumbed to the temptation to hate their enemy, and the historic peace churches, Quakers and Mennonites, continued their long tradition of opposition to war.
would come back to haunt them after the fighting ceased in 1918 and the world plunged into a global depression that gave rise to numerous fascist regimes.  

The second failure of American clergy members was their willingness to use their pulpits to proclaim the inhumanity of the Germans. They accepted and promulgated government propaganda that was designed to arouse hatred towards Germany. Ray Abrams, a sociologist who studied the behavior of religious leaders during World War I, concluded in 1933 that, “the members of the cloth and their followers were susceptible to war psychology and crowd-thinking in the same manner as were other citizens.” He went on to chastise clergy for their actions: “while claiming to be motivated by the teachings of Jesus and superior humanitarian desires, [Christians] did not in general demonstrate any different code of ethics or type of behavior from the unbelievers.” While Abrams’ book was published during a time of intense anti-war sentiment in the United States, the preachers he quotes from did in fact refer to German soldiers as “mad dogs,” “rattlesnakes,” and “hyenas.” Bishop William Alfred Quayle wrote of the enemy:

> We are not at war with the …Junkers…not Prussians, nor the Kaiser…The German people is what we are at war with…Germany has ravished the women of Belgium, Serbia, Roumania, Poland, Armenia…Germany has poisoned wells, crucified inhabitants and soldiers, burned people in their houses…An eye-witness tells of seeing women dead at a table with their tongues nailed to the table left to die…and to climax its horrid crimes Germany has inflicted compulsory polygamy on the virgins of its own land.

The behavior of many clerics during World War I was not the proudest moment in the history of American Christianity. When the war ended, and the passions of patriotism began to die down, many clergy realized how very far they had strayed from their own

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religious convictions. In the years between the two world wars, most ministers committed themselves to the cause of peace, and a good number publicly renounced war as a valid option for Christians. Yet World War I remained for many clergy a painful memory of moral failure, and they were not anxious to relive that time on the movie screen.27

Warner Bros. did not use The Fighting 69th as a vehicle for directly addressing the spiritual failings of America’s religious leaders during the Great War. Instead, the studio used the character of Fr. Duffy to advance the idea that one could be a Christian, indeed a man of the cloth, and still be a patriot. The character of Fr. Duffy is not a rabid Hun-hater. He is not a victim of the wartime hysteria that gripped so many clergy during the war. Rather, he is a religious figure who is not divided within himself about the morality of war. While World War I may not have turned out to be much of a holy crusade, in The Fighting 69th there is a strong connection made between religious faith and courage in battle. Furthermore, the character who delivers this message is never armed and never fires a shot, but is a constant presence to his men in times of crisis and a source of strength and encouragement.

What The Fighting 69th did was bring back the possibility of a relationship between religion and war without the hatred and jingoism that polluted the air during World War I. This does not mean that The Fighting 69th was without its share of ethnic slurs; it just means that they were not coming out of the mouth of a religious leader. While the movie did not directly take on pacifist clergy, it did present American audiences with the possibility that, even though war is hell, with faith in God, Americans

could enter any conflict confident that they would prevail without losing their souls in the process.

**SERGEANT YORK (1941)**

To contemporary audiences, *The Fighting 69th* seems rather uninspiring and dated. The same is true of another Warner film, *Sergeant York*, which was, however, the top grossing film of 1941, taking in more money than Charlie Chaplain’s *The Great Dictator*. The movie also earned two Academy Awards, including Best Actor for Gary Cooper, who played the part of Sgt. Alvin York. Certainly, the presence of Gary Cooper had a great deal to do with the film’s popularity at the time. Yet there was more to it than star appeal. *Sergeant York* touched on issues that were real and pressing. By the time of its release American religious leaders and their followers were embroiled in a debate over the morality of war. The issue was no longer over past abuses of patriotism and faith. The realities of war in Asia and Europe confronted people of faith daily, and new questions began to dominate the discussion. Could people of faith stand by and do nothing while the Germans, Italians, and Japanese raped and pillaged Europe and the Pacific? Which was the greater evil—fighting a war, or failing to prevent the suffering of helpless women and children? Rather than producing a clear consensus, these and countless other questions further divided people of faith. While most Hollywood studios opted to avoid dealing openly with the moral implications of war in their films, Warner Bros. took the issue head-on when it released *Sergeant York*.

The idea to make a film based on the life of World-War-I hero Alvin York had been brought up as early as 1919, when York’s regiment returned from Europe. His life story and acts of heroism contained all the ingredients of a box-office smash. Alvin C.
York hailed from a small backcountry community in Tennessee called Pall Mall. A hell-raiser in his youth, York got religion as a young adult and began to live his life according to the doctrines of his new church, which believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. That meant following both the spirit and letter of the Ten Commandments, including the sixth commandment—Thou Shall Not Kill. When the Army drafted York in 1917, he tried to obtain the status of a conscientious objector, but it was denied him because the government did not recognize his small church, the Church of Christ in Christian Union, as a legitimate denomination. York faced a dilemma. If he reported as ordered he would be required to pick up a gun and potentially kill another human being in combat. If he refused to report the army could arrest him and he would have violated other passages in the Bible that instructed Christians to obey government authorities. After much soul searching York decided to answer his country’s call to arms and he reported to boot camp. ²⁸

Back in the Tennessee hills, York was well known for his hunting skills and the way he handled his rifle. He also impressed his military commanders with his shooting ability in boot camp. York’s accuracy with a rifle formed part of the lore that surrounded him and contributed to his rise as a celebrity. He was a 20th century version of Daniel Boone who distinguished himself in modern combat, yet he did so without succumbing to the inhumanity that seemed to define World War I. The self-discipline that he found through his Christian faith, coupled with his natural hunting skills, represented much of what was good and right about the United States to his audiences. Americans thought of themselves as a peace loving, God-fearing people, but they were capable of defending

²⁸ Schatz, Boom and Bust, 466.
themselves if and when the need arose. Unlike the enemy, Americans knew restraint and had a fundamental respect for human life.

The event that thrust York into the limelight occurred in October of 1918. York’s regiment was engaged in a fierce battle with the Germans in the Argonne Forest. During the fighting York killed several of the enemy but he was also credited with capturing, almost single handedly, 132 German soldiers. Other members of his regiment contended that York was no hero and that he hardly acted alone, but as word spread of this remarkably brave and humane act, York’s name was the one that people repeatedly mentioned. Why the other members of the regiment were ignored is not clear. Perhaps it had to do with York’s religious beliefs or with his down-home sincerity. For whatever reason, the Army singled out York as the man responsible for the capture of these German soldiers. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and Alvin York returned to the United States a certified war hero.

Back home in America, people presented York with numerous offers to cash in on his fame, including a proposal from producer Jesse Lasky of Famous Players-Paramount to have his life made into a movie. York turned them all down, refusing to turn his military service into a commodity. Doubtless, his religious convictions made it difficult for him to take money in exchange for taking a human life. Even though York had fulfilled his patriotic duty he did not want to be an advocate of war. War involved killing, and, even if the cause was just, killing was still morally wrong in his eyes. Throughout most of the 1930s, York’s beliefs about war lead him to align himself with isolationists like Charles Lindberg and isolationist organizations like America First. He did not want to see his actions in World War I turned into an argument for interventionism.
After the war, York returned to Tennessee and devoted himself to improving educational opportunities in his county. These included plans to build a new school, a proposal that local authorities met with resistance. Frustrated by his inability to master local politics, York started to raise the money for the school on his own. Still extremely popular with the public, York embarked on numerous speaking tours as a means of funding his school, yet financial woes constantly troubled his plans. At one point York was willing to talk about turning his life story into a movie but with the condition that filmmakers downplay his heroics in the Argonne Forest. York’s story simply was not compelling cinema without reference to his military service and no studio took on the project.

The need for money finally persuaded Alvin York to let someone make a movie about his role as the reluctant war hero. That someone was Jesse Lasky. Back in 1931, Lasky had been forced out of Famous Players-Paramount when the studio hit on hard times. He spent the next several years trying to get back into the motion picture business. In 1938, an executive at RKO suggested that Lasky explore the York story again. Lasky immediately started to work on what he hoped was his big break. He put together a story idea that centered on York’s heroics in the Argonne. That turned out to be the easy part. The real challenge was selling the project to York, who still wanted his educational endeavors, not his military service, to be the main focus of any film about his life.

Lasky claimed to meet with York several times in Tennessee but was unable to make any progress. The two men had little in common. Lasky, a small, Jewish film producer from some strange place called California, was trying to gain the trust and confidence of a tall, burley, born-again Christian from the insolated rural south. No matter how much Lasky talked, York remained unconvinced. Sensing that his big return
to Hollywood was about to die in the hills of Tennessee, Lasky desperately resorted to playing upon York’s patriotism. York, Lasky argued, had answered his country’s call when it was in trouble before, and Lasky was certain that, if the need arose, York would do it again. York agreed that he would. That second time had come, Lasky pleaded: America was in danger from fascism. York’s duty in 1939 was not to pick up a gun and go off to Europe. Instead, it was to let is life, including his actions in World War I, serve as an example of courage and patriotism for all Americans. A movie about York’s life, produced by Lasky, was the best way York could serve his country.29

After some tense negotiations between the lawyers of both men, York finally agreed to let Lasky make his movie, provided that Lasky paid York $50,000 and gave him the right to decide who played him on screen. Lasky agreed and gave York a check for $25,000, then headed back to California. Lasky’s next move was to find the funds to cover the check he had just given to York, and then to secure the substantial amount of money that he needed for the rest of York’s fee and the costs of producing the movie. Lasky first approached RKO about the picture since an RKO executive had rekindled his interest in the film, but the studio passed, as did several others. Finally, Lasky went to Warner Bros.

The head of the studio, Harry Warner, he had provided Lasky with financial help when Lasky lost his position at Famous Players-Paramount. Over the years they developed a good friendship. It did not hurt that Lasky’s nephew, Mervyn LeRoy, was also Warner’s son-in-law. Still, Lasky felt he needed an angle to get Warner’s backing for the movie. So, he played on both Warner’s patriotism and his sense of faith. Lasky pitched York’s story as one of conversion, both to faith in God and to faith in America. It

worked. Warner agreed to finance the film, and Lasky walked away with a contract that guaranteed him 25% of the film’s gross earnings.\(^{30}\)

The conversion story of Alvin York touched some sensitive nerves in 1941. American Christians were deeply divided among themselves over the morality of war. Like York, many believers had learned that taking human life was wrong. But was killing during wartime, if the cause seemed right and just, really prohibited by the Bible? Scripture offered several contradictory answers. In Genesis, killing is presented as a consequence of sin. Some Christians believed that the killing of humans by humans was not part of God’s plan for creation, and the Ten Commandments prohibit it. Yet that is not the final word on the subject: in other parts of Scripture, God not only sanctions war but also instigates armed conflict. God sends the Israelites into the Promised Land with instructions to make war against those countries’ current occupants. God orders them to kill all of the gentile residents of the land or God will punish the Israelites. God also uses war to punish Israel by sending other nations to invade it when they sin. In the New Testament, Jesus warned his followers that those who live by the sword will die by the sword, and the final vision in Revelation is of a world without violence or war. Ironically, this utopia only comes to pass after a great, bloody battle between the powers of good and evil.

The ambiguities within Scripture allowed each side in the debate to claim that God’s holy word justified their position on the morality of war. So who was right? The importance of Scripture to Christians, especially to Protestants, made this a crucial question. Warner Brothers’ answer forms the center around which \textit{Sergeant York}’s plot revolves. The character of Alvin York is deeply sincere in his desire to do the right thing.

\(^{30}\) Birdwell, \textit{Celluloid Soldiers}, 103.
He wants to follow the will of God, but, like many members of the audience, he is confused over how to interpret God’s word. His situation gets more perplexing after he has a conversation with his commanding officers. York’s attempt to obtain the status of a conscientious objector is known by many of his superiors in boot camp. Some even ridicule him over it. However, Major Buxton and Captain Danforth see in York a leader and want to promote him, so they decide to talk to York and see where he really stands on the issue. During their conversation, York is surprised to learn that Captain Danforth knows a good bit about the content of Scripture:

Danforth: You uh say you believe in the Bible.
York: Yes, sir.
Danforth: Well, I do too. But do you believe that the Bible means that a man shouldn’t fight for what he believes to be right?
York: Well, it done said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”
Danforth: Yes, I know, but, uh, you remember that verse (I think it’s in Luke) where he says “He that hath no sword let him sell his garment and buy one?”
York: He said that to Peter. But he done stopped Peter from using the sword. He said them that lives by the sword ’ll be a-perishing by the sword, and that further on…
Danforth: Yes, I remember.
Danforth: But according to St. John, he said, um, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world them would my servant fight.”
York: Well, that’s just the point, Captain. He done said his kingdom were not of this world. And that a-different…

The debate appears to be going nowhere, so Major Buxton steps in. He shows York a book about American history. York flips through the pages and sees something about Daniel Boone that immediately peaks his interest. Boone, we learn, first discovered the valley where York is from. Buxton uses this fact to his advantage:

Buxton: York, what do ya suppose that Boone was looking for when he went out alone into the wilderness?
York: Well, I never though much about it.
Buxton: Was he looking for new lands?
York: Might be.
Buxton: Maybe. Maybe for something more. Something that a man just can’t see with his eyes or hold with his hands. Something that some men don’t even know they have until they’ve lost it.
York: Yes, sir.
Buxton: To be free. You know, that’s quite a word, freedom. From the very beginning until now. For we are still struggling. It’s quite a story, York. How they all got together and set up a government whereby all men were pledged to defend the rights of each man and each man to defend the rights of all men. We call it a government of the people, by the people, for the people.
York: I never knowed it was all written down.
Buxton: You’re a religious man, York.
York: Yes, sir.
Buxton: You want to worship God in your own way.
York: Yes, sir.
Buxton: You’re a farmer.
York: Yes, sir.
Buxton: You want to plow your fields as you see fit and raise your family according to your own likes. And that’s your heritage, and mine, and every American’s. But the cost of that heritage is high. Sometimes it takes all we have to preserve it, even our lives. How are you going to answer that, York?

York does not have an answer and asks for some time to sort things out. Major Buxton gives him a weeklong furlough to go home and think it through. He also gives York the American history book to take with him. The key to interpreting Scripture, according to the film, is to read it alongside American history. It is an interesting argument, for it implies that there is a deep connection between God’s word and the United States. Rather than place them in opposition, Sergeant York challenges its audience to see the struggle for democracy as a continuation of God’s divine plan of redemption. This is crucial point. America and its fight for democracy must be seen as connected to God’s will so that when York, or any American, is asked to go to war, he can feel confident that he is on safe moral ground.

York returns home to Tennessee and retreats to the hills to think through his problem. He struggles for a long time. The faces of Major Buxton and Pastor Pyle appear on screen, alternately urging York to accept and reject his call to arms. Then, as
the sun is setting, York receives his answer. A gust of wind comes and flips the pages of his open Bible to Matthew 22:21: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” Here is his answer. He is to give to his government what it asks for—his skills as a hunter. He can live with this insight because, as he tells Major Buxton, “It’s like Pastor Pyle done told me. I recon’ I can just be a trust’n somethin’ that’s a heap bigger than I be.” Similarly, the audience can live with this insight because the government of the United States is connected to God. Thus, if the American government asks its citizens to go to war, it cannot be wrong because the establishment and defense of democracy is part of God’s will.

This scene on the mountaintop was created for the movie, and, though draft scripts exist as early as July of 1940, it does not even appear in the script until March of 1941. The real York did struggle with his decision to go to war and had several conversations with Major Buxton and Captain Danforth, but the Matthew text (a similar version appears in Luke) does not appear to have been the deciding factor for York. How York resolved the problem in real life really was not the issue for the producers of the film, of course. Alvin York’s story was the vehicle through which the producers attempted to address the concerns of young men who faced the prospect of having to go to war in 1941. Scripture may have been inconclusive about whether war morally was right or wrong, but, when scripture was read against the backdrop of American history, the correct answer could be found: render unto Caesar that which belonged to Caesar because Caesar, in this case, was doing the will of God.  

31 In Sergeant York: Last of the Long Hunters, by Tom Skeyhill, York goes home to the mountains to sort things out. York spends several days in prayer in the hills, but, when he comes down, all he says is that God told him to go. Sam Cowan’s Sergeant York does not even have York going home. He spends months in conversation with Buxton and Danforth but does not reach his final decision until the three of them meet the night before they are to leave for France. Harry Chandlee, who helped write part of the script, claims
This answer also worked to address another issue. In America, the line between church and state has always been blurry. Disestablishment, the cutting loose of official ties between church and state, was not finally accomplished until the early decades of the 19th century. Even then, it was an uncertain and awkward experiment. Religious leaders still sought to have some influence over the leadership and direction of the state, and the state still needed organized religion to win support and credibility for its actions. By the time war broke out in Europe in 1939, the United States had been engaged in a clumsy, century-long attempt to separate church and state. Sergeant York argues that, when it comes to national security, the state trumps the church. Religious leaders, it argues, are free to disagree among themselves about the morality of war, but Christians should respect and follow the government when it asks them to fight. They should, as Alvin York does in the film, “just be a trust’n in somethin’ that’s a heap bigger than” themselves.

If would-be soldiers had any lingering doubts about the morality of war, the ending to Sergeant York was designed to reassure them that their faith would be rewarded. In true Hollywood fashion, the movie includes a romantic sub-plot involving York and his would-be girlfriend, Miss Gracie. York falls in love with the young Gracie, but she also attracted the interest of other young men, one of whom comes from a wealthier family. York is from the hills, where the soil is hard to till and the people work long and hard to make a meager living. Gracie prefers York, but it is clear that York needs to improve his economic situation if he is going to be able to marry her. When a piece of bottomland comes up for sale, York makes an agreement with the owner to purchase it. The problem is that York does not have nearly enough money. The owner

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that he was the one who made up the scenes between York, Buxton, and Danforth. See memo letter from Harry Chandlee to Jesse Lasky, 10/15/42, Sergeant York, Story File 1712, WBA.
agrees to take York’s mule and some other possessions as a down payment and gives York a few weeks to come up with the rest of the money. York works any odd job he can get in order to scrape together enough money, but he is still short, and it appears that he will lose the land and his down payment.

Luck breaks in York’s favor when a turkey shoot is held the day the final payment is due. York takes part of his earnings and buys five entries into a shoot-off for a cow. If York can have the five most accurate shots, then he will win the whole cow, which he can sell for enough money to pay for the land. This is where York’s skill as a hunter comes to the fore. York wins the cow, and, with his dream in sight, he sets off to buy his bottomland. But York soon learns that the owner has already sold the land to his rival. All hope appears to be lost, but fast forward to the end of the film. After York has refused numerous opportunities to profit from his heroism he is rewarded for his service to his country: not only does he get the girl (the governor of the state will marry them), but he also gets the bottom land, which now has a brand new house built upon it for York and his bride.

This ending must have been hard to swallow for the thousands of former World War I vets who formed the Bonus Army. Miss Gracie and York did get married by the governor, and the real York did get the land—though he also received a mortgage to go with it. The point of the film was not historical accuracy. Instead, the producers highlighted the idea that service to one’s country, a country whose struggle to protect democracy pleased God, would be rewarded. This was a dramatic change from films in which World War I produced only despair and hopelessness. But if the ending did not fit well with the past, it was almost prophetic about the future. Certainly, GIs from World War II fared much better than did WW I vets. The GI Bill helped ensure that WWII vets
were educated and able to purchase homes. Yet in 1941, that was just a hope, a promise, a dream of what might happen if young men followed Alvin York by rendering unto Caesar the service that Caesar sought.

The solution offered up in Sergeant York was impossible for some religious leaders and their followers to accept. Other saw it as the perfect answer. Norman Vincent Peale, an interventionist minister who would gain fame after the war ended, wrote to Warner Bros. in 1941 expressing his great pleasure with Sergeant York:

As I watched the picture, the conviction grew upon me that it will render a very great service to our country in this crisis for it gives a sensible solution to a problem facing many young men—that is the problem of war. In fact, this picture may actually help to save this country.

While it is doubtful that Sergeant York saved America, it did present a way out of a difficult moral situation. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese offered Americans an even more compelling reason to put aside their concerns over the morality of war.32

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32 Sergeant York, Misc. File, WBA.
December 7, 1941, altered many things in American society, including the relationship between Hollywood and its critics. America’s entry into World War II put an end to Congressional investigations into the motion picture industry, at least for the duration of the war. Instead, studio executives were the ones accusing the United States government of foul play for making pro-war movies. In the spring of 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt was given a private screening of a new Army training film entitled *Prelude to War*. The documentary was created as part of the orientation process for soldiers, explaining to them why they wore a uniform. The film so impressed Roosevelt that he thought all Americans should have the chance to see *Prelude to War* and instructed his aides to make it happen.

It is doubtful that Roosevelt gave much thought to what the motion picture industry would think of his idea. After all, he was the President of the United States. If the Commander-in-Chief thought it would help win the war, then the movie should be made available to the general public. Even when Roosevelt’s own Office of War Information opposed distribution of the film because of its portrayal of the enemy, Roosevelt pressured them into releasing the film. His aides soon discovered that convincing studio heads to show the documentary was going to be a very difficult task.\(^{33}\)

War or no war, Hollywood executives were not at all excited about the government entering into the commercial movie-making business. It was not that the motion picture industry did not support the war effort: most studios did so with great

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\(^{33}\) Peter C. Rollins, “Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* Film Series and our American Dream.” *Journal of American Culture*, 19 no. 4 (1996): 84.
enthusiasm by producing hundreds of short and feature films in defense of the Allied cause. The industry also felt the loss of the many talented actors, directors, and technicians who had answered the call to serve their country, a sacrifice that most studios quickly exploited for public relations purposes. Yet it was one thing to have some of Hollywood’s brightest stars in uniform, but it was another thing to ask studios to show government films, made by, and, in many cases, starring Hollywood talent.

There was more than pride or jealousy behind the opposition to showing *Prelude to War* to the general public. Money, or, more importantly, the fear of losing some of it, was the real driving force behind the stand taken by studio executives. The larger studios like MGM, Fox, and Warner Bros. not only made pictures, but they also owned the theaters where they showed. To run a film like *Prelude to War* would mean taking another picture that the studio had already spent considerable money on out of circulation. This was more than the studios were willing to do, and the Hollywood War Activities Committee, which represented the studios, informed the White House that there would be no public showing of the documentary. After some tense negotiating between Roosevelt’s aides and industry officials, the HWAC relented, and *Prelude to War*, as well as others films made by the military, was shown to the general public. 34

Because of its public exhibition, millions of Americans, both in and out of uniform, eventually viewed *Prelude to War*. What they saw was a film that left no room for ambiguity. The world was divided between good and bad, free and slave, black and white. The Axis nations, in their thirst for power, were set on taking over the world. If they succeeded, there would be no room for democracy or freedom. The people of the

world would be plunged into slavery under the rule of men like Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini. There was no choice for the allied nations of the free world except to fight to defeat the forces of evil. Six other Army orientation films, together called the “Why We Fight” series, reiterated this theme.

Among the many things that made these government-produced films unique was the claim that freedom and democracy were the desire and design of God. The rationale for American involvement in World War II was rooted in the assertion that all the great religions of the world testified to God’s desire that humanity live in freedom. War was the last thing Americans wanted, but they had to be willing to fight, even to die, to defend their divinely ordained way of life. The “Why We Fight” films presented the Second World War as a conflict between good and evil, but they challenged audiences to believe not that God was on their side, but that they were fighting on God’s side. Why this theological argument was necessary, and how it came to be included in the “Why We Fight Films,” is the subject of this chapter.

It is possible to trace the origins of the “Why We Fight” series back to September of 1940, when Congress, in response to the growing war in Europe and Asia, passed the Burke-Wadsworth selective service bill. The bill authorized the military to register men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five and then to draft some of these men for one year of military service. Yet legislators were fearful that President Roosevelt might actually try to use these new troops in Europe, so they stipulated that he could not deploy them outside of the Western hemisphere. A few months later, thousands of men began to report to boot camp, many of them with no idea why they had been drafted. Even though their government was not at war with any other nation, and irregardless of the fact that
President Roosevelt had publicly affirmed to the world his desire to maintain American neutrality, they had been called up to prepare for war. What these men did know was that they were not at home with their wives or sweethearts and not at work on the farm or in the factory. Instead, they were preparing to fight an enemy that did not officially exist in a war that they were told they were never going to enter. They also knew one other thing: they were not happy about it.

It did not take military leaders long to discover that their new recruits had a morale problem. The Army and Navy had ways of training weak bodies and unskilled hands. They could teach men to march, to shoot, to sail, and to kill, but they could not make a man want to fight and kill another man (or die trying), especially when there was no war declared and thus no real enemy. This dilemma weighed especially heavy on the mind of General George C. Marshall, the head of the United States Army. Marshall had strongly encouraged President Roosevelt and members of Congress to institute the draft. He believed that America needed to be prepared for war, which meant building up the military before America was officially involved in the world conflict. Marshall got what he wanted, and, before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, over a million men were in uniform. But General Marshall soon confronted the reality that, while he had their bodies, he did not have the hearts of these new GIs. The military lacked a means to inspire the troops, to share with them why events in Europe and Asia mattered to them and their families.

For two long years, Marshall battled this morale problem within the Army. His first attempt at solving the crisis turned out to be complete disaster. In 1940, Marshall charged the Bureau of Public Relations of the War Department General Staff with finding

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ways to motivate the soldiers, a task that was later handed over to the Morale Branch. Good soldiers that they were, the members of the Branch answered the challenge by creating a series of fifteen lectures. By attending these lectures, GIs were supposed to learn about the current wars in Europe and Asia, why they had started, and why American soldiers might be called on to help defend China, England, and France. The response to those lectures was, to be kind, less than enthusiastic. In many cases, the officers who gave the lectures lacked the oratory skills necessary to capture the imagination and attention of the troops. It did not help that the talks were frequently given to soldiers right after mealtime. GIs quickly discovered that, even if the sessions did not clearly explain why they were in uniform, they did present a wonderful opportunity to catch up on their sleep. General Marshall suffered through two of these lectures himself before deciding that he needed a new approach. But what, Marshall wondered, could change men’s minds and alter their emotions? Then it came to him: movies. Marshall was a big fan of the silver screen, and his men had grown up cheering on heroic cowboys and dreaming of being the cop who captured the bad guy. Film could not only tell Marshall’s men why they were going to war, but it could also make them want to fight the Germans, Italians and Japanese.

Marshall did not relish the idea of handing this new project over to the same men whose creativity lead them to concoct the ill-fated orientation lectures. He could imagine with horror a series of boring films shown to tired men with full bellies in a dark room. What Marshall wanted was someone with experience, someone who knew how to make motion pictures that stirred emotions. So, in late 1941, he sent some of his aides to Hollywood on a recruiting trip. Their mission was to find someone willing and able to make the kind of pictures that would inspire American GIs. By mid-December, they had
their man: Frank Capra. Capra accepted a commission as a major in the Army, and, in February of 1942, started producing what became the “Why We Fight” films.  

Capra’s enlistment was a significant achievement for the Army. He was one of the most successful and powerful directors of his day. Power was hard to come by for directors in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. Today, we are accustomed to seeing directors as the principal creative force in movie making, but Capra worked during the heyday of the studio system. Under the studio system, the director was one part of a larger machine that included actors, actresses, and writers, not to mention technical personnel who made costumes and handled sound equipment. The real power in this system rested with the producers. These men orchestrated almost every aspect of a film. Producers decided who wrote the script, who starred in the film, and who directed it. Each day, they viewed the footage that was shot and either approved it or demanded that it be filmed again. Directors were not independent artists, but employees of the studio.

The studio system worked because most actors, actresses, writers, and directors were under contract to a specific studio. Which films they worked on was often at the discretion of studio executives. There were a few exceptions, men and women who found ways to wrestle some control from their studio bosses, and Frank Capra was one of them. Capra worked for Columbia, one of the Poverty Row studios. Unlike the major

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studios, Columbia could not afford to have a stable of stars under contract. Instead, it borrowed talent from other studios and concentrated on producing low budget B-films. Yet Harry Cohen, the head of Columbia, wanted to try to compete with the larger studios, so he brought in a young man named Frank Capra to direct the few “A” films that the studio made every year. Frank Capra delivered. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Capra directed a string of commercially successful films, including *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *You Can’t Take it With You* (1938), and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). *It Happened One Night* swept the Oscars in 1934, capturing Best Picture, Best Actor (Clark Gable), Best Actress (Claudette Colbert), and Best Director and helped bring Columbia some much-needed publicity. Capra won two other Oscars during the 1930s and used his box-office success to obtain creative and artistic freedom over his films. He had almost exclusive control over who he cast for his films, who wrote the script, and how the film was put together in the editing room. His peers were so impressed that they elected Capra as the first head of the Screen Directors Guild, hoping that he could help secure for them some of the same recognition and control that he had earned at Columbia.  

This is what made Capra’s enlistment so extraordinary. Frank Capra was not the only prominent director to join the military during World War II, though he had much more to lose than men like John Ford or William Wyler. By joining the Army, Capra gave up the creative control that he had at Columbia with no guarantee that he would be able to reclaim it once the war was over. In addition, while Capra was well established

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39 Capra’s reasons for leaving Columbia for the military were complex. Part of his motivation came from uncertainty over his career. Capra was unhappy at Columbia and had been looking around for greener pastures. During much of 1941, he had been negotiating with United Artists, the studio started by Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. Working with UA would provide Capra a
as a director of Hollywood fiction films, he had absolutely no experience making documentaries. This did not appear to be a concern for General Marshall, but it most definitely was an issue for Capra. Yet lack of familiarity with documentaries was just part of Capra’s problem. Adding to his sense of anguish was the effectiveness of German propaganda films, pictures that Capra was supposed to outshine with his own work. Capra first realized what he was up against when he viewed Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. He was deeply impressed, and distressed, by the artistic power of the film and its message of German racial superiority. He worried about whether he was capable of making a film that would “counterattack against *Triumph of the Will*; keep alive our will to resist the master race.”

In his autobiography Capra recounts that the days after seeing *Triumph of the Will* were filled with a good bit of soul searching. He claims that the inspiration to make the “Why We Fight” films came from no less a source than the Holy Word of God. “I needed one basic, powerful idea, an idea that would spread like a prairie fire, an idea from which all ideas flowed. I thought of the Bible. There was one sentence in it that always gave me goose pimples: ‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.’” Capra now understood his mission. He would show American soldiers the truth — about their enemies, their allies and the value of democracy. Once they had seen that truth, Capra was confident that it would liberate GIs to defend, and, if necessary, to die so that others might live in freedom.

higher profile and better profits while still allowing him to retain his creative freedom. But the deal fell apart. Capra may have seen military service as a way of buying some time to rethink his options. Capra’s sense of duty to his country also influenced his decision to enter the Army. Capra had been born in Italy, and his family had moved to the United States when he was six. He enlisted during World War I even though he had not yet finished college, and he believed that it was his duty to sign up again in 1941. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 7, 9; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 87-90.

40 Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 329.
41 Ibid., 330.
The truth, according to Capra, was that freedom was under attack. The events taking place in Europe and Asia were not nearly as remote and disconnected from American life as many isolationists had argued. Rather, the same men who set out trying to conquer the British, French, Russians, and Chinese had their eyes fixed on the United States as well. *Prelude to War* presents World War II as a clear choice: either fight to defend freedom or prepare to live as slaves to the Germans, Italians, and Japanese.

After setting out the argument that freedom was under siege, *Prelude to War* attempts to explain what made the free world free in the first place. The narrator of the film provides an interesting answer: “Only through a long and unceasing struggle inspired by men of vision: Moses, Mohammed, Confucius, Christ. All believed that, in the sight of God, all men were created equal.” While the narrator is speaking, images of the holy books from Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are shown. Then, a quote from each book appears on screen. First, from the Torah, the tenth commandment: “Thou Shall Not Covet that Which Is Thy Neighbors.” Next, from the Koran: “Mankind is One Community.” Then, from the Analects of Confucius: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” And, finally, from the Gospel of John, the verse that Capra claims provided him with the inspiration for the series: “The truth shall make you free.”

Those watching the film were not expecting this answer. They might have anticipated that the narrator would ground freedom in the work of the Founding Fathers or the ideas that gave rise to the Magna Carta, or the writings of the ancient Greeks.

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42 Thomas Bohn, in his influential book *An Historical and Descriptive Analysis of the “Why We Fight”* identifies nine major themes in the films, including religion. He argues that religion is used in this opening sequence to reinforce the idea that the free world is religious and the slave world is antireligious. This is true, to an extent. In later films the Axis powers, especially Germany and Japan, want to replace Christianity and other religions with ones that center around worship of Hitler or the Emperor. See page 131.
Linking freedom with the Analects of Confucius was unorthodox. Capra did not ignore the grand story of America’s struggle for freedom and democracy in the “Why We Fight” films. America’s fight for independence does receive proper attention later in the series, especially in *War Comes To America*. Yet, in *Prelude to War*, Capra choose to root freedom in the teachings of four of the world’s great religions rather than in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. The reason for this approach becomes clear as the movie progresses.

After arguing that freedom is rooted in the great religions of the world, the narrator asserts that Western civilization, drawing upon these holy words, has tried to establish governments based upon the principles of freedom and equality. The point is that freedom and equality originated with God, not with humans. According to Capra’s version of history, all of the major world religions testify to the divine nature of human equality. Therefore, American soldiers were being asked to fight not just for their country and not just for the Western democratic tradition, but also for the very concept that God handed down through Confucius, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Here was the main theological argument that Capra tried to make in the film: God was not on the side of America; rather, American soldiers were fighting on God’s side. This was, as we shall see, a subtle yet brilliant way to counter the apathy of American clergy towards the war without directly challenging their authority.43

This opening religious sequence has such a flow to it that it is easy for viewers to be swept along with the message that all great religious traditions believed that men were created equal. There is no opportunity for the audience to reflect on the truth of this

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argument and no chance for them to question the relationship between religion and political freedom. But if the words and images were not enough to convince soldiers, if any doubts lingered in their minds, Capra also included religious music in the background to reinforce the point. During this whole sequence, a verse from the hymn “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear” is being sung in the background. Only the second half of the first verse is audible: “peace on the earth, goodwill to men, / From heaven’s all gracious King! / The world in solemn stillness lay, / to hear the angels sing.” This hymn, often sung during Christmas, was familiar to many soldiers. The words confirm the message of the sequence: “heaven’s all gracious King” (God) has sent a message of peace on earth to all humans. What the Allies were fighting for and why American soldiers were in uniform was to defend the very peace that God had given the whole world. That peace was found only in the free, democratic world. Prelude to War presented soldiers with a whole new way of looking at the war. If peace and freedom were gifts from God, were they not worth defending, even if that meant going to war?

For the most part, the content of the Prelude to War did not originate with Capra, but came from the Army establishment. One of the members of Capra’s unit recalled that he “was 1,000 percent in agreement with policy directives. Nobody [above him] ever suggested an artistic or technical change, but a message or policy would be uttered and Frank would accept it.” The basic message of the film closely follows the interpretation of the war set out in the orientation lectures, except for the theological argument. The theological argument has no parallel in the lectures. In fact, the lectures are completely devoid of any mention of the role of religion in the creation of democratic freedom.44

44 McBride, Frank Capra, 454. In 1942 Farrar & Rinehart, a New York publishing company printed a book entitled The Background of Our War. The forward to that book makes mention of the fifteen orientation lectures and claims that, “The material contained in these lectures is freely available to the
Capra choose to make religion such a critical part of *Prelude to War* because American religious leaders were not supplying the theological support for the war that Capra believed was so necessary. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, most American clergy accepted the need for war, but that did not mean that all of them were enthusiastic about it. Many religious leaders were anxious to avoid the type of blind patriotism that had overtaken them during World War I. Of the major Christian denominations in America, only the Southern Baptists, the southern Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians were able to speak with any sort of clarity about their support for the war. Following their General Council meeting in 1942, the Congregationalist Christians had to issue two statements: one that stressed the necessity of the fight, and another that condemned all war as futile. A resolution from the floor that stated support for the war was tabled at the Northern Baptist Convention that same year. The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., took out language from a resolution, also made from the floor, that deemed the American cause as just and righteous.  

In later years, some of these denominations produced statements that expressed fuller support for the American war effort, but, throughout the war, the general attitude of many religious leaders is summed up by historian Gerald Sittser as a cautious patriotism: “They were devoted to the nation but not without ambivalence and reservations. Church leaders in particular did not want to let the war undermine their greater loyalty to God,

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45 W. Edward Orser, “World War II and the Pacifist Controversy: In the Major Protestant Churches” in *Modern American Protestantism* vol. 6 of *Protestantism and Social Christianity* ed. Martin Marty (New York: K.G. Saur, 1992): 322-326. While Capra was in charge of production of the series a number of Hollywood screenwriters were involved in drafting the scripts. Exactly who was responsible for the content of the film is impossible to know, in part because of Capra’s decision that there would be no individual credits given either on the screen or in the press. The issue is further complicated by the numerous agencies within the government that had to give approval to the films. Officials within the Army, the State Department, and the White House all had to sign off on each film. See “Memorandum from Major Frank Capra to All Officers in the Film Production Section” in Culbert, *Film and Propaganda in America* vol. III part 2, 144 and Steele, “The Greatest Gangster Movie Ever Filmed,” 227.
justice, humanitarianism, and peace. However severe the crisis, they tried to resist being
overcome by patriotic fervor.”

Thus, even as church leaders provided support for GIs and their families, they
struggled to find ways to ensure fair treatment for conscientious objectors. Across the
nation, a number of clergy and lay leaders turned their attention to the plight of Japanese-
Americans forced into the government-mandated relocation program. In some cases,
they applied pressure for the release of detainees, and, in other situations, they worked to
improve conditions at the camps; other Christians provided the necessary funds and
opportunities for Japanese-Americans to move from the West Coast to other parts of the
country. The hope for a peaceful end to the war was kept alive by the efforts of a number
of individuals and groups, including the Commission to Study the Basis of a Just and
Durable Peace of the Federal Council of Churches. The Commission, which was chaired
by future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, had started its work before Pearl Harbor.
Yet even after America’s official entry into the war, the Commission continued to
“clarify the mind…churches regarding the moral, political and economic foundations of
an enduring peace.”

This “cautious patriotism” may have alleviated some moral quandaries for clergy,
but it did not sit well with everyone. Before Pearl Harbor, there had been calls for
religious leaders to step up and inspire the nation. “To fight the war which sooner or later

46 Gerald Sittser, A Cautious Patriotism: The American Churches and World War II (Chapel Hill:
47 On conscientious objectors, see Patricia McNeal, “Catholic Conscientious Objection During World War
II.” Catholic Historical Review 61 (April 1975): 222-42; Orser, “World War II and the Pacifist
Controversy” 313-332. On Japanese Relocation see Floyd Schmoe, “Seattle’s Peace Churches and
Relocation” in Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor and Harry H.L. Kitano eds., Japanese Americans- From
Relocation to Redress. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991): 123-129; Nancy Nakano Conner,
“From Internment to Indiana: Japanese Americans, the War Relocation Authority, the Disciples of Christ,
efforts, see A Just and Durable Peace: Data Material and Discussion Questions (New York: The
Commission to Study the Basis of a Just and Durable Peace of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in
America, 1941): 5.
we shall be called to fight,” wrote Stewart Alsop in 1941, “we need a crusading faith, the kind that inspired the soldiers of 1917, setting forth to war to make the world safe for democracy. We haven’t got it; certainly the men who will do the fighting haven’t got it.” In the summer of 1942, the editors of *Time* magazine chastised religious leaders for not doing their part and getting fully behind the war:

> Few things better illustrate the reason U.S. churches do not enjoy a more impressive leadership in American life than their shilly-shally about the war. In the eight months since Pearl Harbor, only one major denomination (the United Lutheran Church) has placed itself unequivocally behind the U.S. war effort. Yet no major church has had the courage to take the opposite stand, and state unequivocally that the church’s job is religion, not war.

The editors of *Time* went on to complain that the United States war effort lacked “a great dynamic faith. Only Germany and Russia, the two nations most hostile to Christianity, have shown such a faith.”

*Time* magazine published the piece about the same time that the first drafts of the scripts for the “Why We Fight” series were being finished. The final versions of those films—especially *Prelude to War* and *War Comes to America*—use religious language and imagery to counter the more cautious approach many ministers took during the war. If American soldiers were going to be convinced that they should fight, they needed to believe that the war, while not wanted, was now part of God’s calling for their nation.

Interestingly, Capra had more freedom when it came to using religion in film while he served in the military than he did when he worked in Hollywood. The Army was not obliged to follow the Production Code, which placed stiff restrictions on the way

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49 The scripts for *Prelude to War*, *Nazi Strike*, *Battle of Britain*, and *Battle of Russia* were all started on or about April 1, 1942. The script for *Divide and Conquer* was begun around July 23, 1942. See Culbert, *Film Propaganda in America* vol. V, microfiche supplement. Eric Knight, one of the principal writers of the scripts, wrote in a letter to his wife: “I am still busy—deep in the heart of Russia. When I finish the Russian script and the Far East script, I have done the whole series.” The letter was dated July 8, 1942. Culbert, *Film and Propaganda in America* vol. III part 2, 129.
studios could portray religion in films. Thus, while many studios shied away from dealing directly with the issue of American clergy and their cautious patriotism, Capra was able to address it in the “Why We Fight” series. Not that he was reckless. Capra gained nothing by trying to turn soldiers against their clergy. What he chose to do was to use the arguments and language of American clergy who were hesitant about the war to create the impression that their positions were not at all in conflict with the message of the films, especially the final installment, *War Comes to America*. In fact, the reluctance of religious leaders to declare World War II a holy war was proof that America was a righteous nation dedicated to peace. It was only because the Axis powers broke the peace that war was necessary.

*War Comes to America* begins with a grand, if rather selective, retelling of American history. Religion is part of the very fabric of the United States. The first three buildings settlers construct when they come to the New World are houses to sleep in, a watchtower to guard them, and a church in which to worship. During the fight for independence, in the bleak days of Valley Forge, George Washington is presented as seeking the help of God. The narrator says, “A few of us doubted and despaired, most of us prayed and endured it all.” In the sequence on westward expansion, religion is presented as a choice, not something that is forced on people. Religion is explicitly tied to the idea of freedom when the narrator remarks, “We carried freedom with us. No aristocratic class here, no king, no nobles or princes, no state church, no courts, no parasites, no divine right of man to rule man. Here humanity was making a clean fresh start from scratch.” Religion comes in many forms and faiths: “Churches? We have every denomination on earth, 60 million of us attend regularly and no one dare tell us which one to go to.” After the narrator finishes this line, a series of different religious
buildings appear on the screen, each one with a clear sign to distinguish which faith tradition it represents: Orthodox, Chinese Presbyterian, Finnish, Lutherans, Filipino Christian Church Fellowship, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish, and Church of All Religions.

*War Comes to America* presents faith as a natural expression of the American character and part of the reason for American success and prosperity. Yet prosperity has not diminished the American desire for religion. On the contrary, the narrator asserts, “We have made great material progress but spiritually we are still in the frontier days.” Americans have not lost their longing for God or their need to practice their faith openly. The faith that brought their forefathers to America is still alive and well, guiding their actions.

Having established the character of religion in America, Capra turns to the current situation. The sequence opens by showing scenes from various churches, mostly images of people worshiping. There is also a shot of the front of an altar in a cathedral, one of a Protestant preacher in the pulpit, and then a close-up of a crucifix above the altar. Finally, there is an exterior shot of a church. While these images are displayed, the narrator says, “Yet deep down within each of us, there is a great yearning for peace and goodwill towards all men. Somehow, we feel that if men turn their minds towards the field of peace, as they have the field of transportation, communication, aviation, wars would soon be old fashioned as the horse and buggy.” The phrase “peace and goodwill towards all men” harkens back to the hymn used in *Prelude to War*. God wants peace, and Americans, a God-fearing people, know this in their souls. Even with all of their technological innovations, the American people have not lost touch with God or God’s desire for all of humanity.
The narrator continues, “We hate war. We know that in war it is the common man who does the paying, the suffering, the dying. We bend over backwards to avoid it. Be let our freedom be endangered, and we will pay and suffer and fight to the last man. That is America. That is the way of life for which we fight today.” Who then is responsible for the war? The Axis powers who want to create a world of slavery and darkness. A bit later in the film, the date, April 7, 1939, is shown on the screen, and then the exterior of a Gothic cathedral appears, followed by a shot of a stained glass window. Next comes the shot of a choir singing in the cathedral. Then, the camera pans up towards the high vaulted ceiling of the church. The narrator says, “April 7, 1939. As we here in America observe Good Friday.” A newspaper is shown next with a headline that tells that Italy has attacked Albania. The Good Friday reference reinforces the darkness of the day, for Good Friday is the day when Christians remember the crucifixion of Jesus. The Axis powers are the ones who are trying to kill off peace, goodwill, freedom, and democracy. The use of Jesus’ crucifixion carries with it not only the symbolism of betrayal and death, but also hope and resurrection. Just as Jesus was not defeated by the powers of darkness, neither will the Allies, who are fighting on the side of God, fail to defeat the powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Capra found another use for religion in the “Why We Fight Series.” While the Army was racially segregated during World War II, it still threw men together from disparate economic, educational, geographical, and religious backgrounds. For many men, boot camp was the first time they had traveled outside of their home communities or encountered people of different ethnic or religious traditions from themselves. The claim that the major world religions all contained the same call for equality and freedom was
used as a way of unifying soldiers who struggled to find some common ground with men they had very little in common with.

The end of Prelude to War shows a boy’s choir singing the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldier.” Since the films were shown to men in the military, the use of this hymn is not surprising. What is worth noting is which part of that hymn was included in the film. The first verse, the one that soldiers familiar with the hymn might have known, goes:

Onward, Christian soldiers
Marching as to war
With the Cross of Jesus
Going on before:
Christ the royal
Master leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
See, His banner go

This verse would have fit with the idea that the Allies were fighting on God’s side. Yet Capra chose to make audible the third verse, not first one:

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers we are treading
Where the saints trod;
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
One in charity

Unlike the first verse, which specifically mentions Christianity, the third verse references only the “Church of God,” a much more inclusive phrase. Regardless of where they were from, Prelude to War told the soldiers watching it that they were now part of something much larger than they were. The men in uniform during WWII were not the first to be asked to pick up arms and defend the God-given gifts of freedom and democracy. Other “saints” had already traveled that road. Thus, the GI fighting in WWII was one with
those who had fought in previous wars. He was also united with the other men in the army because they all shared a common doctrine—that freedom and democracy were gifts that all of humanity should enjoy.

President Roosevelt must have felt some sense of vindication when Prelude to War won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 1942. Yet Col. Capra and General Marshall had not set out to win over the motion picture industry. They had set out to win over the hearts and minds of millions of young American men who found themselves in uniform. The degree to which they succeeded in that endeavor can be judged, at least in part, by the fact that their version of why the United States entered World War II has entrenched itself in the American psyche. The Second World War remains the “good war” in our national mythology. It was, as the “Why We Fight” films argue, a conflict Americans did not start and did not want to be a part of, but one they were forced into by the actions of power-hungry demagogues. America entered the war to save itself, and the world, from totalitarianism. The men who fought in Europe and Asia were the saviors of democracy and the defenders of the free world.

Capra’s theological justification for the war has weathered the last sixty years much better than the “cautious patriotism” of many wartime clergy. Even in the cynical culture of post-Vietnam America, it is still possible to believe that there was something right and just about the role the United States played in World War II. There was evil loosed upon the world, a power set out to destroy the very freedom that had been ordained for humanity by none other than God. The work that many clergy did during the war to help conscientious objectors and Japanese-Americans to preach a gospel of peace goes unnoticed and unremembered. Perhaps the fact that there is, to date, only one
monograph about the role of American clergy during the Second World War is itself a reflection of the power of the “good war” theology. What else could religious leaders have done but fully support what appears to have been such an obvious threat to all that was good and right? Who today imagines that many Americans in the 1940s would have heard a theological justification for the war coming from Uncle Sam, not from their ministers, or that gospel of the “good war” was preached in a movie theater rather than in a church?\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50} The immediate impact of the “Why We Fight” films was less profound. Surveys conducted by the Army after the film was shown to GI’s revealed that few found the films informative or persuasive. Steele, “The Greatest Gangster Movie Ever Filmed,” 234.
Chapter 3

When the Role is Called up Yonder, I’ll Be There:
The Conversion Narrative and the American GI

In 1943, MGM studios released *Salute to the Marines*, starring Wallace Beery as Marine Sgt. William Bailey. Born in Kansas City in 1885, Beery, at the age of sixteen, got his start in show business as an assistant elephant trainer with the Ringling Bros circus. His interest in animal husbandry was short-lived, for Beery left the circus to perform in musical revue shows, and he eventually found steady work in musicals on and off Broadway. He came to Hollywood later, a career move that was validated when he won an Academy Award for Best Actor for his work in *The Champ* (1931). Beery survived the transition to talking motion pictures and remained an extremely popular star during the 1930s and 1940s. When you watch him in *Salute to the Marines*, this comes as quite a surprise. To be kind, Beery was not the most attractive man to ever grace the silver screen. Yet his “gross physique, gravel voice, rubbery face, crooked mouth” somehow endeared him to moviegoers and made him the perfect choice to play a crusty, hard-boiled Marine sergeant.51

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51 Ephraim Katz, “Beery, Wallace” *The Film Encyclopedia* 3rd ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), 106. Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 208, Beery was ranked as the 16th most popular Hollywood star during the war years according to the *Motion Picture Herald*. 
Salute to the Marines takes place in the Philippines shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The character portrayed by Berry, Sgt. William Bailey, has spent most of his adult life in the Marines, but he has never seen active combat. This is a source of great distress to Bailey, who is about to retire from the Corps and desperately wants to be decorated for combat service. His wife, however, views his lack of battle experience as a blessing from God. When the Army sends Bailey’s unit to China to fight the Japanese, he is sure his chance to win military distinction has finally come. Then he is informed that he must stay behind to help train the Filipino army. Devastated, he blames his wife for making him miss his last chance to fight:

Jenny: Well, I’d rather have you here than in China. William, you don’t know how we’ve prayed.
Bailey: Oh, you ain’t been praying against me again have ya?
Jenny: Every minute, since we heard the First Battalion had been ordered into active service.
Bailey: Oh, I didn’t think you’d do that to me. Praying me out of the last chance I’ve got to get that decoration. I might have known it. You started praying the very first day that we were married and you prayed me out of every chance that I’ve ever had for active service and it ain’t fair, seeing as how I ain’t been praying back at ya.

Jenny’s prayers for peace are not motivated simply out of concern for her husband. As Bailey explains to his commanding officer:

The Colonel knows how it is with me and Jenny. She never forgave me for signing up for that last hitch. Since she moved up there to Balligan to billet with the rest of them there pacifist screwballs I’ve only seen her once or twice. You know she is all hepped up over this brotherly love stuff. She and her friends figure out that they can save the world by turning the other cheek.

The tension between Bailey and Jenny intensifies once he retires. He moves to Balligan to be with his wife, daughter and “the rest of them there pacifist screwballs,” only to quickly discover that he does not belong. Jenny wants her husband to give up his warrior ways, and she becomes very upset when she discovers that Bailey has kept his dress uniform so that he can be buried in it when he dies. The other residents of the
village view him as an unwanted warmonger, especially when he starts to teach the young boys how to drill and fistfight. Jenny realizes, much to her dismay, that Bailey was and always will be a Marine. She begins to question whether his moving to Balligan to be with her was a good idea. That is until December 7, 1941. On that morning Bailey accompanies his wife to church and listens, quite uncomfortably, to a scripture reading about beating swords into plowshares and then to a prayer for peace. As the congregation stands and begins to sing “O God of Love, O Power of Peace,” Japanese dive bombers attack the village. The church takes a direct hit, and the congregant who had been praying for peace falls dead over the open Bible.

As chaos consumes the village, the people look to Sgt. Bailey, the professional soldier, for leadership. He quickly organizes the villagers, but not before putting them in their place: “Ok, we need good men here. If any of you folks still believe in that there peace and brotherly love, you better go with the women.” Bailey assembles a ragtag group of fighters and helps them blow up a bridge to prevent the invading Japanese from going any farther inland. That bridge, however, was also Bailey and his wife’s only escape route. As the Japanese forces surround them, Jenny Bailey, the advocate for love and peace, stands shoulder to shoulder with her warrior husband. His warrior-like behavior no longer embarrasses her, and she is proud to be with him as they prepare to fight, and die, together.

_Salute to the Marines_ has the unique distinction of being the only World War II-era film that openly and directly attacked religious leaders for their pacifist beliefs. In the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor, MGM gave voice to the frustration that many Americans felt over anti-war clergy and their supporters. This did not sit well with the Production Code Administration. The PCA warned MGM to “delete from this picture all
suggestions that the pacifists in Balligan are connected in any way with the Christian churches, making their activity purely personal and isolationist, but not religious.” Clearly, the producers did not follow this recommendation, though the studio did make one change to accommodate the PCA. In early drafts of the script, there was a Nazi spy in the village who also happened to be the minister of the church. The spy remained in the final version of the film, but his cover was changed to that of a businessman.\(^{52}\)

What is most intriguing about *Salute to the Marines* is the way in which it mocks and ridicules pacifists. It takes the religious conversion narrative that was used so effectively in *Sergeant York* and *The Fighting 69th* and turns it on its head. Instead of Sgt. Bailey undergoing a religious conversion, his wife, the one who is already religious, turns her back on her beliefs. While she never denounces her Christian faith (such a thing would never have been permitted by the Code), Jenny realizes, after it is too late, that her “turn the other cheek” approach to life blinded her to reality. It may also have helped the Japanese attack on December 7.

About the same time that production began for *Salute to the Marines*, Albert Maltz, a New York native, came to Hollywood. When he arrived in sunny Southern California, he was already an established playwright and author. Yet, unlike some authors who ventured into film, Maltz seemed to have little problem adapting to Hollywood’s preference for reusing predictable plots and characters. He found work at several studios, including Warner Bros. In 1943, the studio hired Maltz to turn the story

\(^{52}\) Letter from Joseph Breen to Louis Mayer dated 8/19/42 MPPA Files, *Salute to the Marines*, The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California (hereafter MHL). The changes to the Nazi spy character are found in a partial script dated 5/20/42, MGM Script files, *Salute to the Marines*, MHL.
of war hero Sgt. Al Schmid into a workable movie script. Maltz’s labors helped produce 

*Pride of the Marines*, which the studio released in 1945.\(^{53}\)

Al Schmid, a native of Philadelphia, enlisted in the Marine Corps shortly after Pearl Harbor. He worked as part of a three-man machine gun crew and was one of the thousands of Marines that invaded the island of Guadalcanal in the summer of 1942. The battle to take the island back from the Japanese was fierce, and, during some heavy fighting, one member of his crew died and another was seriously wounded. Undeterred, Sgt. Schmid continued to operate the machine gun, even though he was shorthanded. At some point during the battle, a grenade exploded near Schmid’s face, causing him to lose his eyesight. Still keeping up his fire, he asked his wounded buddy which direction to aim the gun. Schmid’s courage, both on the battlefield and during his recovery, earned him several commendations, and his story drew national attention.\(^ {54}\)

As interesting as the real events were, Maltz felt that the script needed something more. What if the events that day in the Pacific caused Schmid’s character to undergo some sort of spiritual conversion? After all, that storyline had helped turn *Sergeant York* into a box-office smash. In a production memo, Maltz explored the idea of replacing Schmid’s Marine ring, which was damaged during combat, with a St. Christopher medal. “It is okay with me to have a religious medallion if it is okay with the Schmids,” Maltz wrote to executives at Warner Bros.\(^ {55}\)

*Pride of the Marines* was not the first film in which Maltz had tried to employ a *Sergeant York*-type conversion narrative. He helped to write the screenplay for Warner

\(^{53}\) “Maltz, Albert” in Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, 892. Maltz, who wrote left-leaning plays while in New York, would later be blacklisted as part of the Hollywood Ten.


Brother’s successful *Destination Tokyo* (1944), in which a religious conversion is one of the major sub-plots. The conversion narrative that Maltz wanted to employ in *Pride of the Marines* was a formula that a number of other World War II-era films repeated: create a character who has a good heart but lacks faith, have that character undergo a cathartic event that leads them to find faith, and then show how faith gives the character the strength necessary to defeat the enemy.\(^5\)

Unfortunately for Maltz, there was no indication that religion played any role in Al Schmid’s life. While Maltz would take some liberties as he crafted the screenplay, he recognized that there were limits and finally concluded that “I don’t know whether any exact parallel can, or should be made between the usefulness of character change in cementing the episodes of ‘Sergeant York,’ and the possibility of a similar use of character change in ‘Al Schmid.’”\(^5\) In the end, Maltz decided to include a different type of religious sub-plot. He made sure that one of Schmid’s closest pals, Diamond, was Jewish. At various places in the movie, Maltz included scenes in which Diamond faces discrimination because of his faith. Through it all, Schmid remains Diamond’s friend and demonstrates what true acceptance looks like. As World War II drew to a close, the religiously tolerant Al Schmid replaced the religiously converted Alvin York as a symbol of the Hollywood GI.

*Salute to the Marines* and *Pride of the Marines* represent important transitions in the way combat films during World War II used religion. The rejection of the religious


conversion narrative in *Salute to the Marines* would be short lived. The need to motivate audiences and to reaffirm their faith in the war effort quickly lead screenwriters back to using the conversion narrative in combat films. But when an Allied victory became certain, screenwriters shelved the religious conversion narrative once again.

**RELIGION IN HOLLYWOOD**

The character of Sgt. Bailey, while designed around the unique acting style of Wallace Beery, was not that different from hundreds of other Hollywood GIs that populated films during the war years. Those celluloid soldiers and sailors were created through reliance upon well-established stock military characters (including crusty drill sergeants like William Bailey), whose attributes were well known to audiences. While Christianity was not as pronounced as some other characteristics, it remained an expected aspect of on-screen heroes. It was a peculiar faith, one that was not worn on the sleeve or that inhibited GIs from doing their duty, but it was there. Sgt. Bailey fits the mold very well. At various times in the movie, Bailey’s character behaves like a stereotypical Marine—he knows how to fight (he likes boxing), and, at one point, he goes to a bar, gets drunk, ends up in a fistfight, and lands in jail. Needless to say, Bailey is not a candidate for the ministry, but neither was he an atheist or agnostic. He attends church with his wife and knows just enough Bible stories to get him out of trouble with the villagers at Balligan.

The religious faith of GIs did not mean they went to worship services on a regular basis. In Twentieth Century-Fox’s *A Bell For Adano* (1945), the American commander of a liberated Italian village forgets that he is supposed to be present at Mass on Sunday morning. Major Joppollo is shown literally running from his headquarters to the church.
While he seems a bit uncomfortable, he has enough respect for religion to appreciate the authority of the local Catholic priest. GIs may not have darkened the door of church often, but they were not shown disrespecting religion or clergy. In an early draft of Fox’s *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), a Marine called Soose tries to wake his comrade Taxi so they can go to Sunday School. Taxi, without opening his eyes, remarks, “Strictly a pastime for children.” This exchange was cut from future drafts and the final version of the film.  

The exact relationship between the GI and religion in World War II era films is ill-defined. Screenwriters never really delved into what servicemen believed (beyond the existence of God) or why they believed it. The only thing that audiences knew for certain was that, with a few exceptions, Hollywood’s soldiers and sailors were almost always Christian. What version of the Christian faith they believed was hardly ever delineated. In order not to offend their audience, filmmakers opted to present GI Christianity as a rather vague faith that diminished denominational differences and allowed for a sense of moral superiority over the enemy. The Production Code Administration was quick to flag anything that might be perceived as a slight to any religious group. When 20th Century Fox submitted a draft script of *Guadalcanal Diary* to the PCA in May of 1943, the PCA encouraged the studio to drop the line “Don’t seem like home, does it, without no collection?” because it might offend Protestant viewers.

The assumed Christianity of most soldiers and sailors was often communicated to audiences by incorporating very brief lines of dialogue and/or subtle visual clues. Studios frequently chose to express GI Christianity through Catholic ritual. This was a practical, not theological, decision. Filmmakers needed a religion that was easy to see on screen,

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58 Script dated 5/13/43, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 20th Century-Fox Collection, University of Southern California Cinema-Television Library, Los Angeles, California (hereafter TCF).
and the Roman Catholic faith offered more visual expressions of religion than most Protestant traditions. The practice of crossing oneself at the end of a prayer, for example, commonly signified the religious nature of soldiers and sailors. In *They Were Expendable* (1945), we discover that the sailors in the film are Christians when two of them come upon the graves of their fallen comrades. Out of respect, they kneel, and, before one of them gets up, he crosses himself. It is a very brief, and seemingly unimportant, gesture, but it quickly and effectively conveys the message that this soldier is a Christian. In one scene from *The Story of GI Joe* (1945), American soldiers are trying to liberate an Italian village from the Germans. Two enemy soldiers have positioned themselves in the bell tower of a heavily damaged Catholic Church, and from this vantage point they fire on their American adversaries. A pair of GIs is sent into the church to eliminate the threat. After they have killed the Germans, one soldier goes up to the altar and remarks, “This is a funny place to be killing men in, isn’t it?” Then he kneels at the altar and crosses himself. Unlike the Germans, American servicemen respect houses of worship, even when they have been bombed out. The writers of *Objective Burma* (1945) not only show soldiers crossing themselves at various points in the movie, but they also created a scene in which one GI prays with Rosary beads, thus reinforcing the idea that the men who are fighting to defend America were God-fearing Christians.

Screenwriters generally gave subtle suggestions of Christianity to the characters who represented enlisted men. Not surprisingly, on-screen officers (who tended to be played by bigger stars) rated a higher profile and more dialogue. In combat films, a popular setting to display the faith of officers was at funeral services. In the absence of a chaplain, the highest-ranking officer presided over the burial of his men. The officers would lead their men in the proper prayers and often included in their eulogies references
to God that were explicitly grounded in the Christian faith. When Humphrey Bogart’s character in *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943) has to perform a funeral, he reads aloud for his men:

“I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. We brought nothing into this world, and it’s certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. That’s the word of God, and it’s good.”

Then, Bogart proceeds to lead the men in the Lord’s Prayer, a piece of Christian liturgy that somehow all the crew knows. The funeral scene ends with Bogart reading from a book that highlights the importance of Jesus Christ. Likewise, in *Destination Tokyo* (1944) a submariner dies while trying to help a Japanese pilot who was shot down. At his funeral, the captain, played by Cary Grant, prays with his men: “And whilst we consign his remains to the deep, we the living pray thee heavenly Father to grant him eternal peace and rest, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.”

It is quite remarkable that screenwriters would place these words in the mouths of officers. Writers assumed that enlisted men had no problems with their commanders leading them in overtly Christian rituals and or that all GIs seem to know specific Christian prayers. Producers could have made these movies without a single reference to religion or without favoring one religious faith (Christianity) over any other. Yet there were, in fact, several practical reasons why studios chose to portray soldiers and sailors as possessing a somewhat vague but explicitly Christian faith. Those reasons involved

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60 Later in the movie, when his submarine is about to enter Tokyo Bay, the captain asks all his men to join him in silent prayer. Dick, *The Star-Spangled Screen*, 129-130.
appeasing various groups, both inside and outside of Hollywood, that were capable of delaying or derailing any motion picture that they found offensive.  

One of those groups was the government-created Office of War Information. The OWI believed that motion pictures could play a crucial role in building up and maintaining public morale during the war. While OWI officials were loath to use the word, they tried their best to ensure that World War II-era combat films were works of pro-Allied propaganda. This included portraying servicemen in the best possible light. Through its Bureau of Motion Pictures, the OWI wanted studios to “reflect the finest aspects of our democratic army” in their films. The OWI did not specifically mandate that studios create GIs with a religious aspect to their characters, but it did push to minimize any on-screen tension or discord between different religious traditions. Often, this meant downplaying religious diversity so as to present the appearance that all GIs worshiped the same God in the same way. In early drafts of Guadalcanal Diary, there were two chaplains serving with the Marines, one Catholic and one Methodist. There was some good-natured competition between the two, and, at one point, the Catholic chaplain warns his colleague, “No proselytizing while I’m gone.” The Methodist responds, “You work your side of the tracks…I’ve got a couple of good Presbyterians in there. I don’t want you putting any ideas in their heads.” Even the recognition that there were Methodists and Catholics in the military was more than the OWI wanted to see. So, in the final version of the script, not only is the scene missing, but the character of the Methodist chaplain no longer exists. Hollywood GIs belonged to a nondescript, non-

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sectarian Christian tradition that left little room for any sort of real theological division or depth.⁶²

If wartime movies watered down Christianity into a single, vague faith, other religious traditions were often completely discarded. In World War II combat films, Hollywood created what has come to be called the all-American battalion. These groups of GIs were intended to be cross-sections of the American population. In reality, the all-American battalion was filled with stock characters that audiences could quickly identify: someone with a heavy Brooklyn accent and a love for the Dodgers; a farmboy from the Midwest; someone from an European background, like Poland or Italy; and a GI from a racial minority (African-American and Mexican-American, for example). Frequently, at least one member of the group was Jewish. In combat films, Hollywood often treated Judaism more as an ethnic classification rather than as a religious faith, which made it possible for filmmakers to ignore the religious aspects of Judaism (a different Sabbath than Christians, dietary laws, etc...), and thus make Jews indistinguishable from Christians.⁶³

*Guadalcanal Diary* demonstrates the practice of subsuming Judaism into Christianity. In one draft of the script, Memphis is trying to convince his Jewish buddy, Max, to go to Mass with him:

Memphis: How about goin’ to church with me, Maxie?
Max: You mean they got a rabbi on board?
Memphis: Nope – just Father Gallagher, but that don’t make no difference. Churches are pretty much the same. You believe in somthin’ an’ you don’t quite understand—so you go to church and listen, while somebody who does know explains it to you. Then mebbe you pray a little bit, no matter how tough you are,

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and you feel like somebody’s listenin’ an’ that He understands. An’ you come out of the church feelin’ all clean and kinda good inside. Ain’t that the way it is in your church?
Max: Yeah – yeah, that’s the way it is.
Memphis: Then come on. What’re we hesitatin’ about.64

The final version of the film has less dialogue, but it gets the same point across. The deck of a troop transport ship is full of Marines attending a Sunday morning worship service lead by a Catholic priest. They are singing the Christian hymn “Rock of Ages,” and one Marine compliments another on his singing voice. The second Marine replies, “My father was a cantor in the synagogue.” Hollywood’s GI Jews had no problems singing praises to the Christian messiah. After all, America was at war.65

The second reason that studios chose to assume that GIs were generally Christian had to do with the necessities of filmmaking during the war. Most feature films are works of fiction, but filmmakers have, from the very earliest days of the medium, tried to make movies that appeared to be credible representations of real life. Research and expertise is required to make sets, costumes, props, and language as authentic as possible. For combat films, the advice of current or former members of the armed forces is very valuable. During the Second World War, each branch of the service had technical advisors stationed in Los Angles so that they could help studios secure equipment (when possible), ensure that costumes and dialogue were correct, and, as importantly, make certain that films did not make the military look bad. Studio executives knew that one of

64 Script dated 12/23/42, Guadalcanal Diary, TCF.
the best ways to guarantee the cooperation of the military was to avoid making films that would question the character or integrity of those in uniform.\textsuperscript{66}

Religion was one tool available to screenwriters to help bolster the image of the American GI and to create goodwill between Hollywood and the military. No one really believed that every single member of the Army or Navy was a person of faith, much less a follower of Christ. But the implicit Christianity of servicemen in many World War II combat films did convey an important message: unlike the enemy, American GIs were good and trustworthy men, and, while they might be a little rough around the edges (a trait necessary to win the war), American servicemen were at heart decent, God-fearing people that audiences should be proud of.\textsuperscript{67}

A good example of how producers used this religious dimension of the GI is found in the opening scenes of \textit{The Fighting Sullivans} (1942). The film tells the story of five very close brothers, all who join the Navy after Pearl Harbor. They request, and are granted, permission to serve on the same ship, a tragic act of loyalty that ends up costing all five their lives when the ship is sunk. The film begins, however, when the Sullivan brothers are still boys. They are a rough and rowdy bunch who are not afraid to fight other boys in their neighborhood in order to defend each other. But the Sullivans are not hoodlums. The audience knows this through the loyalty they show one another throughout the film, but also because of their Christian faith. The brothers are well known and liked by their parish priest, and, in the early stages of the film, one of the boys is preparing to take his first communion. The film ends with all the boys marching through the gates of heaven. These scenes did little to advance the plot of the story, but


\textsuperscript{67} Shull and Wilt, \textit{Hollywood War Films}, 177.
they were an important way for the producers to establish just what type of men the Sullivan brothers were.\textsuperscript{68}

Finally, the vague Christianity practiced by Hollywood’s military characters was also a response to the limitations imposed by film censorship. In the 1940s, studios had to navigate a complicated system of censorship bodies at the state and local level as well as other powerful non-governmental organizations, like the Legion of Decency. The roots of film censorship in the United States were comprised of a tangled mix of motives—the fear that motion pictures might corrupt the minds of the youth and the uneducated working class, the anti-Semitism and xenophobia directed at studio heads, the desire to protect local communities from outside cultural influence, and the promise of additional revenues from license fees.\textsuperscript{69}

As unpleasant as studios found the patchwork of state and local censorship bodies, it was better than the alternative, a national censorship system. In order to avoid the creation of a national censorship body Hollywood had to find a way to convince religious and social groups that it could police itself without the interference of the federal government. In 1922, studio heads formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and appointed former Postmaster General Will Hays as the new enforcer of morality in Hollywood. In 1924, Hays created “The Formula,” a system by which studios would voluntarily send their scripts to his office for review. Then, Hays set about working with studios to create a list of dos and don’ts to help screenwriters. All of these efforts, however, did little to rein in studios or calm industry


\textsuperscript{69} Not all states or municipalities had censorship laws, but by 1929, according to one report, “More than fifty percent of the United States, as far as attendance goes, [was] under censorship...More than sixty percent of the revenue derived from the sale of motion pictures [came] from states and municipalities that [had] censorship boards.” Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, \textit{The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s} (New York: Gove Weidenfeld: 1990): 8.
critics. If federal censorship was going to be avoided, Hollywood needed some divine assistance. To the rescue came the Catholic Church.

In the late 1920s, a group of Catholic priests and laymen began working on their own set of standards for Hollywood. Operating under the principle that “no picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it,” Father Daniel Lord, S.J., working with layman Martin Quigley, created what would eventually become the Production Code. Will Hays found the Code appealing because it gave him a tool with which to manage the studios. For industry heads, the Code offered an opportunity to appease critics and still retain control over their movies. In 1930, the Code was adopted by the industry, but it would not be until 1934 that the Production Code Administration, with Joseph Breen at the helm, was established to ensure compliance by the studios.\textsuperscript{70}

One of the many topics addressed by the Code was the respect for religion that studios needed to show when dealing with it on screen. While it may seem obvious that a document written by a Catholic priest would include restrictions about the use of religion in film, it is important to bear in mind that people held organized religion, especially Christianity, in much higher regard in the 1930s and 1940s than they do today. Churches and synagogues were widely viewed as important pillars in the community, even by those who did not attend them. The Code was not that different from other censorship bodies around the country in the restrictions it placed on filmmakers’ use of religion. The actual guidelines of the Production Code stated that:

1. No film or episode may throw ridiculous on any religious faith.

2. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or villains.

3. Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled. The Code was later amended to include this explanation for its guidelines about religious leadership:

The reason why ministers of religion may not be comic characters or villains is simply because the attitude taken toward them may easily become the attitude taken toward religion in general. Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because of the lowering of the audiences respect for ministers.  

The Code’s broad statements about the treatment of religion and clergy in film left a great deal of room for interpretation, negotiation, and even rejection by studios. Screenwriters, who were very familiar with the Code, frequently tested the boundaries of just what the PCA would or would not allow. They did so in part because they were aware that studios, if they chose, could reject the advice and counsel of the PCA. In reference to an RKO release entitled Back To Bataan (1945), the PCA tried to persuade the studio to alter a scene involving the Catholic rite of Confession:

You will have in mind the observations, we presumed to make, concerning the scenes in the Confessional. You will recall, I am sure, our general recommendation that it might be well to delete the scene entirely. If, however, you think that the scene should be played out inside a Confessional, then we shall insist that the dialogue and action be completely rewritten in order to get away from any paralleling or paraphrasing of the Confessional Ritual. I wish to repeat again that any kind of scene even remotely resembling the action and dialogue set forth in your script is certain to give very serious offense to Catholics everywhere.

As noted above, MGM all but ignored the PCA’s request to remove any relationship between the pacifist colony at Balligan and organized religion in Salute to the Marines. In a letter to Warner Bros. regarding The Fighting 69th, officials at the PCA chastised the studio for ignoring its advice:

As we suggested to you in two, or three, of our letters, we think the lines, spoken by Cagney, “Dominus Vobiscum salesmen” and “Hi, Saint Francis, how’s all the

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71 “Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures,” reprinted in Leff and Simmons, Dame in the Kimono, 283-292.
monks?” are likely to give offense to large numbers of motion picture patrons, especially Catholics, and we recommend that you delete these speeches, pronto.

After listing other problems with the script, the letter concludes, “You will have in mind that we mentioned all of these matters to you in our several letters…which were sent you on the script.”

These were, at the end of the day, voluntary codes. While Joseph Breen may have believed that “the decisions of the Production Code Administration are, in reality, the decisions of a private judicial tribunal” that “have the force of law for the industry and are carefully considered in adjudicating subsequent cases,” things were much more flexible than Breen believed.

Censorship bodies outside of Hollywood were not as malleable. Frequently, the PCA would resort to reminding studio executives that, if they chose to ignore their warnings, other censorship agencies would take action. In a letter to Twentieth Century Fox, the PCA warned that, “the expression ‘heart of Jesus’ and ‘Mary, Mother of Jesus’ may be cut by some political censor boards.”

By far, the PCA’s biggest weapon was the British Board of Film Censors. Great Britain was an important outlet for U.S. films during the war, and the British Board had a much stricter policy regarding religion than the PCA had. The PCA warned studios that the BBFC would take direct quotations from Jesus, the Lord’s Prayer, prayer in general, Christians crossing themselves, any blessings given by clergy, hymns, and quotes from Scripture out of any film. There was some room for interpretation by the British Board, for even the PCA could not always predict what it would do.

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73 Breen quoted in Leff and Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, xiii-xiv.

74 Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, 10/27/44, *A Bell For Adano*, MPPA Files, MHL.
would do, but the best course of action was to avoid using religion in any film headed for Great Britain.  

All of these influences—the propaganda nature of World War II era films, the need to work with the military to produce somewhat believable combat films, and the internal and external censorship bodies that imposed restraints upon the portrayal of religion—affected the way in which Hollywood utilized religion in combat films. These factors did not deter some studios from incorporating religious storylines into their combat films, but it did alter the way in which they employed them. The religious conversion narrative used by Warner Bros. in *Sergeant York* and *The Fighting 69th* before Pearl Harbor had to be adjusted to fit within the constraints imposed by the military, the OWI, and the PCA.

**THE WORLD WAR II CONVERSION NARRATIVE**

A number of World War II era films include conversion storylines, and not all of them are religious in nature. In home-front movies, like United Artist’s *Since You Went Away* (1944), producers use a conversion narrative to deal directly with a lack of commitment to the war effort. The main character, played by Claudette Colbert, is a middle-class woman whose husband has been called up for military service overseas. She tries her best to keep her household running in the midst of serious financial

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75 Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 2/4/41, *Sergeant York*; Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, 5/14/43, *Guadalcanal Diary*; Joseph Breen to Louis Mayer, 1/26/43, *The Cross of Lorraine*; Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 8/11/42, *Action in the North Atlantic*; Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 9/1/39, 10/19/39, 12/8/39, *The Fighting 69th*, MPPA Files, MHL. With regards to the lack of clarity, Albert Deane wrote Joseph Breen that, “we are constantly studying the problem of just how much religion, and to what extent prayers, will be permitted in pictures by the British Censor Board. Some times we are surprised that things we imagined will be banned are allowed to pass.” 2/7/40, MPPA Files, MHL.
difficulties. Even though she takes in borders to help make ends meet, her dedication to
the war effort is not total. Her husband is overseas fighting the enemy, but she resists
taking a defense-related factory job. Her labor is desperately needed to ensure that he
has the ammunition and guns to win the war, but she feels that such work falls outside the
bounds of her middle-class world. The tension in the film slowly builds until at last, she
realizes how selfish she has been. Her conversion experience occurs when she accepts the
fact that, if she wants her husband to returns home safely, she must fully commit herself
to the war and go to work on the assembly line.\textsuperscript{76}

In combat films, questions of dedication to the war effort could not be so overt.
This is why religious conversion narratives appear in combat films but are generally
lacking in other war-related movies. The religious conversion narrative provided
screenwriters with a vehicle through which they could address the fact that not everyone
understood or believed that America was fighting for its very existence. This was
critically important when it came to movies where the main characters were GIs in
combat. During the Second World War, it was unimaginable for studios to discredit
soldiers and sailors by creating characters that were so cynical or jaded that their bravery
and service seemed in doubt. Before Pearl Harbor, Hollywood could create cowardly
characters like Jerry Plunket. Not so after America entered the war. The religious
conversion narrative allowed screenwriters the freedom to explore the reality that not
every GI (or civilian in the audience) believed that America was fighting in a cosmic
struggle against right and wrong, or that the cost of the war was really worth it. The

\textsuperscript{76} According to one scholar the conversion narrative could be used to promote not just the war effort but
also consumerism. See May, \textit{The Big Tomorrow}, 139-174.
conversion narrative also ensured that the film ended with the main characters (and hopefully the audience) finally grasping the significance of what the war was all about.\footnote{Shull and Wilt, \textit{Hollywood War Films}, 177.}

Religious conversions, which Hollywood had used to openly address issues of patriotism and commitment before the war, were now employed to subtly confront those same concerns. The religiously based conversion narrative made it possible to transfer doubts and fears about the war itself onto a slightly safer topic—God. Rather than have GIs openly question their commitment to the Allies’ cause (which no doubt some did), the screenwriters redirected the soldiers’ lack of faith in the war to a lack of faith in God. Doubting that there was a God was easier to handle than questioning the conviction and courage of soldiers and sailors. By transferring concerns about the war to concerns about God, the GI could still be brave and noble. One did not have to believe in God in order to pick up a gun and fight. Yet the conversion to faith in God allowed the GI to be braver and to fight better. It also made it possible to resolve doubts about the war.

Warner Bros. \textit{Destination Tokyo} was one of the first combat films to reintroduce the religious conversion narrative. Its story revolves around the crew of the submarine \textit{U.S.S. Copperfin} and the their secret mission to enter Tokyo Bay. The skipper, played by Cary Grant, is a father figure to his men—a strong, brave man, who, in the absence of a chaplain, is their spiritual leader. The crew of the \textit{Copperfin} contains many of the stock characters of the All-American battalion, including a New Yorker nicknamed Wolf, an Irish-Catholic called Mike, and an innocent farmboy, Tommy. Mike is a veteran of previous submarine missions, but this is Tommy’s first time out. The \textit{Copperfin} receives orders to set sail on Christmas Eve, and, the next morning, Tommy and Mike awake at
sea. Tommy wants to be tough, but already he is worried about what lies ahead, and he expresses his concerns to Mike:

Tommy: Merry Christmas, Mike.
Mike: (waking up) Merry Christmas, Tommy.
T: You know this is the first Christmas I ever spent underwater.
M: You should've been aboard with us Christmas Day, 1941. Japs sure gave us a Christmas present. Blasted the living daylights out of us off Ling Gang Gulf. Between depth charges we ate what you might call Christmas dinner in the dark, 200 feet down. Ice water and sandwiches, well sprinkled with rust and chips of paint that kept flying off the bulkheads at that.
T: Bet you said your prayers.
M: I sure did. Some extra Hail Mary’s too.
T: Do you think prayers do any good, Mike?
M: Sure they do. Alright, some guys say go ahead, prove to me there’s a God. I don’t argue, I just know. Like I know there’s salt in the sea.
T: That’s the way it is with me too. Look Mike, if we, uh…we get depth charged and I show any signs of being yellow why you sock me.
M: Right on the button.
T: That’s a promise.
M: That’s a promise.

The conversation ends when some members of the crew move through the submarine leading the other sailors in a medley of Christmas carols, including “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” proof of the crewmembers own Christian faith.78

Not long after Tommy and Mike have their Christmas morning conversation, they are together with Pills, who serves as both the pharmacy mate and the barber on the Copperfin. While Pills is cutting hair, the three begin talking about the future, after the war is over. Tommy, still struggling with his own insecurities, now looks to Pills for advice:

Tommy: Pills, if…if anything happened to us while were out on patrol, if we got conked off, you figure we’d see our folks in the hereafter?
Pills: I wouldn’t bank on it. I don’t think my old man would be overjoyed at seeing me anyway. He never thought I was much good.

78 In addition to the commanding officer, older GI’s also functioned in the role of father figure in WWII combat films. See, Basinger, The World War II Combat Film, 67-69.
Tommy: I like to think we’ve got souls that...
Pills: I don’t know Tommy, all those guys I cut up at school never found a soul inside.
Mike: But what does that prove, Pills? Say you trust a guy. You can’t see the trust, but it’s there.
Pills: I’m from Missouri, Mike.
Tommy: Well I’m not exactly religious but don’t you think God...
Pills: No I don’t. My angle is this – I only believe what I can see.
Tommy: Are you an atheist?
Pills: Call it what you like.
Mike: If the Japs turn the heat on us I’ll watch you pray, Pills. I’ve seen it happen before.

Their conversation is not so much about God as it is about the war, as indicated by Tommy’s fear and uncertainty about getting “conked off” and what might happen to him after he dies. It is clear that Tommy wonders whether he has the courage to fight and, if necessary, lose his life. That uncertainty grows as Tommy encounters two tests to his faith in the war. Both occur when the Copperfin surfaces to make a secret rendezvous. As the crew waits to pick up a specialist for their mission, two Japanese planes spot the sub and try to sink it. The crew fights back, shooting down one of the planes and forcing its pilot to ditch into the ice-cold waters. Even though the Copperfin is at war with the Japanese, its crew attempts to rescue the enemy pilot. American GIs respect life, but the enemy does not, for Mike is killed by the very Japanese pilot he is trying to save. With the death of Mike, the crew loses a member of its family, and Tommy in particular loses his surrogate father. Now Tommy, like many in the audience who had lost a loved one during the war, faces a choice: does he allow his grief to undermine his belief that Mike died fighting for what was good and right, or does this tragedy strengthen his faith that fascism has to be defeated and give him renewed courage to fight on?

Tommy’s moment of decision comes quickly. One of the Japanese planes dropped a bomb that did not explode but instead lodged under the decking of the sub. A member of the crew has to crawl under the deck and perform the dangerous task of
disarming the bomb, knowing that, if he fails, he will kill himself and the rest of his sub-
mates. Tommy, still reeling from the death of Mike, volunteers for the mission. Slowly, 
carefully, Tommy works to disable the bomb, and, after a few tense moments, he 
succeeds in saving the crew. Tommy emerges from these tests much more confident. 
There are no more questions about whether he will be able to do his duty, or what will 
happen to him if he dies. In one sense, Tommy has taken Mike’s place as the member of 
the crew who demonstrates a complete faith in God, himself, and most importantly, the 
war. It is this faith that Tommy will use to inspire Pills.

The Copperfin makes it into Tokyo Bay and sends a scouting party ashore to 
collect information for an Allied air raid. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew, aware of the 
danger they are in, anxiously waits in the sub at the bottom of the Bay. As if this were 
not enough drama, Tommy develops a case of appendicitis that requires an immediate 
operation. The sub has no doctor aboard and obviously cannot surface to find one. It is 
up to Pills to perform the appendectomy with only a textbook and some crudely adapted 
kitchen tools. Pills is uncertain whether he has the ability to save Tommy’s life—he is 
only a pharmacy mate and has very little formal medical training—yet he has no choice 
but to try. The surgery scene begins with Tommy starting to recite the Lord’s Prayer. He 
only gets partway through before the anesthesia takes effect. In the midst of this 
uncompleted prayer, Pills goes to work while the whole crew nervously waits to see if he 
can save Tommy. Could Pills have done his duty even if Tommy had not begun to pray? 
Perhaps, but the screenwriters needed to create a way for Pills to resolve not just his 
questions about the existence of God but also his questions about the war. Pills believes 
only what he can see, and, with the death of Mike, he has seen firsthand the true nature of 
the enemy. But a partial victory is of no use: Americans had to be prepared to do
whatever was necessary for a total defeat of the Axis threat, even if it required extraordinary feats of courage and sacrifice.

The operation is successful, and, as Tommy comes out from under the ether, he finishes his prayer, and Pills, the self-confirmed atheist, adds an “Amen.” Tommy’s faith has given Pills the strength to do his duty, much as Mike did earlier for Tommy in the film. Now it is Pill’s turn to inspire hope and confidence in another crewmember. The Allied air attack is a success, but the crew must find a way out of enemy waters. They escape from Tokyo Bay, but Japanese warships chase them and pummel the submarine with depth charges. The captain has no choice but to place the boat at the bottom of the ocean and hope that his submarine can outlast the Japanese. Hours pass, and the men start to get anxious. The temperature in the sub starts to rise since they cannot surface for fresh air, so Pills passes out salt tablets to the sweating men. One sailor asks him:

Sailor: Pills, do you think prayers do any good?
Pills: Yes they do. (Flashback image of Tommy on operating table) I know they do.

The film has come full circle. At the beginning of the film, it was who Tommy asked Mike the same question. Now it is Pills, the former atheist, who is a believer. The Code and the Legion of Decency required Pills’ conversion from atheist to believer. It was not acceptable to have a character openly question the Christian faith and then not see the error of his ways. Yet what appears on the surface to be a religious conversion really has little to do with religion. If this scene was truly about a religious conversion, we would expect something to happen to Pills, something that changes his life, a real conversion like Alvin York experienced. But nothing about Pills or his lifestyle changes,
at least from a moral standpoint. All that happens on a religious level is that he goes
from questioning the existence and power of God to acknowledging it.79

Pills was not the only character in World War II-era combat films to have such a
limited religious conversion experience. In *Guadalcanal Diary*, the screenwriters created
a scene that was not found within the pages of the book the movie was based on. Early in
the film, audiences meet Taxi, a Brooklyn cabdriver with a passion for the Dodgers. Taxi
is part of the Marine invasion force that lands on the island of Guadalcanal in the summer
of 1942, the first Allied attempt to take back territory held by the Japanese. The early
days of the campaign are rough, the fighting intense. Late one night, sirens go off, and
the Marines scramble into foxholes to seek shelter from a barrage of enemy shells. One
of the young Marines starts to cry, and another remarks that, “Anybody who says he ain’t
scared is a fool or a liar.” At that moment, Father Donnelly, the regimental chaplain,
comes running into the foxhole. He was helping in the surgical unit when the artillery
attack began:

BOMB EXPLODES
Hook: Hey, that was a bomb.
Father Donnelly: Yes, their planes are really busy too. They’re really pasting
Henderson Field.
Taxi: Father, you got any objections if I say what I’m thinkin’?
Father Donnelly: Go right ahead son don’t mind me.
Taxi: Well, I don’t know about these other guys but me, well, I’m telling you this
thing is over my head. It’s going to take somebody bigger than me to handle it. I
ain’t much at this praying business; my old lady always took care of that.
Hook: Yeah, my old lady was like that too.
BOMB EXPLODES
Taxi: Well, I don’t know as I mean that kind of praying, you know the Lord’s
Prayer and things like that.

79 The PCA cautioned Warner Bros., “We feel that since Pills has been characterized as an atheist quite
definitely in the earlier part of the story, that his prayer at the bottom of the page should be amplified to
leave no doubt in the minds of the audience that he has changed definitely from his former skepticism.”
Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 6-29-43, *Destination Tokyo*, file 1856, WBA.
Hook: I know what your talking about Taxi, I used to pray like that back when I was a kid. You know, Lord give me this, give me that. Please let the Yanks win. I never been in a spot like this before in my life.

BOMB EXPLODES

Taxi: I’m no hero, I just a guy. I come out here because somebody had to come. I don’t want no medals I just want to get this thing over with and go back home. I’m just like everybody else and I’m telling you I don’t like it. Except maybe I guess there’s nothin’ I can do about it. I can’t tell them bombs to hit somewhere else. Like I said before it’s up to somebody bigger than me, bigger than anybody. What I mean is, I… I guess its up to God. And I’m not kidding when I say I sure hope he knows how I feel. I’m not going to say I’m sorry for everything I’ve done. Maybe I am and maybe I’m not. When you’re scared like this the first thing you do is start trying to square things. If I get out of this alive I’ll probably go out and do the same things all over again so what the use of kidding myself. The only thing I know is I…I didn’t ask to get in this spot.

BOMB EXPLODES

Taxi: If we get it…it sure looks that way now…well then I only hope He figures we’ve done the best we could and lets it go at that. Maybe this is a funny kind of prayin’ to you guys, but it’s what I’m thinkin’ and prayin’.

Father Donnelly: (Makes sign of the cross) Amen.

Hook: Amen.

Taxi admits that he has no intention of changing his life or acting differently even if God does intervene. We might expect the Catholic priest to challenge Taxi about this, but all Father Donnelly does is affirm Taxi’s “prayer” with an “Amen.” None of the World War II-era combat films that use the religious conversion narrative contains soldiers or sailors undergoing any changes to who they are or how they act morally. They are no more or less Christian than at the beginning.

There is one film that reverses the conversion narrative. In Universal’s Gung Ho! (1943), there is a change of behavior, but in this case a religious character appears to turn his back on his faith convictions. The movie focuses on a special battalion of Marines who are to invade Japanese-held territory. Only a select few are chosen, and the men must volunteer for this dangerous assignment. One of those who steps forward is a

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80 Richard Tregaskis, Guadalcanal Diary (New York: Random House, 1943). In fact, the only time religion appears in the book is at the very beginning when the author describes a worship service at sea (which does take place in the film).
young Marine named John Harbison. He is questioned, as all the candidates are, about why he wants to be part of this unit. At first, he is reluctant to say, but when pushed he responds:

Harbison: Alright. I’m an ordained minister of the gospel. When I left theological college I entered the Marines instead of seeking a church. Because I felt that in times like these so many men in the service, I could do more good here. Now I want the most dangerous post I can find for there beside me will be the men who will need me most.
Officer: I’m sorry Mac, we got our Chaplains. What we want now is killers.
Harbison: I’ll do my duty sir.
Officer: I believe you will, Harbison.

This is a much milder version of the interview-scene than originally proposed by the scriptwriters. The PCA was firm in its objection that Harbison could not respond to the officer, “I’ll kill – in the name of the Lord.” That language was unacceptable “since you have just established this man as an ordained minister. Such an expression would undoubtedly give great offense to many persons of sincere religious convictions.”

Harbison is selected for the unit, and, throughout the film, he seems to have no problem reconciling his calling as a minister with his desire to be a killer. In fact, it is his faith that propels him to be where the action is, where men are in the most danger. While pushing the boundaries, Gung Ho! could get away with such a storyline because of the assumption that American GIs were good men who, because of their underlying faith in God, would not engage in unholy activities. Harbison actually functions more as a chaplain to the men then as a trained killer, but, through his character, the screenwriters attempt to redefine what it meant to be a person of faith in times of war.

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81 Letter from Joseph Breen to Maurice Pivar dated 6/1/43, Gung Ho!, MPAA Collection, MHL. As we will see later, the PCA allowed a Norwegian minister to take up arms and kill Germans from the church bell tower in Edge of Darkness.
The absence of any real change in the behavior of GIs is the key to understanding the role of the religious conversion narrative in World War II-combat films. Religion is not the end but the means through which filmmakers could address concerns over the war. Writers used their onscreen soldiers and sailors to deliver messages to their audiences about not giving in to fear, doubt, or uncertainty. These films transformed questions about whether the conflict was really worth all the lives lost and the sacrifices made into questions about the existence and power of God. In these films, God not only exists but has the power to deliver: Tommy gets through his surgery, the crew of the Copperfin return home safely after their mission, and Taxi and his fellow Marines survive their night in the foxhole. Hollywood used the religious conversion narrative to remind audiences that the war could be won, that the sacrifices were necessary and worthwhile, and that they needed to keep the faith in the Allied cause.

QUESTIONING THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE

The GI religious conversion narrative was still in use as late as 1945, but as the war progressed and the propaganda needs of the nation changed, so did Hollywood’s use of religion. Warner Bros. God is My Co-Pilot (1945), while still retaining the central elements of the conversion narrative, was the first film in which religion was used to help envision a post-war world. The film was based on a popular book by Col. Robert L. Scott, and tells the story of how Scott became one of the greatest pilots of the Flying Tigers. Along the way, Scott comes to the realization that not only is there a divine being, but that God’s presence is crucial to his success as a warrior.  

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The real-life Flying Tigers were a squadron of volunteer American fighter pilots under the command of General Claire Chennault who helped the Chinese in their war with Japan. In the movie, Scott is an officer in the Army who wants to be a combat pilot but has been assigned to fly transport planes. This is very frustrating to Scott. His fortunes begin to change when, on a flight into China, Scott has a special passenger: Big Mike, a Catholic missionary who works near the Flying Tigers’ airbase. Scott mentions to Big Mike his admiration for the Tigers, who, Big Mike informs Scott, don’t think much of Army pilots:

Scott: You sound more like a soldier than a missionary, Father.

Big Mike: Ha, ha. I guess there’s not much difference. Only in the weapons maybe. We both fight the forces of evil; take the same chances.

Scott: I guess you’re right. Never thought about it that way before. But I’m not exactly a religious guy.

Big Mike: (Little laugh) I’ve yet to meet a flyer who didn’t have some faith or religious code of his own.

Scott: I wish I could feel that way, Father.

Eventually, Scott ends up being invited to join the Flying Tigers and quickly becomes one of their best combat pilots. Even though he is doing what he has always dreamed of, Scott has some lingering doubts. After a successful mission where he has killed a number of enemy pilots and ground troops, Scott goes to see Big Mike in the chapel:

Big Mike: I’d thought you had something on your chest, Scottie. What is it?

Scott: I don’t know if you can answer it or if anyone can. But today I killed a hundred men, maybe more. I never killed a man before today, Big Mike. I know I’m a soldier. It’s my duty to kill. But I’m wondering, would it change me any? If someday I go back to my wife and child, and they’ll be millions like us, Big Mike, who’ve killed men in battle, will we still be the same men who left them…or will we be hard and bitter, burned-out inside? And will life be the same meaningless thing it is out here?

Big Mike: You’re confused, Scottie. Life is always cheap in a war, yes. But neither life nor death are ever meaningless. And a man only changes for the worse when he thinks they are.

Scott: How can I learn to think otherwise?
Big Mike: When a man asks that he’s already begun. You know Scottie, you’ve got a big job coming up, and you’re gonna have to have clear head for it. As you know next week the old Flying Tigers will fly for the last time and they’ll be going home. But their places will be taken by Army pilots; youngsters fresh from America. And they look to you for training and leadership. Don’t let them think you doubt anything.

Scott: It won’t stop me from doing my job, if that’s what you mean.

Big Mike: What I mean goes much deeper than that. It’s faith in God.

Because Scott was fighting on God’s side, anything he did in combat, including killing, was acceptable. The greatest sin was not killing, but doubt, because doubt could lead to defeat. Throughout the movie, Big Mike tries to convince Scott of the need to have faith in God. What is really at stake, however, is whether Scott has the courage to do his duty. Unlike Tommy in *Destination Tokyo*, Scott is not worried about dying. Instead, he questions his ability to take life and how killing might change who he is. These were concerns that many GIs and their civilian loved ones faced. At this juncture in the film, the screenwriters simply raise the question and have Big Mike brush it aside, but it will resurface again later in the movie.

The religious conversion narrative reaches its climax at the end of the film. The Tigers are preparing for a raid on Tokyo, a mission Scott wants to lead. However, he has been grounded because he has come down with malaria. A distraught Scott paces outside of the briefing room where all the other pilots have gathered to learn about the mission. Big Mike is seated outside near him. In a last act of desperation, Scott begins to pray:

I’ve never asked for anything before, and I’ve never believed in miracles. But this is a mission for which I’ve lived and worked ever since I can remember. So if it is your will, let me go with them. Just this one time.

Big Mike says nothing, but his very presence in the scene makes it seem as if God Almighty is listening to Scott’s petition. Of course, his prayer is answered, and Scott is allowed to go on the mission. This is no ordinary mission: the attack on Tokyo not only signals the growing strength of the Allies, but it also involves many deaths, including
numerous civilian casualties. Yet Scott’s newfound faith has given him the courage to overcome his doubts and do his duty.

Two Marines in Guadalcanal Diary also bring up the morality of killing, which troubles Scott in God Is My Co-Pilot:

Chicken: Hey Hook.
Hook: Yeah.
Chicken: How do you feel about killing…people?
Hook: Well it’s kill or be killed, ain’t it? Besides, those ain’t people.
Chicken: Yeah, I know, but the first time you got one of them?
Hook: Well it was kind of rugged I guess. Then it’s just a matter of repetition. Quit thinkin’ about it, you’ll go crazy.

Dehumanizing the enemy, especially the Japanese, was a typical Hollywood response to the question about whether killing in combat was right or wrong. Like Big Mike in God Is My Co-Pilot, the screenwriters of Guadalcanal Diary have the chaplain validate the idea that the enemy was somehow less than human. At a funeral for some Marines who have been killed in action, Father Donnelly reminds his flock:

Seeing your friends hurt and killed is not a thing you can easily forget. True, we have killed four or five, six or even ten for every man we’ve lost. That’s statistics. But I find it very difficult to think of these boys as statistics. They were just Joe and Jim, Bill and Wiz and Alabama to us. (MAKES SIGN OF THE CROSS) God rest their souls.

The loss of one American at the hands of the Japanese is a tragedy; the death of ten Japanese at the hands of Americans is just a statistic.83

Even though Big Mike encourages Scott to do his duty, God Is My Co-Pilot pushes the discussion about the morality of the war farther than other films before it. In the process, it also calls into question the shallowness of the religious conversion narrative. Recall that, in Guadalcanal Diary, Taxi’s conversion is to a belief in a higher

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power that can save him from his current situation. He acknowledges that he does not live a life defined by this faith. In fact, he confesses that he has no intention to alter his basic patterns of behavior even if God intervenes. Father Donnelly does not question or push Taxi; instead, he affirms this limited conversion with an “Amen.” But that was in 1943. The Allies were not assured of victory then. By the time God Is My Co-Pilot was released in 1945, victory was certain and new questions had arisen. What happens when the war is over? How could GIs reconcile their actions during the war with traditional senses of right and wrong? Father Donnelly’s “Amen” and Big Mike’s speech to Scott seem to indicate that God did not care that Taxi had not intended to change his ways. The writers of God Is My Co-Pilot were not so sure that was the case.

When Scott gets shot down during a mission, the entire airbase waits for word of his fate. Hope mixes with a sense of despair as the men search the skies, looking for Scott’s plane. General Chennault even begins to compose a letter to Scott’s wife informing her of his death. The situation causes two of Scott’s fellow Flying Tigers to reflect on whether a GI’s actions will have an impact on life after death:

Tex: Ed, what’ya figure happens to a fellow like Scottie or any of us when we check out?
Ed: I’ve thought of that sometimes, Tex, when I was in a tight spot and didn’t see how I could possibly scrape though. But all I could see is what a lug I’ve been all of my life. That’s not very consoling.
Tex: Yeah, I reckon that’s true of most of us. Seems like what it takes to make a tough fightin’ man wouldn’t make a very pretty angel.
Ed: No, not hardly. Yet that doesn’t seem quite fair either. Take a guy like Scotty. He never had much faith in anything…except himself, and what were fighting for. I wonder if that’s enough to rate a soldier an even break in his final check-up.
Tex: No, I don’t think we’ll get a priority upstairs simply because were fightin’ with the Allies. If there’s any justice in heaven it’s got to be every man for himself, on his own personal record.
Ed: Yeah, I guess your right, Tex.
Big Mike offers absolution for the actions of GI’s during combat. They did what they had to do and God understood. Yet Ed and Tex’s conversation calls that very logic into question. Even if God accepts that killing in wartime is necessary, that does not mean that a GI’s actions after the war do not matter. There is no special status given to those who fought, no special set of rules. The location of the conversion scenes in *Guadalcanal Diary* and *God is My Co-Pilot* are important. A casual conversation outside replaces the urgency of the foxhole, just as the certainty of victory in 1945 replaced the uncertainty of victory in 1943. The questions raised in *God Is My Co-Pilot* were no longer about survival but about what would happen when the war was over and millions of GIs returned home. The character of Col. Scott gave voice to the concerns that many in uniform and in the audience had: how would what occurred during combat change soldiers or sailors? While the writers of *God Is My Co-Pilot* leave the question unanswered, they did believe that, once the war was over, the traditional ways of right living would matter once again. God may have granted men like Taxi a reprieve because they were fighting on God’s side during the war, but that did not mean they would be granted eternal life. Foxhole faith would not be enough after the war was over.
Chapter 4

Thus Says the Lord:
Religion and the Role of Women, Ministers, and African-Americans

On October 1, 1943, approximately twelve hundred people gathered on the campus of UCLA to attend the opening session of the Writers’ Congress. Organized by the Hollywood Writers’ Mobilization, the Congress was “to mobilize all writers to dedicate their creative abilities to the winning of the war.” The first evening of the program consisted of a series of greetings and addresses from some of the most important leaders in the country. President Roosevelt, Vice-President Wallace, and former Republican Presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie each sent messages expressing their appreciation that print, radio, and filmmakers had taken the initiative to gather and talk about ways to further the war effort. Fellow writers from the Allied nations of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China also sent letters of support and encouragement. Representatives of the War Department, the Nations of the Western Hemisphere, the United States Marines, and the NAACP all gave addresses.84

The very last speaker of the evening was a representative from the Office of War Information. Since the OWI was the official propaganda branch of the United States government, the idea of the Congress must have certainly pleased OWI officials. In one place were gathered hundreds of writers for radio and film, giving the agency a golden opportunity to ensure that they got the right message out to the American public. Yet notably absent that evening was OWI head, Elmer Davis. A former newspaperman, Davis could have spoken to the writers as someone who knew the importance of using

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the right words. Yet for some reason, Davis remained back in Washington. It would have seemed logical for him to send someone from his Bureau of Motion Pictures to address the Congress on his behalf, but neither Lowell Mellett, the head of the BMP, nor his Hollywood branch chief, Nelson Poynter, was on the program. Instead, the man representing the Office of War Information was Owen Lattimore, the newly appointed Director of the Pacific Bureau of the OWI’s Overseas Branch. Lattimore was an expert on China, having spent most of his childhood there. While he had done some writing during his career, he had no direct experience with either the film or radio industries. In fact, the branch of the OWI that he worked for would eventually become the Central Intelligence Agency. Lattimore’s presence at a Congress so central to the aims of the OWI may have baffled those in attendance, but it was a telling indication of just how badly things had gone for the agency during the past year.\footnote{85} 

While Lattimore was not an obvious choice to address the Congress, the OWI had few options in the fall of 1943. During the summer, Congress, which had become increasingly frustrated with Davis and his organization, cut most of the funding for the Domestic Branch of the OWI. As a result, the Bureau of Motion Pictures was shut down. So that left Lattimore, who was stationed close by in San Francisco, to speak on behalf of the OWI. His task, already difficult, was made even more daunting when other speakers on the program openly criticized the work of the OWI and even the need for its very existence. 

These critiques put Lattimore on the defensive, and he began his speech by attacking those who questioned the integrity of his boss, Elmer Davis, a man who, he said, “sums up and symbolizes in his own person the independent American writer

\footnote{85} Ibid.
serving his country in time of war.” After defending Davis’ integrity, Lattimore turned his attention to justifying the need for the United States government to have an official propaganda agency. “There are still many people who feel somehow that to resort to the warfare of ideas at all is a little bit beneath the dignity of Americans, that this is, in some way, an unbecoming and unprofessional approach to the business of war.” Lattimore continued, “There are others who believe, or who try to make others believe, that the work of the Office of War Information is something that was dreamed up in Washington by a lot of long-haired, New Deal bureaucrats, and that this work has no rational bearing on winning the war.”

Lattimore’s response to the first group of critics was to claim that America’s enemies had forced it to engage in ideological warfare, “Propaganda warfare is something that was imposed on us by ruthless and efficient enemies who themselves use propaganda with great skill.” But, he said, “while we have mastered the methods of propaganda, we do not use these methods in the way in which our enemy uses them.” Lattimore tried to reassure the writers that they had no need to fear that the OWI was trying to turn them into mindless zombies who wrote whatever the government told them to write. Americans could beat the Germans and Japanese at their own game without losing their commitment to freedom of speech and press. Further, Lattimore argued, the United States was winning the propaganda war. He praised the effectiveness of the Overseas Branch of the OWI and offered examples of how it was helping to win the war in the Mediterranean and the Pacific.86

Given Congress’ distaste for the Domestic Branch, it is not surprising that Lattimore shied away from mentioning the effectiveness of the OWI at home, but the

86 Ibid., 22-26.
agency had been active in trying to encourage writers, especially in Hollywood, to broaden and deepen their presentation of the war. In its short life, the Bureau of Motion Pictures used all manner of encouragement, persuasion, cajoling, and threats to get studios to produce pictures that truly represented, at least from OWI’s point of view, what the war was all about. Among other topics, the BMP attempted to push screenwriters to acknowledge that women were contributing as much as men to the war effort and that African Americans were as much a part of the fight as whites.

For an industry built upon the use of stock characters (including sexist and racist ones) and predictable storylines, this was not an easy task. Studio executives were generally reluctant to tamper with formulas that made them money or to engage in progressive politics. Hollywood screenwriters discovered that religion was a useful tool in negotiating the difficult task of supporting the war effort while at the same time making films that would turn a profit. Religious language and symbolism could be used to help audiences understand the importance of the sacrifices they and their loved ones were making. On-screen clergy preached sermons and offered prayers that reaffirmed the righteousness of the Allied cause. This fit nicely with the OWI’s interpretation of the war as a titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil, democracy and totalitarianism. 87

But religion’s real value was in the way that screenwriters could use it reassure audiences that things would return to normal when the war was over. Motion picture producers responded to the requests of the BMP by placing women in new roles as factory workers and Army nurses. Studios also created opportunities for African-Americans to be part of a completely fictional interracial military. Yet Hollywood was in no mood to concede that these roles were anything more than wartime aberrations. Films

used religion to reaffirm traditional status quo in American society: women would continue to be subservient to men, and African-Americans would continue to be submissive, second-class citizens.

THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION

The hostility that the Office of War Information encountered in the summer of 1943 had its roots in the First World War. In April 1917, shortly after America officially entered the war, President Wilson authorized the creation of the Committee on Public Relations. The intention was to create a working group with input from the War, Navy, and State Departments, but, in reality, the CPR was a one-man show, headed by George Creel. A former journalist, Creel went to great lengths to rally Americans behind the war. He was remarkably successful, but his zealousness created some unwanted consequences. Propaganda posters and speeches relied upon a heavy dose of hate-the-Hun rhetoric and caused a significant backlash against German-Americans. Creel also, in the words of one historian, “oversold his product.” The war was presented as a religious crusade that would not merely “re-win the tomb of Christ, but bring back to earth the rule of right, the peace, goodwill to men and gentleness he taught.” When such a world failed to materialize after the war, many disillusioned Americans, including clergy, directed their frustrations towards Creel and his propaganda.88

When Roosevelt created the Office of War Information in 1942, it carried with it the stigma of the Creel Committee. The distrust and disdain for government-sponsored propaganda plagued the OWI, especially its Domestic Branch, throughout its short life, but the effectiveness of the OWI was also hampered by the Roosevelt administration’s

previous attempts at controlling information. In September of 1939, the President authorized the creation of the Office of Government Reports. The OGR had two tasks: to share information with the public about the activities of government agencies and to report back to the administration about the public response to those activities. The OGR came under attack early on as a propaganda machine for the administration. In March of 1941, Roosevelt created the Division of Information of the Office of Emergency Management, which was to be the primary agency by which the public obtained information about the government’s defense related activities. In order to deal with public morale about the war, the Office of Civilian Defense was created in May of 1941. The OCD was responsible for keeping up public opinion, a task that it was not very successful with. None of these agencies seemed to be as effective as Roosevelt wanted, so, in the fall of 1941, he authorized the creation of the Office of Facts and Figures. Grafted onto the OCD, the OFF was to determine what war-related subject the public needed more education about and then to help create ways for other government agencies to get the information out.  

All of these organizations focused on domestic propaganda efforts. During the summer of 1940, the administration recognized the need for a more aggressive policy to assess and counter the efforts of Nazi propaganda in Latin America. This led Roosevelt to create the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, under the leadership of Nelson Rockefeller. Thus, on the eve of Pearl Harbor, the United States government had established a number of agencies to deal with domestic and foreign propaganda. Not only was such an alphabet soup of bureaucratic organizations difficult to figure out, but each newly created group suffered from the same lack of clarity and purpose. Franklin

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Roosevelt was well known for giving vague directives and frequently invested more than one agency with the same purpose or mandate. In-fighting to determine influence was a common problem, one that would plague the Office of War Information.\(^9^0\)

Shortly after America officially entered World War II, Roosevelt moved to establish a formal relationship between the government and one of the most powerful propaganda tools available: Hollywood. In mid-December, 1941, Lowell Mellett, the former head of the Office of Government Reports, was appointed coordinator of government films. Mellett moved quickly to ensure that studios got behind the war effort, meeting with the industry’s War Activities Committee and opening a branch office in Hollywood under the leadership of Nelson Poynter. Mellett’s mandate from the President, at least as he understood it, was two-fold. First, his office was to be the place where movie studios interacted with the government. Second, he was not to act as a censor but as a partner with Hollywood, helping them to further the war effort while still producing commercially successful films. Unfortunately, Mellett had no real experience with Hollywood and would soon discover that other governmental agencies did not share his vision for his office.\(^9^1\)

In June of 1942, President Roosevelt moved to consolidate all of the various propaganda organizations under the authority of one agency—the Office of War Information. From the beginning, this proved to be an impossible task. Nelson Rockefeller successfully petitioned to keep the CIAA as a separate organization, and some of the more covert foreign operations were kept out of the OWI for security reasons. Elmer Davis, a former journalist and radio announcer, was appointed the head


of this newly created amalgamation. Roosevelt gave Davis a very large mandate. The OWI was supposed to have authority over the creation and flow of information from all other agencies and departments of the federal government and could “review, clear, and approve all radio and motion picture programs sponsored by Federal departments.” Davis quickly discovered that not only did the various agencies within the OWI dislike each other, but that other departments within the federal government did not recognize the authority of the OWI.92

As part of the restructure that created the OWI, Lowell Mellett was given command of the Bureau of Motion Pictures. Hollywood executives were eager to help with the war effort, even if some of their motives were not as patriotic as others. Men like Harry Warner had been arguing for American involvement in World War II for years, so their willingness to work with the administration was not really a question. They were eager to find a government agency that would provide them with some direction about how to be effective partners in promoting the war. Yet studio executives were also aware that, if they were to turn a profit during the war, they were going to need the government’s help. The war was draining critical manpower from Hollywood, including A-list actors, directors, and technicians. Studio executives worked with the BMP to designate Hollywood an essential war industry. This created the opportunity for military deferments and also made necessary raw materials, like film stock and set-building materials, more readily available.93

The BMP established a voluntary process where studios submitted their scripts for review and allowed their movies to be screened before releasing them. Many studios cooperated with the BMP and were willing to consider suggestions from Nelson Poynter

92 Myers, The Bureau of Motion Pictures, 67.
93 Ibid., 61, 65.
and his staff. Those suggestions were not in short supply. Poynter was disappointed with much of the content of films made in the early months of the war, finding that studios had simply interwoven the war into preexisting genres, including musicals and westerns. The BMP wanted Hollywood to move beyond a superficial treatment of the war and incorporate more relevant themes and ideas into its pictures. Towards the end of June, 1942, the BMP produced the *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*. Whereas the Production Code was designed to tell studios what they could not put into movies, the Manual was more concerned with what Hollywood should be put into their product.\(^{94}\)

The Manual represented the BMP’s liberal version of what the war was about; raising themes and issues that the agency hoped studios would incorporate into their films. The document presented the war as a titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil, and argued that Americans were capable of making the appropriate wartime decisions if the government gave them the right information. In darkened theaters across America, the BMP envisioned movie audiences absorbing its messages through one of the most powerful mediums ever invented. Among the many characters who would clarify just what the war was all about were military chaplains and home-front ministers. In one of the many ironies of the wartime era, Hollywood would turn the very clergy they had chastised for their lack of patriotic support into divine spokesmen for the Allied cause.

DOMESTIC SPOKESMEN FOR THE DIVINE CAUSE

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\(^{94}\) Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 69; Myers, *The Bureau of Motion Pictures*, 73, 76.
In 1943, barely a year after the United States formally entered World War II, the Rev. Edwin McNeill Poteat published a book called *Four Freedoms and God*. Rev. Poteat, a former missionary to China, was minister of the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He was deeply impressed by President Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms—the freedom of speech and religion, and the freedom from fear and want—and believed that they were more than political ideas. From Poteat’s perspective, each freedom was firmly grounded in the great monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, and Americans needed to grasp the spiritual dimension of these freedoms or they would never be fully realized. Only by recognizing God’s role in providing the Four Freedoms would they become more than slogans devoid of real meaning when the war ended. Rev. Poteat was not alone in his thinking, for the *Four Freedoms and God* clearly articulated the post-Pearl Harbor theology of many Christian leaders in the United States. Historian Gerald Sittser has written that:

> Religious leaders believed that if America and its allies had a chance of winning, they would need a power that transcended mere military might. That power was the Christian faith. Nothing less than the influence of Christianity was needed to fortify the very system of democracy and the idea of freedom that the war in Europe and Asia was perilously close to destroying. Christian leaders believed that either totalitarianism or democracy would win. Atheism provided the foundation for the former, Christianity the latter.⁹⁵

It was Poteat’s conviction that people of faith needed to rally behind the war effort and ensure that the Four Freedoms “become the primary concern of those who share the great Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, a tradition that is basically religious.” While Poteat’s book was a call to arms and action, it was not overtly militaristic. His was more a war of the mind than the heart. Even with its strong theological purpose, the *Four Freedoms and God* embodied much of what the OWI was hoping Hollywood would

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convey in its motion pictures. America was fighting a holy crusade to defend freedoms that were so basic, so universal that they must have come from some higher power.  

Hollywood and the OWI would spend the war years trying to figure out how to incorporate this divine justification for the war into motion pictures. They would struggle to find both the right message and the right messenger. It made sense that the best spokesmen for God would be ministers and priests. But what types of religious characters should studios create? What should they look like and what should they say? The Production Code placed strict restriction on how films portrayed religious leaders. But would the effort to win the war allow screenwriters the freedom to create non-traditional men of God? That is just what 20th-Century Fox attempted to do when it began production on Guadalcanal Diary. In the process of trying to redefine the military chaplain, Fox, and Hollywood at large, discovered that, even in the face of total war, there were still limits to what on-screen clergy could say and do in the name of God.

In 1942, Fox purchased the rights to an extremely popular book by war correspondent Richard Tregaskis. Tregaskis was one of two reporters allowed to accompany the United States Marines as they prepared for and executed the first Allied land invasion in the Pacific. Guadalcanal Diary gave readers not only a taste for life on the frontlines but also introduced them to some of the men who fought and died trying to defend democracy. Writers George Bricker, Herman Ruby, and Leonard Hoffman completed an early screenplay of the film in late December of 1942. Their storyline was closer to Republic’s Flying Tigers (a 1942 release about Col. Claire Chennault and his volunteer airmen in China) than Tregaskis’ book about the Marine invasion of Guadalcanal. In the book, there is a brief mention of a Catholic priest named Father

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Francis W. Kelly from Philadelphia. Tregaskis describes him as “a genial smiling fellow with a faculty for plain talk,” who preaches a Sunday morning sermon to the troops about duty in a simple way “that was about right for the crowd of various uniformed sailors and marines standing before him.” Neither Father Kelly, nor any other religious figures, were included in the December, 1942, script.\footnote{Richard Tregaskis, \textit{Guadalcanal Diary} (New York: Random House, 1943): 3; \textit{Guadalcanal Diary}, TCF.}

The studio quickly abandoned the Bricker-Ruby-Hoffman screenplay and turned the project over to screenwriter Kenneth Gamet. He chose to follow Tregaskis’ book much more closely and created a character patterned after Father Kelly whom he called Father Donnelly. He was, according to Gamet, “a sturdy, genial man, much liked by the men” who wore his vestments while preaching to the men. But Gamet turned Father Kelly’s simple sermon on duty into a rousing theological justification for the war:

Somewhere across the reaches of these vast waters the evil forces of this earth lie in waiting. Your destination is unknown…but wherever it may be you know that you are sailing forth to lay siege to those forces which seek to destroy the freedom of all men…Before you is the goal—it is yours to attain…perhaps upon some distant Japanese beachhead it will be your privilege to strike the first blow of retaliation for our nation against the enemies of God and Man. There will be no defeat, for when the will to win is as strong as yours, you cannot fail. You are Marines!

The undying spirit of your comrades of Wake and Guam and Bataan march with you. The flaming story of their courage is your heritage. And God is your right hand…In his name you have drawn the sword of Truth. It will never be sheathed until Victory is yours…In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Ghost\footnote{Incomplete script (no date), pages 1-3, \textit{Guadalcanal Diary}, TCF.}

By the spring of 1943, another writer had been assigned to the film, this time a man named Waldo Salt. His first attempt, an incomplete script dated March 9\textsuperscript{th}, does not contain Father Donnelly or his patriotic sermon. In his next draft Salt chose to reinser Father Donnelly, but with no character development and no lines. Salt simply shows
Donnelly conducting a Catholic Mass. However, a new chaplain appears, presumably a Protestant minister, since he is presiding over a Protestant service. He has no name, but Salt describes him as “a rugged man, as tough as the Marines themselves,” and he tells the Marines: “In a very few minutes, men, it will be your privilege to strike the first blow of retaliation for our nation against the common enemy of God and man. The enemy you face is tough and ruthless with all the force of evil…” Later in the screenplay both chaplains are on deck and the skipper of the ship asks whether they will be going ashore with the first wave of men when the invasion begins. Father Donnelly responds for both when he replies “That’s when we may be most needed, Captain.”

It was standard practice for studios to assign and reassign scripts to various writers, and, in the process, characters would appear, be written out, and then sometimes reappear. Thus, the uncertainty about whether to include a character based on Father Kelly was not unusual. Yet at some point in the spring of 1943, the decision was made to not only include a character based on Father Kelly, but to develop him into one of the stars of the show. This would not be just any old priest. Fox endeavored to create a new type of chaplain, one that was just as tough, just as daring, and just as much a Marine as the men he served. Warner Bros. had attempted to do something similar with the character of Father Duffy in *The Fighting 69th*, but Fox would push the boundaries even further. The only difference between Father Donnelly and his men was that the priest did not carry a gun—but, with his unshakeable faith in God and the Allied cause, he didn’t need to.

In late March, the task of creating a screenplay was turned over to Jerry Cady. He rejected the Protestant chaplain and returned Father Donnelly to the “sturdy, genial man”

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99 Ibid., pages 23, 29-30, 35.
who was well liked by his troops. He wrote a new sermon that ends with a heavy dose of righteous patriotism:

There is no such thing as a holy war, for all wars are unholy and an abomination in the sight of God, but there is such a thing as a righteous cause, and for such a cause have you drawn the sword of liberty.

Victory will be yours, for your cause is just and your hearts are strong. **You are the Marines!** The undying spirit of your comrades of Wake and Guam and Bataan march with you. The flaming story of their courage is your heritage, and the torch they have handed you is your birthright. We know not where we are going, nor on what strange shore we shall find the forces of evil awaiting us. But this we do know, that with God on our right hand, we cannot fail, we must not fail, we shall not fail! In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.100

In this version of the script, and every script that followed, Father Donnelly goes ashore with the first wave of Marines. He is in the thick of the action and is unfazed by being the only person on the beach without a way to defend himself. His toughness is essential to the character that was being developed, and Cady, in a second draft, turned Donnelly into “a mountainous, battle-scarred old warrior in the army of the Lord.” The audience was to first see Father Donnelly not conducting Mass, but, Cady wrote, “stripped to the waist, so there is nothing about Father Donnelly to indicate that he is a chaplain. Indeed, at the moment, he seems anything else, for he is attacking the marine viciously with a bayoneted rifle.” Father Donnelly had evolved to the point where he not only taught his flock the ways of the Lord but also the ways of war. Where Donnelly does finally address the men, Cady introduced a new part of the sermon. After acknowledging that theirs was a righteous cause, Father Donnelly says,

There is a lot of fine language to describe a righteous cause—stripped of high sounding words, a righteous nation is one which is economically strong, politically sound, and spiritually unassailable. But because a cause is righteous is no guarantee of its success. I say to you men that you must stop Japan in the Pacific, or the Japanese armies will march through the streets of Washington!

100 Script dated 3/25/43 page 2, *Guadalcanal Diary*, TCF.
Gone was any language of uncertainty from the past script (“We know not where we are going, nor on what strange shore we shall find the forces of evil awaiting us”). Instead, the chaplain reminds his men, “We know that with God on our right hand, we cannot fail, we must not fail, we shall not fail!”

By March 31st, Cady had added a new scene for Father Donnelly, this time in a foxhole with the men during a night bombing by the Japanese. The priest has no lines, but his presence signals that even though things might be rough, God still provided a way for the righteous to persevere. The combination of the sermon and the foxhole scene, where the men survive the night, brought greater meaning to Father Donnelly’s final scene in the film. Cady has Father Donnelly die in the arms of a Marine named Sammy, who happens to be Jewish. Through his death, Father Donnelly symbolized what might happen to organized religion in America if the Allies lost the war.

This new type of chaplain, a true warrior-priest who gives his life for his country, was a bold step for Fox to take. It reflected not only a willingness by the screenwriters of the film to directly mix politics and theology, but also to recast clergy as manly-men, every bit as tough as the men they served. The character of Father Donnelly was still rooted in the stereotypical military chaplain that Hollywood had refined over the years. He was, as were almost all chaplains, Irish-Catholic. Not only were Catholic priests easy to identify by their clerical garb but also their Irish background defined them as “urban, rooted in ethnic neighborhoods, and associated with—even signifying—working class Americans.” When placed on the battlefield, “Irish chaplains tolerated drinking,

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101 Screenplay dated 3/31/43, pages 2-7, Guadalcanal Diary, TCF.
dancing, and even wenching well enough; they even countenanced doubts, fears, and tears rather well. What they couldn’t stand, however, was cowardice or indecision; the lukewarm had no place in this holy war.” 103 The screenwriters at Fox gave Father Donnelly all of these characteristics, but then placed them in the body of a man whose physique was as imposing as his understanding of God’s will. Father Donnelly would not only tell audiences that God was on the Allies side, his exposed chest would visually symbolize the power and righteousness of their cause.

Yet as Guadalcanal Diary moved closer to filming, executives at Fox had second thoughts about this hyper-militaristic warrior priest. Sensing that they may have been pushing the boundaries farther than audiences, the PCA, or the OWI were willing to go, a new screenwriter reined in Father Donnelly’s militarism when he took over the project in April. Lamar Trotti put Father Donnelly’s shirt back on and restricted him to much more traditional priestly roles (which did not include bayonet practice). It was important to let the audience know that Father Donnelly was still man enough to accompany the United States Marines, so, at the beginning of the film, the narrator introduces the priest as “Father Donnelly, Notre Dame 1917—All-American for two years—now simply Chaplain Donnelly.” As the movie progressed, audiences would grasp the fact that this All-American football player was no ordinary chaplain.

The character of Father Donnelly stands out among the chaplains and homefront clergymen that Hollywood created during the war. While Universal’s Gung Ho!, also released in 1943, included a clergyman, he is not cast as a military chaplain but a regular enlistee in the Marine Corp. The Catholic priest in God Is My Co-Pilot, Big Mike, played by Alan Hale, was a tough man, but not exactly physically fit. He was also a

103 Keyser, Hollywood and the Catholic Church: 163.
civilian and always wore his clerical collar (though at times he accented it with a leather bomber jacket). Almost every other wartime Hollywood minister or priest was middle-aged. They represented the divine connection between God and the Allies more with their words than with their bodies. The Office of War Information took a keen interest in what many of the celluloid clerics had to say to audiences about the war.\textsuperscript{104}

In early April of 1943, Fox forwarded a copy of the script of \textit{Guadalcanal Diary} to the OWI. In a letter to Col. Jason Joy, the head of Fox, Warren Pierce of the OWI complained that the studio was wandering too far:

The other point is the sermon of Father Donnelly on page 6. I like his first speech very much, drawing a distinction between a holy war, of which there is no such, and a righteous war. However, his next speech says, ‘A righteous nation is one which is economically strong, politically sound, and spiritually unassailable.’ That is bad political philosophy and, I suspect, bad theology. China, Greece and Yugoslavia, among others, would have difficulty in qualifying as righteous nations under this condition.

What is a righteous nation? Is it not one in which the rights of the individual, human dignity, are of paramount importance—one in which the state exists for the greatest good of the greatest number, and where the power of government is derived from the consent of the governed?

Without taking up any more time than in the present speech, Father Donnelly can justify the righteousness of our cause much better than he does in his present speech.\textsuperscript{105}

Fox did not take well to a government agency telling it how to make a movie, so the studio responded to Pierce’s criticism by completely altering Father Donnelly’s address to the troops. Not only did they eliminate anything that might offend China, Greece or Yugoslavia, they cut almost the entire speech from the script. The new screenwriter, Lamar Trotti, returned to Tregaskis’ book for inspiration and reduced the chaplain’s speech to “I thought I’d talk to you men this morning about a word which one of the

\textsuperscript{104} Koppes and Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 71. Les and Barbara Keyser argue that the character of Father Donnelly is representative of the way that Hollywood presented its wartime chaplains. In reality, Father Donnelly was the exception, not the rule.

\textsuperscript{105} Letter from Warren H. Pierce to Col. Jason Joy dated 4/9/43, \textit{Guadalcanal Diary}, MPPA files, MHL.
greatest soldiers who ever lived called the sublimest word in the English language: Duty.” In the final version of the film, even these lines are discarded.\textsuperscript{106}

\textit{Guadalcanal Diary} was not the first film where the OWI tried to shape on-screen sermons. In 1942, Nelson Poynter, head of the Hollywood office of the BMP, sent Paramount studios an extensive letter regarding the script for \textit{So Proudly We Hail} (1943). In one scene, a Protestant chaplain (one of the few times such a character is not an Irish-Catholic priest) gives a Christmas Eve speech to the service men and women aboard a naval vessel at sea. Poynter wanted the studio to use the sermon as an opportunity to clearly connect the Allied cause with that of God: “Democracy has been on the march since Christ. Christ was a revolutionary because he said that each individual is important...Century by century the combination of the Christ ideal and modern industry and communications have freed more and more individuals.” Paramount was furious that Poynter would go so far as to suggest dialogue for one of its pictures, but the final version of the sermon does end up incorporating, almost word for word, much of Poynter’s suggested language:

Ah, before we get on with it there is something in my heart that I would like to say to you. This is the night before Christmas and because it is you must forgive me for being sentimental. We’re a sentimental people and I think we’re proud of it. Despite the fact that our enemies deride us for it makes us the stronger. It is ironic even to try to talk about the spirit of Christmas when war is flaming throughout the globe. But we believe in this great truth, and so all I want to say,

\textsuperscript{106} Trotti could not, however, refrain from using the chaplain character to make an overt religious justification for the war, so he inserted a new speech for the priest, which he delivers at the funeral of several Marines: “Seeing your friends hurt and killed is not a thing you can easily forget. True, we have killed four-five-six- maybe ten for every one we’ve lost. That’s statistics. But somehow I find it very difficult to think of these boys as statistics. They were just Jim and Joe and Bill and Whiz and Alabam to us. (a long pause) God rest their souls.” Ibid., Script dated 4/23/43, page 3, 74. “Pierce had another criticism of \textit{Guadalcanal Diary}. He explained that one of the characters, Father Donnelly, gave a weak definition of a ‘righteous nation.’ A full BMP review of the script, along with Pierce’s criticism, went to Twentieth Century-Fox. In the margin of the scrip was an interesting notation. The note plainly stated that Donnelly’s remarks about a righteous nation had been eliminated. Pierce then congratulated Colonel Jason Joy and the studio on the new and ‘stronger dialogue.’” Myers, \textit{The Bureau of Motion Pictures}, 143
in the tragedy all about us, is, have faith. Not a blind faith. But faith in those things in which we believe. We must have such faith in those things, such faith in ourselves, such faith in mankind that we are tough about the things we believe in. So tough that we will fight to the death to make those tender and sentimental beliefs, like Christmas, a reality forever. Now God bless us everyone.\textsuperscript{107}

Even when the OWI did not get directly involved, screenwriters used the sermons and prayers of chaplains and home-front clergy to provide “both benediction for the troops and solace for the audience at home.” In \textit{God Is My Co-Pilot}, Big Mike offers divine blessing on Scott’s killing of enemy troops: “Life is always cheap in a war, yes. But neither life nor death are ever meaningless…You know Scottie, you’ve got a big job coming up, and you’re gonna have to have clear head for it.” The minister in \textit{Since You Went Away} is so certain of the righteousness of the Allied cause that he unabashedly equates the words of the national anthem with the words of God:

\begin{quote}
In these troubled times when many of our loved ones are making the supreme sacrifice, I have searched the Holy Scriptures and my heart for some message of comfort and inspiration to you. On other occasions I’ve quoted from Saint John, the prophet Zachariah, I’ve reminded you the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Psalm “thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” Today, I offer you the words of a Maryland lawyer of another day when Americans were fighting to preserve their sacred heritage of liberty: “O thus be it ever when free men shall stand between their loved homes and wars desolation, blessed with victory and peace may the heaven rescued land praise the power that have made and preserved this nation. And conquer we must when our cause is just and this be our motto – ‘In God is our Trust.’ Now those words have become the last stanza of national anthem.
\end{quote}

Meanwhile, the minister in \textit{Happy Land} offers up this prayer on behalf of the faithful:

\begin{quote}
Our fathers in their pilgrimage walked by thy guidance and rested on thy compassion. Still to us, their children, be thou our strength. And let they pity revive our fading hearts. To those among us whose dear ones are being struck down in far off lands, being thy peace and thy understanding. Envelope them with thy love which knows no ending. Amen.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} Koppes and Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 100-102; Myers, \textit{The Bureau of Motion Pictures}, 145. Frank Freeman of Paramount complained to Lowell Mellett about the BMP messing with the picture too much. Mellett wrote Poynter that Freeman “‘considers harmful the preparation of suggested dialogue, such as the speech of the army chaplain…in…So Proudly We Hail.’” Baker, \textit{Images of Women in Film}, 119.

\textsuperscript{108} Keyser, \textit{Hollywood and the Catholic Church}, 164.
There were no jeremiads calling Americans into greater faithfulness, no recognition of the injustices within American society that might make the fight for democracy seem insincere. No mention was made of racism or the segregation of African-Americans, of the forced internment of American citizens of Japanese ancestry, or of the effects that the war was having on marriages and families. Instead, on-screen clergy blessed America as it was: the good was good, and the bad was, well, not as bad as what the enemy was doing. Hollywood was willing to give divine sanction to the status quo if it helped to win the war.

WOMEN AND THE WAR

In February of 1945, Warner Bros. studios was in the midst of filming *Pride of the Marines*. Jerry Weld was the producer of the picture and, as was customary at penny-pinching Warner Bros., he flooded his production staff with memos trying to get them to limit costs. On the 20th, he sent one such memo to T.C. Wright, a member of the production team. Weld wanted to change the location of one of the upcoming scenes of the film. The script called for Ruth, Al Schmid’s girlfriend, to be in a church praying for him. Taking a crew to a local church to film the scene would not be cheap, so Weld suggested that Ruth say her prayers in her bedroom. “All this would require is one wall and a bed,” wrote Weld, “the girl, Ruth, will be lying on the bed, and the dialogue used in the church will be substituted here.” It is not clear whether Wright did not get the memo or ignored it, or if Weld changed his mind. In the final version of the film, Ruth is not in her bedroom but in what appears to be the interior of a church. What is certain is that
Warner Bros. did not spend much time or energy in constructing the set. A blank wall, candelabra, and a pew are all they used, but it is obvious where Ruth is supposed to be. 109

The church was a place populated by many of Hollywood’s home-front heroines. At critical points, when their husbands, boyfriends, or sons were in grave danger, women headed off to houses of worship. Church scenes confirmed that a woman’s traditional role—taking care of her man—was still intact. When the Marines are trapped in a foxhole in *Guadalcanal Diary*, Taxi remarks that it is his “old lady” who does all of the praying in their family, an observation seconded by another GI. Women remained the keepers of the spiritual flame, a crucially important function with so many husbands and sons away from home and in danger. In these films, the church becomes an extension of the home. It was the proper place for women to be, a place where they could still take care of the men in their lives, and where they could still be under the authority of a man. 110

The need by Hollywood to reinforce the proper place for women was brought on by changes within American society during the war. With millions of men called up for active duty in the military, there were critical shortages of labor in the workplace. American women had access to jobs that would never have been open to them before the war began. The trouble was getting women to accept these jobs. The government undertook a concentrated propaganda effort to encourage women to accept new definitions of their role in society: either Rosy the Riveter on the homefront or the brave Army nurse in uniform. Through the *Manual*, the BMP asked screenwriters to stress the

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109 Inter-Office Communication dated 2/20/45, *Pride of the Marines* box 1716, WBA. While Warner Bros. was notorious for penny-pinching, the federal government placed wartime restrictions on how much studios could spend on set construction. See Myers, *The Bureau of Motion Pictures*, 111.

seriousness of the situation: “It is not a lipstick affair. It is performing an essential task in a businesslike manner, replacing men in non-combat duties.”

Studios responded with an increased visibility of women in the workplace and in uniform, but the suggestions of the BMP were tempered by the continued on-screen reminder of more traditional roles for women. The observations of film historians Koppes and Black about RKO’s Tender Comrade (1944) are true of many wartime films:

On the positive side women were shown volunteering for war work and making those little sacrifices which indicated to OWI a cheerful acceptance of war’s discomforts...But Tender Comrade’s clear implication, contra the Bureau of Motion Pictures, is that when the men come back to the factory women will shuffle back to the kitchen.

Even the BMP itself could not break free of the belief that a woman’s place was ultimately to be subordinate to men. While asking Hollywood to encourage women to enter the nursing profession “because of its tradition of service, because it is exciting and real and vital,” women also knew “that their primary duty in war time [was] to serve the fighting men.”

Religion proved to be a useful tool for screenwriters in resolving the problem of how to present women in a new light, yet, at the same time, reaffirm existing gender stereotypes. Rather than use religion to break new ground, Hollywood used it to reassure audiences that, both at home and in the wider world, women were still defined by their hierarchical relationship to men. In Pride of the Marines, when Ruth goes to church, it is out of care and concern for her fiancé, not because of any difficulties she might be experiencing in her own life. Al loses his eyesight in combat and his recovery at the military hospital is complicated by his own feelings of uselessness. On a number of

112 Koppes and Black, Hollywood Goes to War, 166.
occasions, Virginia, the Red Cross nurse stationed at the military hospital, tries to convince Al that Ruth will still love him no matter what his condition. After Al leaves for the long train ride home, Virginia telegrams Ruth letting her know that it is all up to her to make him feel loved and wanted. Extremely anxious about what will happen when Al gets home, Ruth heads off to a house of worship. The camera focuses in on the telegram from Virginia for a few seconds, and then shows Ruth closing the telegram up in her Bible. She prays: “Dear heavenly Father, he’s got to come home where he belongs, he’s got to know he’s wanted.”

The prayer offered up by Ruth is closely tied to the plot and it also reflected the hopes and fears of many in the audience. Yet it completely ignored any concerns or issues that women might have been having about their own situation. Ruth, like thousands of other American women, was expected to stay in a relationship with a man who was permanently scarred (both physically and emotionally) by the war. In the film, it is assumed that love will conquer all, and that Ruth will not question her commitment to the man in her life. Religion is a powerful symbol in communicating this message, reminding audiences that a woman’s commitment to her man is firmly rooted in nothing less than the will of God Almighty.

Though their husbands might be away, women were still under the control of a man—the minister or priest. Audiences overheard Ruth’s prayer to God because she was alone in the church. When male clergy were present, women’s voices were silenced with the clergy interceding on their behalf. In Since You Went Away, Ann Hilton heads to worship soon after being informed that her husband, Tim, is missing in action. The audience only sees Ann in church. It is the male minister who delivers the patriotic call to faith. A similar situation occurs in Happy Land. Agnes Marsh and her husband Lew
lose their only son, Rusty while he is serving overseas. Lew is devastated by Rusty’s
death, and Agnes, putting aside her own feelings of grief and despair, calls the local
minister (a Protestant) to come to the house to console her husband. In one of the few
times in which the power of religion is questioned in a wartime film, the minister is
unable to get Lew to move on (it will finally take the ghost of his late grandfather to help
Lew come to his senses). Agnes remains committed to caring for her husband, so she
heads off to church seeking divine intervention. Yet Agnes is not allowed to speak; it is
the male minister who offers a prayer on her (and the audiences’) behalf. His prayers are
more effective than his counseling, for the film ends with a friend of Rusty’s, who
happens to be an orphan, coming to see the Marsh’s to pay his respects. He becomes a
surrogate son for Lew, which reaffirmed for audiences that a happy ending awaited the
woman who put her husband first.

The sermons and prayers of clergy in homefront films are examples of the ways in
which religion was used to reestablish traditional gender stereotypes. In combat films,
non-clergy male officers were allowed to function as clergy. In Destination Tokyo,
Action in the North Atlantic, and other films, the commanding officers functioned as the
spiritual leader and they were given dialogue that ties together the war effort and religion.
Yet in homefront films, women were not given the same opportunities. In films like
Tender Comrade, women were given long speeches designed to communicate to
audiences what the war was all about (Jo’s is a rambling lecture to her infant son about
why his father won’t be coming home from the war), but they were never given the
opportunity to tie the war effort to a larger, more divine purpose. Their prayers were only for the safety of their particular man.\textsuperscript{114}

The location where women pray is important. The church was where women went to petition God; the bedroom was for girls. In \textit{Since You Went Away}, Brig, the youngest daughter, looks to religion for comfort and hope when her father goes missing in action. Her prayers are uttered in her bedroom, on her knees.

Brig: I pray the Lord my soul to take. And God bless pop, and mother and Jane and Fedilia, and Uncle Tony…and please God, make Pop safe. Oh, I know he is safe; you wouldn’t let anything happen to him. But please, make him safe anyway. Amen.

The image that girls are the ones who are on their knees in their bedrooms gets reinforced in RKO’s \textit{Tender Comrade}. The plot revolves around four women who work together at a defense plant. In order to save money, they decide to rent a house. They are later joined by a German-émigré who works as their housekeeper while her husband is away fighting the Nazis. In an early draft of the script, written by Dalton Trumbo (who would be blacklisted in part because of this film), the main character is called Pepper. She walks in on Doris, the youngest of the women, while she is finishing her prayers:

Doris is rising from her knees praying. Pepper seems embarrassed
Pepper: (in a strange voice) Were you…praying?
Doris: Yes
Pepper: For…him?
Doris: (nods, pauses a moment and looks curiously at Pepper) Don’t you pray?
Pepper: (careless shrug) I guess I do. Only I never made much of a point of it.\textsuperscript{115}

In the final version of the film, Pepper has been renamed Jo (played by Ginger Rogers). To get it approved by the PCA, Trumbo had to rewrite the script so it was less antagonistic about prayer, but it is clear that the character of Jo does not value religion.


\textsuperscript{115} RKO-S Box 976 & 977, RKO Files, University of California at Los Angeles Art Library – Special Collections (hereafter RKO).
Early in the film, she and her husband talk about what life will be like after the war (she dreams of sleeping late on Sundays). Jo is presented as being much more sophisticated than Doris, the ideal woman who loves her man, is willing to do what it takes to help when the war, and holds her head up even when she discovers that he is not ever going to come home. Doris, by contrast, is young and immature. When the women get into a heated discussion about the black market and hoarding, Doris confesses that she has been hoarding lipstick. Jo and the other women just sort of laugh it off and tease Doris that she should turn herself into the FBI. Doris says that she has written to the FBI, only to be told that she should go tell her minister.

The character of Jo is one of the only examples where a homefront woman is clearly not religious. Even though Jo is a very likable and sympathetic character, she is also one of the few exceptions in these films where the female character does not get what she wants. Ann Hilton goes to church, and Brig prays for her father’s safe return—and he comes home. Agnes prays for her husband to come to terms with their son’s death—and he does. Ruth prays that Al will see that he is loved and wanted—and he does. Doris prays for the safe return of her husband—and he comes back safe and sound. Jo, however, loses her husband. A woman’s faith, it appears, is an essential part of taking care of the man she loves.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS

The challenge of rethinking how to portray the changing landscape of America was not limited to female characters. During his address to the Writers’ Congress, Walter White, the head of the NAACP, noted that:
A mild change in the treatment of minorities in fiction and on screen has begun to take place. But even yet one hundred and fifteen million Americans each week and moviegoers in other countries have been fed pictures which, in their portrayal of certain groups, have created resentment among those so pictured and smug convictions of their own “superiority” among the white people of the world…Negroes as fat, funny, and feebleminded.\textsuperscript{116}

White was not alone in his chastisement of the way the industry presented African-Americans. Veteran screenwriter Dalton Trumbo acknowledged that Hollywood had a problem when it came to black characters. Speaking during one of the Congress’ many panel discussions, Trumbo took his fellow writers to task:

In Hollywood the most gigantic milestones of our appeal to public patronage have been the anti-Negro pictures, ‘Birth of a Nation,’ and ‘Gone With the Wind.’ And between the two we have produced turgid floods of sickening and libelous treacle. We have made tarts of the Negro’s daughters, crapshooters of his sons, obsequious Uncle Toms of his fathers, superstitious and grotesque crones of his mothers, strutting peacocks of his successful men, psalm-singing montebanks of his priests, and Barnum and Bailey sideshows of his religion.\textsuperscript{117}

Trumbo’s critique of Hollywood was more than the simple ranting of a frustrated Communist. It reflected the reality that racism posed a significant propaganda problem. Discrimination and segregation were alive and well in 1940’s America and Hollywood’s portrayal of African-Americans had done little to further the cause of racial reconciliation. How could the United States maintain that it was fighting a war for freedom and democracy when it had not achieved those noble ideals within its own borders?

African-American leaders were quick to point out the apparent hypocrisy between Allied rhetoric and American reality. The reemergence of the Klu Klux Klan in the 1920s and 1930s, increases in the number of lynchings, and the entrenchment of segregation in the North as well as the South left African-Americans in no mood to rally

\textsuperscript{116} Writers’ Congress, 16.
\textsuperscript{117} Writers’ Congress, 497.
behind the Allied cause. In response to interventionist calls for American involvement in World War II, the NAACP countered that:

_Crisis_ is sorry for brutality, blood, and death among the peoples of Europe, just as we are sorry for China and Ethiopia. But the hysterical cries of the preachers of democracy for Europe leave us cold. We want democracy in Alabama and Arkansas, in Mississippi and Michigan, in the District of Columbia – in the Senate of the United States.\(^{118}\)

When the United States began to increase production in war-related industries in 1940 and 1941, blacks found that the newly created jobs were for whites only. They also encountered an officially segregated military that restricted them to menial tasks. African-Americans became increasingly frustrated by the lack of action by the Roosevelt administration to address these problems. Unwilling to risk angering Southern Democrats, Roosevelt did as little as possible to alleviate the inequalities that African-Americans faced, so leaders like A. Phillip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, took matters in their own hands. If the President needed encouragement to act, then they would supply it in the form of a march on Washington by African-Americans to demand equal opportunity in hiring. Through the early months of 1941, the concept of the march took on greater appeal, and, by the spring, Randolph and other leaders were claiming that was many as 100,000 African-Americans were preparing to descend upon the nation’s capital.

Keenly aware of the propaganda nightmare this would create, Roosevelt tried to bargain with Randolph. The President told African-American leaders that, if the march were called off, the government would reevaluate what it could do to encourage businesses and the military to become more fully accessible to blacks. Randolph, however, was in no mood for smooth talk and empty promises. At a meeting with the

\(^{118}\) Quoted in Sittser, _A Cautious Patriotism_, 179.
President, Randolph made it clear that, without concrete action by the government, the
march would go on as scheduled. The threat worked, and, on June 25, 1941, the
President signed Executive Order 8802, which declared, “that there shall be no
discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government
because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” To help ensure enforcement of this
order, Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was designed
to hear complaints against employers and to take action to remedy any problems. 119

While they were steps in the right direction, neither Executive Order 8802 nor the
FECP were capable of creating a level playing field for African-Americans. Discrimination continued to plague blacks who sought work at defense plants. When
they were hired, African-Americans were frequently denied access to high-wage
assembly-line jobs and forced to take lower-paying janitorial positions. The military
created all-black regiments that were typically assigned to non-combat tasks. All
branches of the Armed Forces remained segregated until the end of the war. Racism, the
influential Pittsburgh Courier understood, was as big an enemy as the Germans or
Japanese. African-Americans were going to have to fight for a double V—“victory over
our enemies abroad and at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefield abroad.”
The situation became even more problematic during the summer of 1943. The need for
industrial workers brought millions of Americans, both black and white, into urban areas
such as Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and Detroit. None of these cities were prepared for the
influx of so many people, and adequate housing was in short supply. Racial tensions,

From Fear, 763-767.
fueled by encounters in the factory and on the streets, exploded into full-scale race riots.120

News of violence between blacks and whites, especially in Detroit, was a propaganda nightmare for the OWI. Yet, the reality was that, during the Second World War, the Roosevelt administration faced two competing challenges: either unify the nation to help win the war or engage in a program that would challenge segregation and discrimination but which threatened to tear the country apart. More often than not, the Roosevelt administration chose the former over the latter, and the actions of the Office of War Information reflected that approach. As historians Koppes and Black note,

OWI’s approach was broadly compatible with the Roosevelt administration’s stance toward wartime racial issues—a mixture of honeyed words and starspangled symbolism, impassioned warnings of the fascist menace, subtle threats if cooperation was not forthcoming, and occasional concessions granted tardily and grudgingly.121

Racial equality was something that many OWI officials believed in, but the ultimate goal for the agency was to win the war. If African-Americans were fighting a two-front war, so was the OWI. In terms of motion pictures, the OWI directed its propaganda efforts at reducing racial tensions and at encouraging African-Americans to support the war effort. Thus the BMP’s Manual encouraged studios to reduce racial and ethnic divisions:

We must emphasize that this country is a meting pot, a nation of many races and creeds, who have demonstrated that they can live together and progress. We must establish a genuine understanding of alien and minority groups and recognize

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their great contributions to the building of our nation. In this war for freedom they fight side by side with us.

To appease African-Americans, the BMP wanted Hollywood to highlight the promise of racial equality that could only be found in a democracy:

Some people may ask what the underprivileged, the uneducated, the oppressed minorities—even in this country—have to fight for. Can we not portray on the screen the fact that under the democratic process the underprivileged have become less underprivileged? For example, the Negroes have a real, a legal, and a permanent chance for improvement of their own status under democracy and no chance at all under a dictatorship.  

Wartime films did downplay ethnic and religious differences, and Hollywood was willing to show that African-Americans were stepping up to do their part. Still, black characters were “frequently fleeting, token, humorous, and all too often just as racially stereotyped as pre-war film characterizations,” and African-Americans were relegated to roles that “[depicted] them in isolated musical numbers, or as domestic servants, railroad redcaps or porters, and in other minor roles.” Religion played a key role in Hollywood’s conservative approach to African-Americans. It was used to reaffirm existing stereotypes (blacks are a religious, even superstitious people) and to distinguish them as different from whites. The presence of religion in World War II-era films functioned as something of a code, a way of telling audiences that even though they might be seeing an African-American character in a slightly new role, they should feel free to assume that nothing had really changed. Blacks were still inferior to whites.  

In wartime films African-Americans, in fact, most non-whites were consistently portrayed as being religious. Filipinos, Hispanics, and African-Americans were all deeply religious, possessing a faith that at times undermined their intelligence. Early in

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122 Ibid., 389, 394; Myers, The Bureau of Motion Pictures, 125, 127.
123 Shull & Wilt, Hollywood War Films, 188.
God Is My Co-Pilot, the film flashbacks to Robert Scott when he was a boy. Scott is so obsessed with flying that, in an attempt to get airborne, he tries to jump off the family barn with an umbrella. Frank, the Scott family’s African-American house help, confronts his young master:

Frank: Tell me one thing; what keeps these contraptions [airplanes] up in the air when they do stay up.
Scott: Why, that’s simple. The wings, and the engine, and propeller. But the main thing of course is the pilot.
Frank: The pilot. He’s just a man, human man. I don’t know, Mr. Bobby. Seems to me like a man needs someone else with him up there in them clouds.
Scott: Well who else? It just takes one man to fly a plane.
Frank: Does it? Is it just one human hand that makes a stalk of cotton grow, bloom and bear? Was you’n the only hand on that umbrella that day when you tried to fly with it?
Scott: A hand? What hand?
Frank: Same hand that led Daniel safe from among the lions. Oh, I ain’t so positive that the good Lord ever intended for folks to fly around like birds in the first place. And if He did it’s because He had His hand on ‘em, holding ‘em up.
Scott: I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t believe you do either.
Frank: Don’t ya? Well, maybe you will someday when you get ‘a flying around up there in the bright sun and the sky, and maybe He’ll show it to ya. Then you’ll understand.

Frank’s language and his religious convictions mark him as being less intelligent than his white master is. His faith borders on superstition, and his uncertainty about whether God intends humans to fly seems silly. His childlike faith does grasp something that Scott misses, namely the importance of God to the war effort. Scott will discover this later on in the movie, but his teacher will be Big Mike, a white priest, not a black house servant. ¹²⁴

Religion made even strong, articulate black characters appear irrational and different from whites. In 1944, Twentieth Century Fox released Lifeboat, a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock and based on a screenplay written by John Steinbeck. The story is

¹²⁴ The producers of the film seemed intent on including some sort of representation of African-American religiosity. In an early draft of the script, before the character of Frank was created, the boy Scott cuts through the tent of a black revival. Script dated 9/4/43, God Is My Co-Pilot, file 1936 Story Memos, WBA.
about a group of passengers who survive the sinking of their passenger ship by the Nazis. A young mother with her baby is among those who find a way into the lifeboat. In a state of shell-shock, she is unaware that the child has died. At first, she refuses to believe that her baby is gone, but finally the other survivors convince her to let the child go back into the ocean. Someone asks if anyone knows the service for a burial at sea, and Rittenhouse, a rich, white millionaire speaks up first,

I suppose any prayer – (he thinks for a moment, takes the cigar out of his mouth, then resumes) The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures—Ho-He

Suddenly, the deep baritone voice of Joe, a black ship steward, continues the prayer,

Leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.¹²⁵

The main focus of the film is on the German sailor who ends up in the lifeboat. At first, the other survivors have no idea who he is, but when they discover that he is a Nazi, they debate what to do with him. Some suggest that he be thrown overboard, but Rittenhouse challenges the group:

If we harm this man we are guilty of the same tactics that you hate him for. On the other hand, if we treat him with kindness and consideration we might be able to convert him to our way of thinking. That’s the uh…Christian way.

While the African-American character knows the Lord’s Prayer, it is the white millionaire who starts the prayer and uses the Christian faith to defend the German. Of all the characters, Rittenhouse appears to be the most religious. In reality, religion is just a cover, a way for the businessman to hedge his bets. He does not want the German

¹²⁵ This scene does not appear to have been Steinbeck’s idea for in a in a revised story by John Steinbeck the baby dies at sea but no funeral scene. Lifeboat, Script file, folder 354, Alfred Hitchcock Collection, MHL.
killed because he might be of some value later on. Yet it is Joe, not Rittenhouse, who the other passengers accuse of misusing religion. When the group does throw the Nazi overboard, Rittenhouse reminds them that the German was the one who had been doing the rowing. Without him, and without a motor, the survivors appear stranded. Joe looks up in the sky, and another of the survivors tears into him for being unrealistic:

   And you Joe. It’s alright for you to look up and trust in somebody. How about giving him a hand?

   Joe’s faith separates him from the other survivors (who are all white). Religion is used to reinforce the stereotype that all blacks are religious, and that their religious faith is immature, out of touch, and even superstitious. Instead of looking for a realistic solution to their problem, Joe looks up to heaven, waiting on God to do something.  

When African-American characters found their way into combat films, their religious faith still defines them. MGM’s *Bataan* (1943) set the standard for World War II combat movies. It was the first to incorporate the All-American battalion, a mix of races and ethnicities that promoted the idea that the great American melting pot produced only one type of people—Americans. As progressive as *Bataan* was at the time, it still relied on, and to some degree helped lock in, stereotypes of African-Americans and other people of color.

The film began as a remake of John Ford’s *Lost Patrol* (1934), and the early draft script for *Bataan* includes large chunks of the dialogue from Ford’s film. One of the scenes carried over from *Lost Patrol* involves a character named Sanders, who is

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126 “*Lifeboat* (TCF 1944), includes a black steward (Canada Lee) among the survivors of a ship which has been sunk by a German submarine. Lee is generally portrayed as the equal of the others in the lifeboat – in fact, he is given the chance to ‘vote’ along with the other survivors to decide the fate of the U-boat captain who has been captured (although he declines this opportunity) – but is still initially identified as a servant and is a subordinate, even deferential character. John Steinbeck’s impression of the character, after seeing the film, was strongly negative…This seems a bit of an overreaction, but perhaps Steinbeck had envisioned a much more assertive character.” Shull & Wilt, *Hollywood War Films*, 190.
something of a religious fanatic. When one of the other soldiers dies, Sanders insists that he be allowed to conduct a proper Christian burial, an act that is at odds with the wishes of his sergeant. That scene forms the basis of a burial scene in *Bataan*.127

The character of Sanders from the *Lost Patrol* is renamed Private Epps for *Bataan*. Early on, he is identified as an African-American, and, while not the fanatic that Sanders was, he is still a very religious man. The burial scene begins with Epps asking if it would be all right to pray for the dead men:

Sergeant: All right. But hurry.

Private Epps: Well sir, Sergeant…it’s kind of hard to hurry much when you’re putting a soul under ground. But I’ll try…Heavenly Father, we never knew these men. But they were our brothers. They weren’t afraid to die—because they wanted to see the kind of goodness and decency that You planned go on living in this world. We figure when folks fight and die for freedom, they’re on Your side, Lord. We figure You look out for Your people, according to Your plan. It’s like our preacher said, back home…What comes out of graves is the best part of what went into them. (He hesitates; gropes for words) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Amen.128

This was remarkable dialogue for an African-American character. Epps’ prayer underwent a modification in August of 1942, one that places the sacrifices of America’s fighting men in a clearer religious context,

Epps: Heavenly Father..Captain Lassiter wasn’t afraid to die. He did his job and he kept on doing it as long as he could. We figure he was like all of us—he just wanted to do all he could to help the goodness you planned go on living in this world. We figure what’s worth men like him dying for is worth us fighting for—even if we die too. We figure You look out for Your people—and we figure we’re on Your side, Lord..So we’re not scared..Long as we know that what comes out of graves is the best part of what goes in them—we’re all right. (hesitant, gropes for words) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Amen.129

This burial scene includes another soldier, a white man named Hardy. At one point, Epps is identified as a preacher, yet, in another draft, it is Hardy who is the

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127 Dialogue Cutting Continuity dated 6/29/42, *Bataan*, MGM Script Files, MHL.
128 Script from *Bataan Patrol* dated 7/13/42, page 30, *Bataan*, MGM Script Files, MHL.
129 Temporary Complete Script for *Bataan Patrol* dated 8/6/42, *Bataan*, MGM Script Files, MHL.
minister. But in all of these scripts, Epps’ character continues to say the prayer at the grave. Through successive drafts, however, the power of the prayer is reduced:

Epps: Heavenly Father..Captain Lassiter was our Captain, and he was a good Captain..he did his job and he kept on doing it as long as he could. He died a long way from home. His folks probably won’t know where we buried him. But we reckon he was prepared for that- and so are we, if that’s the way it’s meant to be for us. Long as we know that what comes out of graves is the best part of what goes into them – we’re all right, the same as our Captain was. Blessed be the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Amen.

Gone is any explicit connection between the allied cause and God. The prayer that finally ends up in the film is changed so that Epps (who was now studying to become, but is not yet, a minister) does not even mention that Lassiter’s bravery has inspired his men:

Epps: Heavenly Father, Cap’n Lassiter was our cap’n. He was a good cap’n. He did his job and kept on doing it as long as he could. He died a long ways from home. His folks probably won’t ever know where we buried him. But we reckon he was prepared for that. As long as we know that what comes out of graves is the best part of what goes into them. We know he’s alright. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Amen.

The transformation of Epps’ character and the changes the scriptwriters made to his dialogue were not accidental. In 1940’s Hollywood, African-Americans were not going to receive equal treatment on the silver screen. Epps was stripped of his status as a minister so that his character would not be an officer nor be seen in the same light as a Father Donnelly (and so there would be no complaints when Epps was shown shirtless throughout the entire film). He could be religious, but only as it concerned the individual. Thus, Epps could comment about Captain Lassiter’s eternal soul but not the role of God in the Allied crusade for democracy. Like women, African-American

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130 Complete script dated 11/7/42, page 34, Bataan, MGM Script Files, MHL.
characters were not given the opportunity to place the war in a wider theological context. That job, like so many during the war, was for whites only.\footnote{Koppes & Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 71.}
Among the many letters that Joseph Breen received in July of 1942, was a note from Fr. Hugh Calkins, O.S.M. of the Sanctuary of Our Sorrowful Mother in Portland, Oregon. This was not the first time that Fr. Calkins had written Breen. In June, the priest had written to the Production Code Administration official praising the “fine Catholic atmosphere I enjoyed in Joan of Paris, a film I’m sure you [Breen] had your strong Catholic hand in.” Fr. Calkins was particularly pleased with the accuracy with which the Catholic faith was presented in the film, and hoped that “Maybe in time we can persuade the movie moguls that it isn’t murder to put in Catholic atmosphere. And believe me it thrills a Catholic heart to see our Faith getting that kind of publicity.”

Now, however, Fr. Calkins wrote to Breen with words of concern rather than praise. The priest had heard that Hollywood producer David O. Selznick was planning to turn the book *The Keys of the Kingdom* into a movie, and Calkins wanted him to rethink the project. Fr. Calkins included in his letter to Breen a copy of an article he had written in his order’s magazine, *Novena Notes*. He called the popular *The Keys of the Kingdom*, written by A.J. Cronin, vastly overrated and warned Breen that “Selznick is going to have a heck of a time with priests and Catholics if he doesn’t go carefully.” In his response to Calkins, Breen confessed that he was in agreement with much that the priest had to say about the book. He agreed to forward a copy of Fr. Calkins’ article to Selznick, but also

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warned that it may be too late because the famed producer was confident that he could make a film that would not offend Catholics or any other group.\footnote{Letter from Calkins to Breen, 7/11/42, Letter from Breen to Calkins, 7/15/42, The Keys to the Kingdom MPPA Files, MHL. Breen did not tell Fr. Calkins about an internal PCA assessment of the book: “This fictionalized biographical drama of Catholic priesthood, in many ways reminiscent of THE CITADEL, is I think, a much greater book. It covers sixty years in the life of a man who is a real Christian in every sense of the word, and therefore, is classed as a church rebel. But leaving out anything that would be offensive to the Catholic Church, there is still enough incident, action drama in this story to make a great picture. As a novel it is certain to be a best seller and Mr. Cronin’s work is remarkably photogenic…It is certainly worth our most sincere consideration and is high RECOMMENDED FOR CONSIDERATION.” Synopsis given to Geoffrey Sherlock (Hays Office), The Keys to the Kingdom, MPAA Files, MHL.}

David Selznick did not end up making The Keys of the Kingdom. Instead, he sold the rights to 20th Century Fox. Catholic concerns about Cronin’s novel quickly made their way to executives at the studio. The Keys of the Kingdom centered on the life of a fictional priest named Francis Chisholm. Father Chisholm’s road to the priesthood is not a smooth one. As a young man, he wants to marry his first cousin, Nora, but Chisholm’s Aunt Polly, who raised him when his parents died, adamantly wants him to enter the priesthood. Distraught, Nora ends up impregnated by another man and finally commits suicide. To complicate matters, Chisholm’s best friend is a confirmed atheist who constantly rebuffs Chisholm’s attempts to convert him to Catholicism. Reluctantly, Chisholm enters seminary, but he struggles as a parish priest. His superior suggests that he might have better success serving a mission in China. When he arrives, Fr. Chisholm finds that the mission is in complete disarray. Over many decades of hard work, Chisholm builds the ministry into a thriving community of faith. His success lies in his unorthodox manners and approach, and, throughout the book, Cronin contrasts Chisholm with more stringent, and at times unsympathetic, Catholic priests.

Cronin’s less than-positive-portrayal of the priesthood was what had some Catholics up in arms. When Fox took over the project, they hired Father Albert O’Hara
to function as a technical advisor on the film. In September of 1943, Fr. O’Hara sat down with studio head Col. Jason Joy and screenwriter Joseph Mankiewicz to discuss ways to avoid controversy. Mankiewicz opened the conversation by asking Father O’Hara what he thought the studio should and should not leave in the script, to which Father O’Hara responded:

Generally speaking, the present script is acceptable. You should not revert to the novel because there are many things in the novel which, although true in many cases, would be difficult to interpret in terms of screen entertainment and still have the approval of the Church. Mr. Johnson, in his script, has wisely omitted those things entirely, or has referred to them generally.

I do not mean to say that there are no priests like Father Chisholm. There are many such. You could easily find such a character as Francis who would be criticized by other priests because he sometimes overstepped the line by being overly generous in interpreting doctrine. They would say of him, “He just let his good side get the better of him.”

As you know, there has been condemnation of a lot of passages in this book by a lot of clergymen. They will also condemn the picture if these passages are not changed. Some priests emphasize mercy and some emphasize severity. Those who advocate severity will criticize you if you make Francis too lenient in his interpretation of doctrine. It is not that there aren’t priests like Francis Chisholm, because there are.¹³⁴

Much of the remaining conversation revolved around specific scenes in the script and whether the actions and dialogue of Father Chisholm (played by Gregory Peck) and other characters were acceptable to the Church. Throughout the meeting, neither Mankiewicz nor Joy ever questioned or challenged Fr. O’Hara’s observations. Instead, both men seemed quite willing to do whatever the priest suggested. This included making alterations to the script that not only changed the way that the film presented Catholic priest but also the way that the film presented the Chinese with whom Father Chisholm served.

Father O’Hara, a former missionary to China himself, had serious concerns about the way that the script portrayed Chinese Christians. He admitted that, when he first read the script, he was afraid that “the Chinese would resent being shown as a dirty lot of beggars, hating the white man, etc.” He was not the only person with this concern. On July 21st, Joseph Breen had written to Fox about the project and had encouraged the studio to be in contact with the local Chinese Consul before it began filming. The Consul, T.K. Chang, did not have any higher opinion of the book than Fr. Calkins had. Chang worried that a picture “seething with civil war, bandits, flood, famine, epidemic, torturing and murdering of foreign friends can but create misunderstanding and resentment in our relationship.” But the Consul also wanted to make sure that Fox did not make the Chinese out to be religiously intolerant:

In our country, there are no less than 4,000,000 Catholics; through them, modern science was first introduced to China. History has it that several of our eminent Emperors and Prime Ministers were Catholics in religion and action. The religious attitude of our people toward Christianity has never been such as described in the book.\(^\text{135}\)

Fox’s concern about appeasing Roman Catholic officials was not unusual, given the power of the Legion of Decency. The sensitivity shown toward the characterization of the Chinese, however, was a recent development. The Chinese were important partners in America’s war against the Japanese, and neither China nor the United States wanted to see their relationship destabilized by a reckless motion picture. If this meant downplaying any religious tension between the two nations, then so be it. Defeating the

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\(^{135}\) Ibid., 12. During the discussion, Fr. O’Hara mentions a line in the script in which the Methodist missionary gives a Chinese woman $50 and someone says, “That’s a Methodist trick.” O’Hara questions whether Methodists would like the line, to which Col. Joy responds, “As a Methodist myself, I can assure you they won’t!” Pgs. 15-16; Letter from Joseph Breen to Colonel Jason Joy, 7/21/43, Letter from T.K. Chang to Joseph Breen, 2/23/44, *The Keys of the Kingdom* MPPA Files, MHL.
Japanese required a willingness to portray Christianity as much more vibrant in China than it really was.\textsuperscript{136}

With some serious prodding by the OWI, Hollywood studios began rethinking how they portrayed not just the Chinese but most of the nations that were allied with the United States. These included the Russians, British, French, and a whole host of other countries:

We should emphasize the might and heroism of our Allies, all the victories of the Russians, the incredible feats of resistance of the Chinese, the stubborn resistance of the British after Dunkirk, the readiness and sea success of the Dutch immediately after Pearl Harbor, the continued heroic resistance of the Free French, of Norwegians and Yugoslavs and other people of occupied Europe.\textsuperscript{137}

This would require a significant effort by Hollywood screenwriters who had for years vilified the Russians, belittled the Chinese, and celebrated the aristocratic and imperialistic nature of British society. The Army Signal Corps would undertake a similar reeducation effort in the training films it made for soldiers.

Religion played an important role in the transformation of America’s on-screen allies during World War II. Studios, and the Army, had to be careful that their use of religion did not undermine the re-imagining of the Russians, Chinese, French, British and other nationalities. This would necessitate, as in The Keys of the Kingdom, the omission of truthful but unpleasant religious realities. Screenwriters, for example, would need to ignore the Soviet Union’s open disdain for the Orthodox Church and to encourage audiences to think that Christianity was alive and well in Communist Russia. If Hollywood had anything to say about it, God was going to be on the side of the Soviets, whether the Russians wanted Him to be or not.


\textsuperscript{137} Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry, Office of War Information, Bureau of Motion Pictures, June 1942.
Religion functioned on two different levels when it came to America’s allies. First and foremost, it helped to make America’s allies appear more sympathetic and righteous. If American audiences had any doubts about the character of the allied peoples, then the on-screen religious beliefs of America’s allies helped assure audiences that they were worthy of support. It confirmed that they too were fighting hard in a holy war against all that was evil.

When Frank Capra’s Army unit used religion took on a different function. For stronger nations—those who had not been occupied (the British) or who were actively fighting back against their invaders (the Russians)—religious symbols, language, and characters helped to create the impression that these people were just like Americans. The on-screen religion that audiences experienced bore a remarkable similarity to what they participated in at home. Religion confirmed that the British and Russians were just like Americans and therefore were worthy of America’s continued support in the war against fascism.

Studios sometimes sent a different message when they made films about America’s conquered allies, including the Filipinos, the Czechs, the Poles, and even the French. These nations, the films implied, were not on the same level as the British and the Soviets. Something had gone wrong, and they were not able to resist the Japanese or Germans on their own. They needed America to rescue them from the fascist menace. Films used religious symbols, language, and characters to convey a sense of dependency. While these nations might have active resistance movements, they still required a miracle, and that miracle would come in the form of a United States soldier or Marine. Thus, American servicemen were encouraged to see themselves in the role of divine liberators.
As important as the Chinese were to the war in the Pacific, they, of all America’s allies, proved to be the most difficult for Hollywood to re-imagine. During World War II, Americans displayed a fascination for China but remained remarkably ignorant of the country and its culture. A public opinion poll conducted in mid-1942 found that 40 percent of Americans could not even locate China on a map. In the imagination of most Americans, China remained “a far-off land of mystery, teeming with millions of people who spoke a strange language, ate with chopsticks, and worshipped their ancestors.” Popular culture reflected this shallow understanding of China through a set of well-defined caricatures of the Chinese, ones that motion pictures had helped to promote. These included “the sinister Oriental…the Oriental sage…and the comic waiter-laundryman-houseboy…There were also a number of examples of the alluring—but often dangerous—Chinese femme fatale.” These characters emerged as a way to express the foreignness of Chinese culture and as a means for Americans to express a sense of racial superiority over Asians.  

Americans could both be fascinated by China and completely ignorant of its culture because of the belief that Western culture was inherently superior. Asians (Americans frequently lumped Chinese, Japanese, and other distinct ethnic groups together), according to Americans, were politically, economically, culturally, and spiritually inferior. The moral responsibility of Americans was to spread the gospel of free enterprise, democracy, and Christianity. Because China was the most populous nation in the world, it received special attention from American Christians, who sent

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thousands of missionaries to convert the country to the one, true faith. The allure of the missionary enterprise in the minds of Americans made it very difficult for Hollywood to think of religion in China without reference to Christianity or western missionaries.\footnote{Leong, \textit{The China Mystique}, 2-3, 7.}

In fact, Hollywood found it difficult to think of any aspect of China without some reference to the west. While the OWI wanted studios to emphasize Chinese resistance, screenwriters continued to develop scripts that showed that:

For the most part, no Chinese national could function competently without American help, guidance, or authority…Not much changed after the Pearl Harbor attack. On the silver screen, China was still a beleaguered nation, a country with a pitiful military, ill-equipped to stop the advancing Nipponese Army…While the Chinese peasants washed dishes, swept floors, or functioned as obedient servants, American pilots – with their mastery of western technology – saved their Oriental ally from capitulation.\footnote{Fyne, \textit{The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II}, 110; Leong, \textit{The China Mystique}, 54.}

The inadequacies of the Chinese were so pronounced that studio executives would not even cast Chinese actors to play Chinese characters. The best studios were able to do was to take American racism of Asians and redirect it. “Asians” were no longer a monolithic group in Hollywood. Instead, there were the Chinese who, as fellow victims of Japanese aggression, were deserving of our friendship and help. The full force of anti-Asian racism was reserved for the Japanese.\footnote{Leong, \textit{The China Mystique}, 165-66.}

There were efforts, albeit unsuccessful, to present the Chinese as being somewhat independent of Americans and Christianity. In 1942, MGM began production of Pearl S. Buck’s \textit{Dragon Seed} (1944). Buck held a unique place in American culture in the 1940s. The child of American Christian missionaries to China, and a missionary herself, Buck was able to present herself as both an expert on China and Chinese culture while at the same time emphasizing that she was fully American. Her books on China had
widespread appeal because she both represented the white missionary perspective and offered readers what they thought was an accurate presentation of China. The popularity of Buck’s novels attracted the attention of a number of Hollywood studios, and several of her books were made into motion pictures. Through them, audiences experienced a positive, though still distorted, presentation of the Chinese.  

In *Dragon Seed*, Buck tells the story of a rural Chinese family and the devastation that the Japanese invasion causes in their lives and, by extension, in the lives of all the Chinese. The Chinese in *Dragon Seed* are not warriors. They are simple peasant farmers. But when forced to act, they prove to be willing to do whatever it takes to resist the Japanese, including burning their own fields. An early draft of the script for *Dragon Seed* from September of 1942, stayed true to the novel and included no western religious characters. A new outline in January of 1943 included a character called the White Woman in the Mission, “Old before her time. Worn out with years of service to the minds and bodies of China’s poor – too Christian to insist upon Christianity as a price for those she serves.”

By the spring, screenwriter Jane Murfin gave the missionary some brief lines of dialogue. The woman tells one of the Chinese characters that she has done a good deed “in the name of the true God whom I serve.” The scene also includes a shot of a candle and a crucifix. When Jane Loring took over the script in May, she gave the white missionary a much larger, yet more disturbing, role. When the Japanese are about to invade the mission, the white woman (who still has no name) informs the Chinese that she has made a deal with the enemy:

[143] Outline of Story by Robert Andrews dated 1/28/43, *Dragon Seed*, MGM Files, MHL.
White Woman: The enemy is at the gate. They say they will come in and I have no power to keep them out. I have no arms...only the power of my God and my country to hold them back. They do not fear my God, but they fear a little my country, which is a great nation. Because of this I have been able to buy them with a price.

It is such a price that I am ashamed to tell you what it is...they say they will not come in if we give them a few women...perhaps five or six.\textsuperscript{144}

The white woman is willing to save herself and her mission by offering up some Chinese girls to be raped and murdered. The white woman tells the few girls that are willing to leave the mission compound, “God give you blessing. God take you unto heaven for this!” Later in the script, with no sense of irony, the white woman throws a Chinese woman out of the mission for being a traitor. When the woman dies, the white missionary agrees to let her be buried in the mission, a gift she gives “in the name of the true God whom I serve.”\textsuperscript{145}

All of this disappeared by the late summer, and, in the final version of the film, there are no white missionaries. There are some mentions of Chinese gods by the characters but no references to Christianity. Whether the exclusion of the missionary was due to some influence by Pearl Buck or because the producers chose to keep the script closer to the novel is not clear. In all likelihood, the character of the white missionary was dropped because she presented religion in a negative light. The PCA and the Legion of Decency would have objected to a Catholic nun sending women out to be raped and killed. However, while \textit{Dragon Seed} was one of the very few wartime films about China that did not include westerners or Christian characters, the attempt by MGM to present the Chinese as a people cable of defending themselves without help from the west was

\textsuperscript{144} Temporary Composite script dates 5/21/43, page 112-113, \textit{Dragon Seed}, MGM Files, MHL.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 126, 134.
undermined by the casting. The main characters were played by Caucasians—Katharine Hepburn and Walter Huston.146

RKO studios tried their hand at another Pearl S. Buck novel, *China Sky* (1945). The novel revolves around two American doctors who operate a mission hospital in China. The final version of the film remains fairly faithful to the novel, but screenwriters had attempted to add several Chinese religious characters. The most important was a Catholic nun named Sister Peter who is part of an order run by American missionaries. Sister Peter helps move a wounded man named Monsieur Andre (in the film, the wounded character is Chinese) to a place where the Japanese will not find him. She leads the patient and some medical staff to an old Buddhist monastery. Kate, one of the American doctors, asks Sister Peter if, as a Catholic nun, she will be welcome at the monastery. Sister Peter’s response is the kind of propaganda that made the OWI happy: “we are all part of the same China – and all religions, like all strangers, are welcome in China. For two thousand years we have had no religious persecution.”147

Upon reaching the monastery, the group discovers that the Japanese have bombed the holy site. They also encounter a Father Prior, a confused, shell-shocked priest. He wanders around harmlessly until he sees that the doctors are using the altar as an operating table. He shouts, “This is blasphemy – desecration – this altar is a holy altar. It shall not be profane – for it is written – the temple of Buddha is the soul of Buddha – it is written.” Later in the script, one of the Chinese characters, Quong, begins to tell Kate a

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147 Screenplay by Emmet Lavery dated 9/1/43 page 19, RKO-S 852, RKO.
story about “the Emperor Wu in the Han dynasty – one hundred years before Christ,” but she cuts him off.  

There are two other interesting scenes in the script. In one, Sister Peter is talking with Dr. Chen, a Chinese doctor, about the impending arrival of the Japanese soldiers. Chen, a woman, is a revolutionary and is willing to fight the invaders. Sister Peter responds, “Really? Then we are well met, Doctor. For I too, am a revolutionary.” In the second scene, the monk remarks about the shadow of a puppet on the wall,

This is the sleeping giant, which is China. Yes. The sleeping giant. For you see, Lieutenant – China has been many things to many people. Sometimes she has been a land of conquering heroes…sometimes a land of civil war – with one brother fighting it out against another brother. And sometimes it has been just a conquered land where might was right and the invader could do no wrong. But the day will come, Lieutenant, when the invader will be destroyed – For China is a sleeping giant – and when the giant awakes-

A Japanese officer stops his speech. While the monk is obviously not mentally well, his character and that of Sister Peter represent the Chinese in an independent light. Sister Peter is a Catholic, trained by American missionaries, but the priest is the closest Hollywood came to portraying Buddhism on a somewhat equal plane with Christianity.

Both characters, however, underwent significant changes before the writers completely dropped them from the script. In the film, the character of Sister Peter becomes a nurse working at the hospital. She goes with a wounded Chinese guerilla to the old monastery, but they encounter no priest there. Hollywood seemed unwilling to imagine a Chinese Christian who was not under some sort of direct supervision or influence by a white missionary. The only traces of Buddhism are the bombed out ruins

148 Ibid., pg 41, 45
149 Ibid., 91, 113-114.
of the monastery, a visual reminder to Americans that the ancient Eastern religion was neither equal to nor a threat to modern Western Christianity.

Finally, Jack Moffitt, a screenwriter at Warner Bros., proposed a more interfaith perspective for *God Is My Co-Pilot* (1945). In a memo to producer Hal Wallis, Moffitt suggests that:

> Perhaps the religious note might be struck much earlier by making the hospital cave one of the old temple caves which are frequent in China. In his semi-conscious state Scott might look up and see the benign and beautiful face of a woman carved in the rock, looking down at him. He might mutter the words “Who is she” and the old Chinese doctor might reply “That is Yan Yin, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy”—whereupon Scott might say, through teeth clinched with pain—‘‘God has a way of speaking in many languages, hasn’t he.”

> I rather like the idea of including the Chinese as his children of God in the picture’s philosophy and not limiting the spiritual message to a purely denominational Christian dogma. I think Scott’s final words to the Pilots in regard to this…“we have learned that humanity is divided between those who believe in goodness and mercy and those who believe only in power and hatred. Whether we worship by burning candles to the Virgin Mary or incense to Yan Yin; whether we follow the words of Moses, Jesus or Budha, or whether we have no formal religion and believe only in God as expressed in the good within us, the division remains the same. It is the good people against the bad people. We are on God’s side and we know that he is on ours.”

Wallis completely ignored Moffitt’s suggestion. The religious message in *God Is My Co-Pilot* was instead conveyed through a white, Irish-American missionary priest—Big Mike. Instead of references to Yan Yin, the film shows Chinese Christian nuns and children worshipping the Christian God at the mission (even singing a hymn in English). During the war, China, while an important ally, remained dependent upon the United States, and Hollywood used religion to convey that dependency.

The United State missionary ties to China were crucial to the Army’s presentation of that nation in *Battle of China*. In fact, an American missionary shot some of the footage used in the film and later smuggled it out of China. Capra’s unit struggled to

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150 Inter-Office Communication dated 3/20/44, *God Is My Co-Pilot* file 1936, WBA.
acknowledge that China was an ancient culture, telling audiences that its birth could be dated by the “3400 years [that] have gone by since Moses viewed the Ten Commandments.” The problem was that China was over 4000 years old. Even so, the Army filmmakers felt the strong need to date Chinese culture by reference to other religions, first Judaism, and, later in the film, Christianity:

   Narrator: And it was one of China’s great philosophers who, 500 years before the birth of Christ, gave mankind these words:
   ON SCREEN: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” page 105
   Narrator: They are that kind of people.

The film reduces Confucius to the status of a philosopher whose life is dated by the Christian Messiah.

   The Battle of China makes the argument that the Chinese are a peace-loving people, noting that even though they invented gunpowder, it was “not as a weapon of war but to celebrate their holidays and religious festivals.” But the only religious activities shown are Christian. As the narrator informs the audience that the Chinese have freedom of expression and religion, a scene of a church appears on the screen. A huge banner appears barring a cross at the center, Christ on the right, and a Chinese man in a suit on the left. A Chinese cleric is present, dressed in western vestments. The church appears very full, and, at the head of a procession marching through the congregation, is a large cross. Then the narrator compares the peaceful Chinese Christians to the unchristian Japanese: “Here the god-emperor and his warlords were using this same western crucifix for one purpose and only one, to create one of the world’s most powerful war machines.”

   Western missionaries only appear during a scene showing the brutality of the Japanese towards the Chinese, but the lasting impression is clear: American soldiers are to understand China through the lens of their own experiences. China is a product of the
western missionary enterprise, and as such worthy of their support and sacrifice. Like Hollywood, Capra’s unit was not above stretching the truth to motivate American troops, even if that meant ignoring the millions of Buddhists in favor of highlighting a handful of Chinese Christians.

PHILIPPINES

The Filipinos were the other Allied Asian nationality that won attention from Hollywood during the war. For American audiences, the Philippines represented both failure and promise. The fall of the Philippines was perhaps the lowest point of the war in the Pacific for the United States. Its liberation would signal the triumph of America over Japan. On the silver screen, the battle for the Philippines exhibited the courage and heroism of the Americans and the unbelievable brutality of the Japanese. Studios made a number of films that showed United States’ military units returning to the islands and exacting revenge on the Japanese.

Because of their status as an American protectorate, American wartime films always portray the Filipinos as being dependent upon the Unites States. Filipino characters also suffered from being caricatured by screenwriters. MGM’s Salute to the Marines (1943), reinforced two prominent stereotypes—the Filipinos are short in stature and excellent boxers. They are also ill prepared to defend themselves. Salute to the Marines is set in the months right before Pearl Harbor. Sgt. William Bailey is a Marine drill-sergeant stationed on the islands. His commanding officer tells him that he must remain behind in the Philippines while his unit goes to China to fight the Japanese. The reason is that the Filipinos will be gaining their independence in 1946 and need proper
military training from the United States Marines. Bailey is not convinced that the Filipinos are up for the task, and his assessment of the people is not short on paternalism:

Bailey: Besides, them there Filipino they’re too little to make good fighting men.  
Col. Mason: When God made the Filipino he gave him so much heart he had to skip a little on the side of his body.

The Filipino heart, and dependence, was on display in RKO’s *Back to Bataan* (1945). As the title suggests, this is one of the return-to-the-Philippines-to-redeem-the-honor-of-the-United States films. The movie is set in 1945, but, early on in the film, there is a flashback to 1941 and the takeover of the Philippines by the Japanese. On the door of a village school is a note from the Japanese invaders saying they will soon be occupying the building. Inside the classroom, a white American woman is teaching a class of Filipino children. Also in the classroom is a Filipino priest. The American, Ms. Barnes, is teaching the children about their upcoming independence on July 4, 1946, and the impact that America has had on the islands. She then asks the children about the contributions of the Spanish to the Philippines. A child named Maria answers: “The Spanish brought us the Holy faith, the blessed Virgin and the saints.” Ms. Barnes praises the child: “Quite right Maria, the Spanish brought us Christianity.” The West has brought the Philippines the gifts of faith and democracy (though the Filipinos could not open that gift for five more years). Without the Spanish and the Americans, the Philippines would have remained a backward nation. The Filipino priest is silent through all of this, never questioning the fact that the teacher fails to give credit to the Filipinos themselves for the development of their own culture. Instead, his presence is a quiet affirmation of the necessity of western ideals and religion.

What the Filipinos do possess is a great deal of courage to defend the faith and democracy. In front of the whole school, the Filipino headmaster refuses the command
of a Japanese officer to take down the American flag that is flying above the school. Such an action meant certain death, and the Japanese are quick to hang the headmaster. The Filipino priest blesses the headmaster before dying a most righteous and courageous death.

SOVIET UNION

While Hollywood struggled to break free from their old, stereotypical depiction of the Chinese, they had no such problem with residents of the Soviet Union. No other nation underwent such a significant facelift in wartime motion pictures. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Hollywood had either ignored the Soviets or treated them in a ruthless manner. Even though a number of screenwriters were either sympathetic to communism or members of the Party themselves, the PCA, especially Joseph Breen, forcefully opposed any favorable treatment of the Red Menace. The pact signed between Hitler and Stalin in August of 1939 did nothing to encourage Hollywood to make pro-Soviet films. Things began to change, however, when Germany turned on its partner and invaded the Soviet Union.151

Once the Soviet Union became America’s ally, Hollywood found new motivation to present the Russians in a more positive light. This involved several strategies, beginning by diminishing, or outright avoiding, anything to do with communism. One of the most visible symbols of communist Russia was Joseph Stalin. When Stalin appears in wartime films, he is recast as the genial, non-threatening Uncle Joe who is just as committed to democracy as Franklin Roosevelt. But the most effective way to get Americans to forget about communism was just to pretend it did not exist. Instead of

ideology or politics, Hollywood chose to create a positive portrayal of the Russians by focusing on them as people. In particular, Hollywood sought to convince American audiences that the Soviets were a freedom loving, hardworking, God-fearing people, just like them.\footnote{Dick, \textit{The Star-Spangled Screen}, 159; Doherty, \textit{Projections of War}, 144; Shull & Wilt, \textit{Hollywood War Films}, 202; Koppes and Black, \textit{Hollywood Goes to War}, 219.}

Several factors aided that task (factors that the Chinese lacked). First and foremost was race. While the Soviet Union comprised a large number of different ethnic groups, Hollywood chose to present the nation as almost exclusively Caucasian. Because they were white, Hollywood could present Russians as possessing many of the same western cultural traits as Americans. The Soviets also displayed a remarkable resistance to the Nazi conquest of their country. Unlike the Chinese, however, the Russians seemed to be able to do this without much aid from the United States. Their independence was a characteristic that American audiences could identify with.\footnote{Fyne, \textit{The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II}, 110.}

Because American propaganda portrayed the Second World War as a holy crusade to rid the world of fascism, America’s allies all needed to have a religious, preferably Christian, dimension. Given the official position of the Soviet Union towards organized religion, this presented something of a problem for Hollywood. Ambassador Joseph Davies, whose \textit{Mission to Moscow} (1943) created some of the most distorted images of the Soviet Union during the war, confessed that in the Soviet Union, “Every effort is being made to substitute worship of a man for the worship of God. It is one of the greatest weaknesses of this situation.” During the war, the Soviet government relaxed some of its opposition to the Orthodox Church, which helped create the impression that it was much more religiously tolerant than was the case. Yet studios still struggled to find a
way to show that the Soviet Union was more than tolerant of Christianity: they wanted to show that Russians actively practiced the faith.154

The first two pro-Soviet films that Hollywood released, Warner Bros.’ Mission to Moscow and RKO’s The North Star (1943), only hinted that the Russians were a religious people. MGM’s Song of Russia (1943) started out on a more ambitious path. The film was about an American composer, John Meredith (Robert Taylor), who visits Russia, falls in love with a Russian musical student named Nadya (Susan Peters), and marries her. Their happy world comes crashing down when the Germans invade the Soviet Union and Meredith must leave his new bride behind as a fighter while he tries to return to America to raise support for the Russians. Unable to return home without his wife, Meredith eventually works his way back to Nadya’s village and convinces her that she can do more good with him in America than by staying behind in Russia.

Song of Russia started out as a movie called Scorched Earth. In the summer of 1942, MGM assigned the project to screenwriter Anna L. Strong, who created a character who was a Russian priest. The Nazis use the village church to house prisoners, and the priest is an active part of the guerilla network. In an interesting exchange, Strong found a way to both acknowledge that some communists were atheists and still give the impression that Christianity was a vital part of many Russian’s lives. Peter, one of the local guerillas, asks John Meredith to go tell the priest about a resistance meeting. Since the Nazis are occupying the church, Meredith is to tell the priest that a man named Faber is dying and wants to see the priest. Meredith is confused since Faber is not in fact dying:

Peter: He'll know what we want if you mention Faber. Faber’s an atheist. He would never send for a priest but only for guerrilla business.
John: Does the priest do guerrilla business?
Peter: Every honest Russian does. But this priest is a real help to us. He knows every trail, every hill and gully. Better than Boris. When we raid the munitions train tomorrow night, I bet he’ll be pointing the way.\[155\]

The next morning, Meredith goes to deliver the message to the priest, who questions how committed the American is to helping with the resistance:

Meredith: As far as I’m able. I hope to act with you.
Priest: It seems strange that you, an American…
Meredith: It seems strange that you, a priest…
Priest: I defend my land and my religion.
Meredith: Together with atheists?
Priest: (Nods) Our Russian atheists only compete with God. The Nazis make God serve the devil. God can survive with us but not in a Nazi world.\[156\]

Through this conversation, Strong tried to send the message that Americans had little to fear from the Soviets. While atheistic Communists were a nuisance, atheistic Nazis were the real threat to the world.

Later in the script, the priest goes with the other guerillas to the meeting. The guerillas greet him with a great deal of enthusiasm. He is clearly one of their leaders, but he is also a priest. It is his responsibility to tell one of the other men that the Nazis have beat his wife to death in the church. She died, however, defying her oppressors, and this knowledge causes the man to raise his head in pride. The use of the church as a place for Nazi atrocities was intentional. Describing the scene inside the church (where the prisoners are mostly the elderly and children), Strong writes:

They have found a few priests’ robes and alter draperies to wrap around their freezing limbs; these have been used for the babies and the most sorely wounded. The juxtaposition of these sacred emblems with the baby faces and wounded

\[155\] Anecdotes dated 7/6/42 by Anna L. Strong, pages 18-22, Scorched Earth, TCF; 8/18/42 Treatment for Scorched Earth, page 38, Song of Russia, File 52922, Turner/MGM Script Files, MHL.
\[156\] Ibid., 43A, 43L.
bodies might recall to the imaginative the pre-Raphaelite portrayals of the child Jesus or of the tortured saints.\textsuperscript{157}

It was the Germans, not the Soviet Communists, who were the real threat to Christianity. Under Soviet rule, there was a church and a priest for the people—under the Nazis, houses of worship became prisons.\textsuperscript{158}

In this script, John and Sonia (later named Nadya) are married in the church. The church is still a prison, which means that the Germans have caught both John and Sonia. The priest is not present in this scene.\textsuperscript{159} Throughout October and November of 1942, screenwriters Paul Jerrico and Richard Collins drafted a new script for the project, which they now called \textit{Russia}. They created a way to diffuse the issue of religion in the Soviet Union and at the same time to make the Russians appear to be just like Americans. Sonia has become Nadya, and when Meredith proposes she asks if he just wants to get their marriage officially recognized or have a church wedding. John seems a bit taken back, and asks if church weddings are customary Russia:

\begin{quote}
Nadya: It’s up to the individual  
John: Oh.  
Nadya: Why – how is it done in America?  
John: It’s up to the individual.
\end{quote}

They are married in the church (it is referred to as a Greek Orthodox Church) in a ceremony that is both solemn and colorful: “Nadya is beautiful, John is serious, the Priest dignified.” None of this would have been unfamiliar to American audiences. In fact, Jerrico and Collins meant it to resemble an American wedding service.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 60.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 62.  
\textsuperscript{160} Script dated 10/30/42, amended on 11/24/42, pg. 46, 49, \textit{Song of Russia} file 2929, Turner/MGM Script Files, MHL. Koppes and Black note that both Paul Jerrico and Richard Collins were communists but still included a church wedding in their script for the film. It is difficult to determine what influence their
The screenwriters gave the priest a much smaller role in this script. He is no longer a leader of the guerillas, but he does tell Meredith that, after the harvest, he intends to join the guerillas and to fight, if necessary.\textsuperscript{161} By January of 1943, the screenwriters expanded the priest’s role to include helping the guerillas blow up a bridge. In March, they had the priest crouching with Nadya behind a machine gun and then opening fire on the belfry of the church. This scene did not go over well with the PCA, and the screenwriters eventually dropped it from the script (though a similar scene had appeared in \textit{Edge of Darkness}). The screenwriters continued to tone down the priest’s dialogue as well. In a July draft, the priest, when asked if he is going with the guerillas, only tells John, “Where my people go – I’ll go with them.”\textsuperscript{162}

The changes to the character of the priest reflect the struggles that Hollywood had incorporating religion in Soviet Russia. At first, the priest is a full-blown patriot, a critically important member of the community. Yet, even in the fantasyland of Hollywood, this proved to be too much. Religion and religious characters were reshaped until they finally become symbolic tokens, hints that Christianity existed in the Soviet Union without going into details about what role it actually played. Thus, in the film, the priest has a minimal part. His main function is to preside at the wedding of John and Nadya. He is shown later in the film both helping the villagers to burn their fields as an act of resistance and praying over a Russian who has been shot by the Germans. But his role is reduced to that of a passive symbol from that of an active spokesperson for religion in the Soviet Union. He no longer interprets for the American audience that the

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{162} Scripture dated 1/21/43 and 3/6/43, pages 89,90, 100; Script dated 7/6/43, page 90, \textit{Song of Russia} File 2934, Turner/MGM Script Files, MHL.
true atheists were the Germans, nor does he embody the presence of God in the same way that the military chaplains do in films such as Guadalcanal Diary. In Song of Russia, religion ends up making a cameo appearance, showing up just enough to lead the audience to believe that the Soviets might, perhaps, really be Christians after all.¹⁶³

Like the script for Song of Russia, the script for RKO’s Days of Glory (1944) started out containing more explicit scenes of Russian Christianity than made it into the film. Days of Glory does, however, go further than any of the films about the Soviet Union in portraying the Russian people, not just Russian priests, as actively Christian. The plot involves a group of guerrillas who are hiding in an old monastery. One of their members finds a young woman alone in the woods. She turns out to be a ballerina who has gotten lost from her troupe while on her way to entertain Russian troops. Nina (Tamara Toumanova) is not easily accepted into the group: she cannot cook, clean, sew, or fight. But when a captured German soldier tries to escape, Nina finds the strength to kill him. From that point on, she becomes one of the guerillas. Woven into the plot is the mandatory love story. Nina falls in love with Vladimir (Gregory Peck), and the two die heroically fighting a German tank.

In the film, Nina prominently wears a cross around her neck, signifying her Christian faith. She explains to Mitya why she is a Christian while showing the young guerilla how she prepares for a ballet:

Nina: And so I tremble in the wings, and I cross myself…
Mitya: (interposing with surprise) You are religious?
Nina: Aren’t you?
Mitya: I haven’t decided yet.
Nina: Well, I might break my leg, so I am religious!…

If Mitya is not sure about his faith, the other guerillas are more certain. A character named Sasha crosses himself twice each time he comes across a dead German, and another, Fedor, is shown kneeling for his prayers.164

When the Germans kill Yelena, the other guerillas gather for the funeral. Several of them are kneeling; one holds a makeshift incense burner while Dmitri, an old farmer, says the prayers:

Dmitri: (taken from the orthodox funeral rite) ‘Blessed is our God, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen…O, Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.’ (instructing the others) Say it with me. Sascha, Fedor and Nina say the words, the others just mumble a little, and Olga, overwhelmed with the situation, tries also to repeat the sentence. All: (together) O, Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.
Dmitri: May Christ, our true God, establish the soul of his servant, Yelena Komarova, brave soldier and good woman, departed from us, in His holy mansions… (to Vladimir, apologizing) That is all I can remember…It is a long time since I was an altar boy.165

These expressions of peasant faith became muted as the script was revised. Again, hard political and propaganda realities tempered the initial enthusiasm of screenwriters to redeem the Soviet Union. Audiences were willing to suspend disbelief when they walked into a movie theater, but only to a certain extent. Dmitri is the only character who uses religious language in the film, though Nina continues to wear her cross. When Dmitri tells the other members of the group that a man has died, he ends his statement by saying, “God’s will.” And it is his voice the audience hears after Yelena is killed. Nina is in her cell burning a candle in front of an icon of Mary with the infant Jesus. In the background, Dmitri prays, “Now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. May the true God establish the soul of his servant, Yelena Komarova, brave soldier and

164 Revenge script dated 5/24/43, pages, 12, 65, 79-80, Days of Glory, RKO-S 969, RKO.
165 Ibid., 162.
good woman.” The rest of his prayer is drowned out when Nina and Vladimir begin to talk.  

Whether audiences accepted that the Soviets were really Christian and not atheists is difficult to discern. At a minimum, the use of religion helped stem the tide of anti-Soviet feelings, at least during the war. The Communist-as-atheist diatribe would reemerge with a vengeance shortly after the war ended, a sign that Hollywood’s wartime propaganda efforts had a limited effect. But religion was such a powerful tool in redefining America’s allies that military films also employed it. Frank Capra used religion to explain to Army recruits why they should support the Russians in his “Why We Fight” films. In the second part of _The Battle of Russia_, the film shows Russian people praying for victory in a church. The Germans may have invaded the Soviet Union, but they had not conquered it. When it is time to strike back against the Nazis, religion becomes an important weapon. In a Russian church, worshippers surround a priest while the narrator says, “And while in the churches of Russia men of God prayed for victory against the invaders.” On the screen, superimposed on image of the priest and his congregation, are the edited words of a prayer attributed to the Archbishop of Moscow:

> Oh merciful Lord…crown our efforts with victory…and give us faith in the inevitable power of light over darkness, of justice over evil and brute force…Of the cross of Christ over the fascist swastika…so be it. Amen. Sergi, Archbishop of Moscow, Moscow, November 27, 1941.  

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166 “When Nina joins the guerrillas, she does not remove her cross, even when Vladimir administers the guerrilla other requiring her to swear allegiance to the Soviet Union. At that point politics do not matter, however, because a German tank is moving toward them. Thus, Communists in the audience could say that Nina died as one of theirs; Christians would be pleased that she kept her cross; and Gregory Peck became an overnight star.” Dick, _Star-Spangled Screen_, 163.

When the Russians pray, it is not because they are hopeless or desperate; it is because they are on the attack. An old woman appears in the film, and she is shown crossing herself when Russian troops move past her. But these soldiers are marching into battle, not returning from defeat. The woman is blessing the troops as they head towards victory. By showing the Russian people in church, surrounding a priest who is leading them in prayer, the Russians take on the image of being on the side of God.

*The Battle of Russia* does not, however, highlight the very real differences between the Russian Orthodox believers, Roman Catholics, and various Protestant denominations within the Soviet Union. The image of Christians in Russia who possess no real theological or liturgical differences from each other or from American Christians was part of the propaganda effort to present the allied nations as completely unified. American propaganda completely glossed over differences in religion and politics in an effort to make the Russians a suitable ally.

Absent as well was any mention of the anti-religious attitude of the Soviet government in the years between the Russian revolution and the German invasion. There is nothing in the film to alert the audience to the fact that Lenin and Stalin all but destroyed the Orthodox Church, and neither is there any mention of the long history of anti-Semitism against Russian Jews. In reality, the war gave the Orthodox Church a new lease on life. Stalin was willing to tolerate the Church as long as it served to help win the war. Orthodox religious leaders were more than willing to oblige. Soviets, eager for Western audiences to believe that Russians were free to practice religion (especially if
that would help convince the Americans to open a second front against Hitler), supplied much of the footage used in the film, including that used in the church scene.  

ENGLAND

Officials of both the OWI and the Army had concerns that the British Empire and the rigid English class system might undermine Americans’ support for Great Britain. It was hard for some Americans to believe that the British were fighting for democracy when they were denying it to millions of people all over the world. Pre-war Hollywood films contributed to the problem. Aristocratic Englishmen and the grandeur of the British Empire made for wonderful cinema but lousy propaganda. The OWI encouraged studios to refocus on the British commitment to democracy and the heroic actions of everyday Britons. Even so, Hollywood could not escape its own stereotypes of the British, reinforcing “the ‘stiff upper lip’ attitude, the class structure, and – when relevant – the general air of bemusement Britons have when confronted with brash Americans.” Religion was used to testify to the toughness of the English. It was also used to portray British society as much more egalitarian than it really was.

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In the “Why We Fight” films, Capra tried to give soldiers the impression that all of America’s allies were Christian, but he did so in a way that differentiated stronger allies from weaker allies. The British, like the Russians, possessed a strength that was worthy of America’s respect. England was the last free country that stood between Nazi Germany and the United States. American soldiers were not going overseas to preserve the British Empire; they were going to save the Western world, and more importantly the United States, from totalitarian rule.

The Battle of Britain celebrated British tenacity by using religious images and music. The English people are not shown praying in churches. Rather, the religiousness of the English people is found in their commitment and determination to keep fighting for the ideals of equality and freedom. The most important sequence that communicates this message is built around the bombings that occurred on Christmas Day, 1940. Images are shown of the massive damage done by the firebombs that the Germans dropped on London on the night of December 24. The destruction is overwhelming; buildings are burned till nothing remained but a pile of rubble, and fires rage all over the city. Yet, in the background, a choir sings the hymn “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” The words of the chorus are clearly heard: “O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!” Then, the beginning of the third verse: “Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning.” Even though London has been brutally attacked, the film argues that the English people are rising up in faith and welcoming the new day. The religious nature of the British is implied through their courage and their reaction to the Christmas bombings.

Hollywood screenwriters were more direct in using religion to help gloss over some of the problems with English society. Feature films, in particular Mrs. Miniver
(1942), made the church a place where British resolve was affirmed and class differences overcome. Before the war the Miniver’s attend a church that physically reflects the class divisions within their community: the working class worshipers sit in the back of sanctuary, the wealthy up front, and the middle-class Miniver’s sit in between. The Miniver’s do not question the status-quo and indulge their son, Wyn, when he comes home from the university ranting about the outrages of the aristocracy in British society. It is in the church that the community learns that Great Britain has declared war on Germany. The war changes everything: the Miniver’s suffer the loss of their comfortable lifestyle; class barriers are broken down when Wyn falls in love with and marries Carol, the niece of the local aristocrat; and death affects people of all rank. Mrs. Miniver acknowledges the stereotypes that Americans had about Great Britain but argues that the war was helping to democratize English society. Americans were not fighting to preserve empires or class structures but to help put an end to the suffering that all Britons were experiencing.

The final scene of the movie takes place in the church, where German bombs have ripped holes in the ceiling. The Anglican priest proceeds into the worship service while the congregation sings “Children of the Heavenly King.” The last line of that hymn speaks to the strength of the English people:

Fear not, brethren! Joyful stand
on the borders of your land;
Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
bids you undismayed go on.

The priest begins his sermon by reading from Psalm 91. In the midst of a bombed-out church he affirms for the congregation that God is their refuge and fortress. Then he recounts the losses the community has suffered during the war:
The homes of many of us have been destroyed and the lives of young and old have been taken. There’s scarcely a household that hasn’t been struck to the heart. And why? Surely you must have asked yourselves this question. Why, in all conscience, should these be the ones to suffer? Children. Old people. A young girl at the height of her loveliness. Why these? Are these our soldiers? Are these our fighters? Why should they be sacrificed? I shall tell you why. Because this is not only a war of soldiers in uniform, it is a war of the people. Of all people. And it must be fought not only on the battlefield, but in the cities and in the villages; in the factories and on the farms; in the home and in the heart of every man, woman, and child who loves freedom.

Well, we have buried our dead, but we shall not forget them. Instead, they will inspire us with an unbreakable determination to free ourselves and those who come after us from the tyranny and terror that threatened to strike us down. This is the people war! It is our war. We are the fighters. Fight it then! Fight it with all that is in us. And may God defend the right.

As the congregation stands to sing “Onward Christian Solider,” Wyn moves from his pew to that of Mrs. Beldon, Carol’s aunt. It is a bold act that would have been unthinkable before the war, but they now share the pain and sorrow of Carol’s death. This is a new England, one that has been transformed by suffering and unified by a common determination to defeat fascism. This is an England that Americans might find worth fighting for, even if it only existed on the silver-screen.170

OCCUPIED EUROPE

There was a remarkable similarity in the way that Hollywood and the United States Army used religion in their presentations of Russia and Great Britain, but, when it came to the countries of occupied Europe, there was a significant difference in tone between Hollywood feature motion pictures and the “Why We Fight” films. Hollywood favored movies that emphasized the fighting spirit of the occupied people while Capra’s unit created the impression that these same nations were weak and dependent upon the

170 Koppes & Black, Hollywood Goes to War, 223, 227, 236.
United States to rescue them. Part of this discrepancy had to do with their intended audiences. The “Why We Fight” films were produced for members of the Army, many of whom had been drafted into the military. Capra wanted to show these men that there was a reason that some of them were going to Europe to fight and die. The liberation of occupied Europe was necessary for America’s national security, but there was another reason as well: the people of occupied Europe had prayed for deliverance from their Nazi oppressors, and Capra wanted GIs to see themselves as divine agents sent by God to answer their prayers.

In *The Nazi Strike*, there is an extended sequence on the siege of Warsaw. The Polish people are brave and noble for trying to fight against the Nazis, but they are much too weak to resist the German onslaught. Poland is not directly criticized because it is weaker than England or Russia, but it is clear in this film that the Poles are not going to be the equals of America in this conflict. While the Polish people are faithful to the one, true God, their religion is a testimony to their weakness. During the sequence on the siege, the narrator says, “For twenty days of death and horror every man, woman and child fought to save his city.” There is a shot of people praying in front of an altar, followed by the image of a church steeple collapsing because of the German bombardment. The Poles prayed for a miracle, for some sort of deliverance from the German siege. Under the overwhelming force of the Nazi military, all that is left for the citizens of Warsaw is to pray that God will save them. At the end of *War Comes to America*, there is another scene from the siege of Warsaw. The image is of an older woman who is staring out of a window with a statue of the Virgin Mary in front of her. She gazes at the statue with a look of desperation on her face, a symbol of a people who have nothing left to comfort them but prayer.
In *Divide and Conquer*, religion reinforces the idea that the Norse, Dutch, and French are weaker allies in the fight for freedom. In a sequence about the occupation of Norway, the narrator says, “unopposed bombing raids sent defenseless citizens fleeing in stark terror” while an image of an old woman crossing herself appears on the screen. The use of older people, especially women, was another way of conveying the weakness of these nations. The defeated nations of Europe are tired, old, and without youthful hope. The only defense they have left is the desperate prayers of old women.

As the Netherlands fall, Capra shows a scene with a group of people in a cathedral, praying with a priest. The narrator says, “The people of the democracies prayed for strength to meet the coming terror.” The terror is the occupation of Holland by Nazi troops, which signaled the end of Dutch freedom and equality. Like the situation in Poland, there is no hope of the Dutch defeating the German military. Their only weapons are prayers that the people will be able to withstand the long occupation until some other nation comes to their rescue.

The country that suffered the most in the “Why We Fight” films was France. It is clear in *Divide and Conquer* that Germany should never have overrun France. Had the French people held fast to their faith in the equality of all humans and the promise of freedom and democracy, they would have been able to defeat the Nazis, the film claims. Instead, the French placed their faith in the Maginot Line, in a defensive position that they thought would stop any German advance. As the narrator remarks, “When a people loses its faith in their own ideals it is ripe for the insidious words of the devil.” Because the French were waiting to be attacked rather than fighting for freedom, the Nazis were able to gain the upper hand. German propaganda was able to weaken the morale of the French troops. When war came, French soldiers had already given up. During the fall of
Paris, the narrator says, “the despairing people of Paris sent their children South, praying that some miracle would keep them from harm.” Because they refused to aggressively fight for freedom, the French were left—like Poland, Norway, and Holland—with only prayers of desperation.

Capra framed these images of defeated nations to make soldiers feel pity and see that they must stop Germany. But the image of the conquered people praying for help worked on another level as well. The occupied people of Europe had prayed for God to deliver them, and the films invited American soldiers to see themselves as the instruments of that deliverance. God would use them to free Europe from the Nazi terror. Therefore, Americans were a chosen people, a people of faith who were called by God to restore peace and democracy around the world.

RESISTANCE FILMS

One of Hollywood’s most popular wartime genres was the resistance film. The country did not really matter—France, Norway, or Czechoslovakia. The fact was Hollywood purposely avoided making the actual country a major issue of the film so that it could focus on the ordinary farmers, bakers, laborers, and even clergy who were actively opposing the Nazi invaders. The resistance film tried to create sympathy for America’s allies by showing that they were fighting even after the Germans occupied their countries. These films made the occupied allies seem more like ordinary Americans. The resistance film frequently used religious characters and settings to create a connection between the American audience and the nations presented on-screen.¹⁷¹

France was the most common location for a resistance film for several reasons. Hollywood found the French easy to portray and, at times, to caricature. The accent alone could convey a thousand different images and characteristics to audiences. But France was also an anomaly. It was an ally, an occupied country, and an enemy state. Thus, Hollywood could show the French fighting with the British or Americans, resisting the German occupiers, and even fighting among themselves.172

French priests were a favorite character in resistance movies. They not only created the impression that the French were a righteous people, but they were also one of the few characters who could help the resistance and still interact with the Nazis. They were never in hiding themselves, but they made it possible for others to remain unseen. Father Antoine in Joan of Paris (1942) is one of those priests. When the underground needs to get some British flyers out of the city, its agents come asking for his help. “I’ve learned many things in this parish,” Father Antoine says, “I know the underworld almost as well as I know the world above. There’s a door that leads from the crypt into the ancient sewers of Paris. I can hide them down there.” When the Nazis show up during Mass, Father Antoine is prepared. The Nazis have come searching for papers that will lead them to the British fliers. Father Antoine complies, showing them a set of documents, but not before he has hidden the ones they want.

Even in captivity, the French priest in the resistance film remains a pillar of strength and support for his compatriots. In Cross of Lorraine (1944), Father Sebastian is a part of the captured French army held in a military camp. He is recognizable by his clerical garb, his cross, and his willingness to stand up to the Nazis and their French

When his men have been denied food for several days, Father Sebastian approaches Duval, a Frenchman who works for the Germans,

**Father Sebastian:** Did you tell him that our men are starving? That no one in the barracks has been fed since Pierre was shot?

**Duval:** The major realizes that Father. In a way he holds everybody in the barracks responsible. (Starts pushing his finger into FS chest) But he feels you could have stopped Pierre from doing this foolish thing.

**Father Sebastian:** (Grabs his hand and squeezes it hard) Then tell the Major that hungry men go mad. When the times comes and they have nothing to lose they’ll… (Paul who is loyal cuts him off)

**Paul:** Father...

**Duval:** Hey…You don’t realize your own strength, Father. (Rubs his hand)

Father Sebastian’s strength allows him to risk his own life for his men. When one of the French soldiers became ill and is taken to the military hospital he repeatedly asks for Father Sebastian, but the Germans refuse to let the priest see the dying man. After the soldier’s death, Father Sebastian concludes it is time to challenge the Nazis’ decree that there be no religious services. Even though some of his men try to talk him out of it, Father Sebastian decides to hold a funeral. He starts to say a prayer when some German soldiers walk up to him and one of them pulls his gun. Father Sebastian continues with his prayer: “Let us live in the fear of no man but only in fear of thee. (Stands up straight) And deliver us O Lord.” With those words, the Nazi shoots and kills the priest.

Resistance films portray priests from other countries as similarly courageous. The village priest in *Hitler’s Madman* (1943) also speaks out before the German overseer of Czechoslovakia shoots him. On occasion, Hollywood tried to turn the tables and have the clergy be the ones killing the Nazis. Most of the time, the PCA warned the studios that it would be out of character for a man of God to kill anyone, even if the person was a Nazi.
But in 1943, Warner Bros. was able to create a warrior-priest for *Edge of Darkness*. The response of the Norwegian government made sure that Hollywood never did it again.\(^{173}\)

*Edge of Darkness* stars Errol Flynn and tells the story of a small village in Norway that stands up to the Nazi invaders. When the Germans decide to close the local Lutheran church because of the activities of resistance groups, the citizens gather together. They have to decide if they should take the weapons offered to them by the British and fight back. They ask their pastor what he thinks:

Pastor: I say it’s wrong. I say it’s against God’s will, I say its murder.
Man from other village: They slaughtered us in the streets and you talk about murder.
Gunnar: Wait, wait. You’ll all have a chance to speak. Let him have his say
Pastor: Believe me I understand. But do not infect us; it would only make it worse. By him who died on the cross I swear I’m no coward but in my very soul I know this is wrong.
Villager: You are a man of God, pastor. But in these times you…
Pastor: In these times I must cry out all the louder.
Man from other village: How can you trust a man who talks like that?
Pastor: God have mercy on you.
Villager 2: We pay you a good wage. 300 Kroner a month, and now you turn on us.
Pastor: I am not turning on you.
Doctor Stensgard: He has a right to say what he thinks.

“A Mighty Fortress is My God” begins to play in the background as the villages vote to take the weapons.

After the Nazis commit several atrocities, including raping a woman inside the church, the pastor has had enough. The Nazis round up all of the leaders of the resistance and plan to shoot them on the town square. Before they are to be killed, they must each dig their own grave in front of the church. In the church, the pastor prays, “O God, if this suffering must be, bless those that serve thee and want only freedom. But whatsoever

thou decidest may thy will be done.” At 7 a.m., the town folk halt the executions by marching, armed, to the square, singing “A Mighty Fortress.” The pastor is in the bell tower and opens fire with a machine gun to prevent the executions. Then, a gunfight breaks out between the villagers and the Germans. When the PCA saw the script for the film, it seemed more concerned that the pastor changes his opinion about the morality of armed resistance than that he fires a machine gun from the bell tower of his church.174

When the Norwegian technical advisor for the film saw the script, he quickly wrote a letter complaining that the scene was completely inappropriate,

Allow me the following remarks and objections to Scenes #289 and 303 in last script version 10/27/42, of which I received my copy yesterday 10/29/42.

(1) The churches of Norway have never been used by the Norwegians for storage of arms, nor for battle stations or fortified strongholds. Even in the earliest days of Christianity between 1000, and 1100 no weapons were taken into the church, but removed by the bearer before entering and deposited outside the church.

(2) The principles of the Norwegian State Church have been & unalteringly are to maintain and on their part strictly observe such Christian principals and in all respects to regard and treat their churches as ‘God’s House’, and in all their acts to keep it inviolate. Also in the face of torture, death and temporary defeat. There are inspiring examples of this of late I shall be glad to inform you at length – at your convenience.

(3) The Norwegian People and the Norwegian Government do not intend to lower themselves to the level of their attackers, by themselves breaking the holy principle of sanctity and respect for their church and religion. Their moral stamina and high principles have been amply proven time and again, since the sneak attack of April 1940-; in the face of torture and death the church leaders have kept their faith and principles unsoiled and firm, as an inspiration to an admiring Christian World.

(4) This strong protest is only made in the interest of the parties involved so as in time to allow for safeguards and protect, in taking double shots where the pastor and church is concerned with the arms and shooting. Because I have no doubt whatsoever that the Norwegian Government and the Norwegian Church will protest to the United States State Department (Foreign Office) with actions to follow.

It would no doubt to them appear as a misrepresentation of their aims and of the spiritual fight they have waged for two years.

[IN HANDWRITING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE DOCUMENT]
The above objections would also apply to the pastor using the holy vestments (garb) while fighting outside the church. There should be no objection to the pastor fighting outside the church in civilian clothing. He could administer to the wounded in holy garb.  

Certainly, a different standard applied to Norwegian clergy than to American ones. No Hollywood film would ever have shown an American clergyman shooting a machine gun from a church tower. But then again, the Germans occupied Norway, and thus the studio did not stand to lose much by offending the Norwegian embassy. The point was to make the citizens of Norway look heroic and god-fearing—just like Americans saw themselves.

While Hollywood preferred to show America’s occupied allies fighting back, there were instances when Hollywood portrayed them as helpless. The character of Joan in Joan of Paris constantly prays to her statue of St. Joan, even asking it for a new dress. Joan makes a heroic sacrifice in the film, but there is a clear impression that she, and perhaps the masses of the French, resort to religion because they have no other option.

Warner Brother’s In Our Time (1944) is set in pre-war Poland. Jennifer, a Briton, falls in love with and marries Steffen, a Polish aristocrat. Throughout much of the film, the Poles are presented as backward, and Jennifer and Steffen struggle to try to get their peasants to adopt more modern farming techniques. The Polish army is not much better, relying on mounted cavalry to defend them from any attack. When the Germans (and their mechanized army) move toward the Polish border, the local village priest prays:

175 Letter from E. Wessel Klausen, Norwegian Technical Advisor to Henry Black 10/30/42, Edge of Darkness file 1882B, WBA.
Priest: A foreign country has cast her eyes on our Polish harvest. We pray that we may avert the menacing threat of war. That God may see fit to darken the sun with storm clouds and let rain fall upon our Polish earth. The invader might be discouraged if our roads were to turn into a sea of mud wherein the enemy tanks would be engulfed as were Pharaoh’s chariots under the Red Sea.

When the peasants hear artillery, they think it is thunder and that God has answered their prayers. Instead of rain the sound is of the German war machine preparing to overrun the helpless Poles.

Religion, especially Christianity, created a bond of mutual faith between Americans and their allies. It vouched for these foreign people, some of whom were suspect in the minds of many Americans. Whether that mutual faith really existed was not Hollywood’s concern. The war needed to be won, America’s allies had to be supported, and if that meant making everyone, including the Russians, appear like Christians, then so be it.
October 27th, 1941, was designated Navy and Total Defense Day. The United States was not yet at war, and there were still Americans who opposed getting involved in the latest European conflict. Franklin Roosevelt decided to use this occasion to continue to hammer home why America had to respond to the fascist threat. In a speech commemorating the day, President Roosevelt told his audience that the United States had obtained a copy of a secret German map. It was of Central and South America and showed that, under Nazi control, the German Reich would carve the whole area (including the Panama Canal) into five vassal states. If the prospect of Germany cutting off America’s economic lifeline (the Panama Canal) was not enough to get the isolationists to change their minds, Roosevelt offered up an additional bit of Nazi intrigue:

Your Government has in its possession another document, made in Germany by Hitler's Government. It is a detailed plan, which, for obvious reasons, the Nazis do not wish to publicize just yet, but which they are ready to impose, a little later, on a dominated world—if Hitler wins. It is a plan to abolish all existing religions- Catholic, Protestant, Mohammedan, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish alike. The property of all churches will be seized by the Reich and its puppets. The cross and all other symbols of religion are to be forbidden. The clergy are to be forever liquidated, silenced under penalty of the concentration camps, where even now so many fearless men are being tortured because they have placed God above Hitler.

In the place of the churches of our civilization, there is to be set up an International Nazi Church- a church which will be served by orators sent out by the Nazi Government. And in the place of the Bible, the words of Mein Kampf will be imposed and enforced as Holy Writ. And in the place of the cross of Christ will be put two symbols—the swastika and the naked sword.

The god of Blood and Iron will take the place of the God of Love and Mercy. Let us well ponder that statement which I have made tonight.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{176}Address for Navy and Total Defense Day, October 27th, 1941.
That no such document ever existed was immaterial. The threat that the Nazis might exterminate organized religion was too good of a propaganda tool for Roosevelt to pass up. Famed Hollywood director Frank Capra also propagated the myth. When his team went to work on the “Why We Fight” film series for the United States Army, Capra decided to do the President one better. He would not only claim that Hitler was out to destroy religion, he would show it happening. The shattering of a stained glass window begins a long sequence of Nazi anti-religious activity in *Prelude to War*. The audience sees the words of an edict that reads “…the Christian Cross is to be removed from all churches and cathedrals and is to be replaced by the immortal symbol of Germany, the swastika.” In the background are images of several soldiers raising a Nazi flag on top of what appears to be a church. It is worth noting that, when German prisoners of war saw *Prelude to War*, several complained especially about this scene. They doubted that Hitler’s Reich had ever passed such an edict, and, even if it had, they were skeptical that it had ever been enforced.177

Following the flag scene, there is a quick montage showing further Nazi hostility towards religion. Jews are the first to suffer. The film shows a soldier smashing the Ten Commandments outside of the Bremen Courthouse in 1934. Then, the film shows a shot of flames shooting up in front of a building that has the Star of David on the outside. The Nazis then turn their attention to the Christian faith. As the hymn “O Come, All Ye Faithful” starts to play in the background, the audience sees the interior of a church that has been senselessly destroyed. A large crucifix has been sacrilegiously thrown down from the wall and now provides a frame through which all the other damage is viewed. A

177 Memo, Edward Davison to Frederick H. Osborn (with enclosures about the “Why We Fight” series and re-education of the German prisoners of war) February 26, 1945, Culbert, *Film and Propaganda in American* Vol. V Microfiche Supplement.
voiceover informs the audience that this was how the Nazis treated the Church of Our Lady, Landau, on July 12, 1939. A shot of a group Nazi soldiers walking through a gate, ready to enforce the 1935 edict that the 700,000 members of Protestant Youth organization disband, follows this shot. One of the soldiers posts a “Do Not Enter” sign on the gate.

Images of newspaper headlines testify to the willingness of Hitler to arrest and even kill religious leaders: “NAZI STORM CARDINAL FAULHABER’S PALACE: Bricks and Clubs Hurled at Windows”; “PASTOR NIEMOELLER SENT TO PRISON CAMP”; “PASTOR WIESLER IS ‘SUICIDE’ IN NAZI JAIL: Charges Against Him Never Proved”; “NAZI GERMANY JAILS PRIESTS, FRIARS, AND NUNS: Arrest Follows Search of Convents, Monasteries.” These headlines are followed by a quick image of the Star of David in a window, then another headline: “NAZI VENT RAGE ON JEWS: RIOTS ALL OVER GERMANY: MOBS KILL, LOOT, BURN: Italy Tightens Control on Jews.” A shot of a sign banishing Jews quickly follows, and then a one final headline: “1500 GERMAN PASTORS IMPRISONED IN HOMES: Church Split Predicted.” At this point, the background music ends, and a round Nazi sticker is placed in a window, a symbol of the new religion that was taking over Germany.

The climax of this sequence comes when two German officers proclaim that Hitler is god-like, that he cannot even be compared to one as insignificant as Christ. A quick shot shows Hitler seated, looking somewhat pensive, his hands folded together. Then comes the final powerful image: a classroom full of German children singing a hymn of praise to Hitler. The image begins to replace a stained glass window of Jesus talking with children. The German youth refer to Hitler as their God, while in the background a poster of the Führer in armor carrying a Nazi flag appears.
While the “Why We Fight” films show German Christians resisting this new religion, they completely ignored the collaboration between many church leaders and the Nazi government. The German Confessing Church movement did challenge Nazi ideology, especially its claim that the state was more important than the church. But the Confessing Church was a minority among Protestants in Germany. Most Protestants were part of the German Christian movement that aligned itself with the Nazi government. As early as 1933, the Roman Catholic Church signed a concordant with the Third Reich that protected Catholics within the state but also undercut the ability of German Catholics to publicly oppose Hitler’s regime. The Church in Germany supported Hitler more than it suffered from him.  

That Roosevelt and Capra would so readily spread inaccurate rumors about religion in Nazi Germany is an indication of the serious problem that American propagandists faced during the war. World War II was presented as a holy war, with the forces of God (the Allies) squaring off in a titanic struggle with the forces of evil (the Axis). The argument worked fairly well when applied to the Japanese, a foreign people from a strange land. But both Germany and Italy were western, Christian nations. The seat of the Roman Catholic Church was in Rome, and Protestant Christianity came into existence through the German theologian Martin Luther. Millions of Americans—Christian Americans—had strong ties to Germany and Italy and knew that their kin were

not godless heathens. The solution to this quandary was to blame Hitler rather than the people of Germany and Italy. Hollywood quickly picked up on this idea and incorporated it into many of its wartime films. They cast Hitler as a would-be demagogue, Mussolini as his clueless altar boy, and the German and Italian people as their victims.

The Office of War Information fought such an approach. As historian Thomas Doherty argues:

The OWI wanted an ideology not an individual to be the Hollywood villain, a policy good in theory but bad as theater. On stage and in film, a magnetic villain...is more charismatically compelling than a considered analysis of totalitarian structure...The OWI harbored a deep suspicion of the American tendency to perceive political problems in personal terms...For official purposes, World War II was not about bad guys like Hitler or Hirohito but a bad body politic.179

Hollywood did not do well with ideology, but it understood raw, naked ambition. Yet the development of the Hitler-as-god storyline had to do with more than just Hollywood’s preference for a villain. The OWI offered little help to studios in creating a way to resolve the problem of religion and the Axis powers. Any solution had to fit within the tight constraints the Production Code Administration placed on the portrayal of religion in general and religious leaders in particular.180

Throughout the war, Hollywood, as well as the Army Signal Corp, remained committed to using religion as a way of defining America’s enemies. Motion pictures seldom suggested that the Axis powers were not religious. Rather, a key characteristic of the enemy was their determination to replace the great monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity with the blasphemous worship of mere human beings (Hitler and the Emperor). Filmmakers employed a two-fold approach when it came to religion and the

179 Doherty, Projections of War, 123.
180 Koppes and Black, Hollywood Goes to War, 249.
enemy. The Japanese, because of their race, were distinguished from the Germans and Italians and treated in a very different manner. These films argued that by virtue of being Asian the Japanese were physically, culturally, and spiritually inferior to Americans. Christianity had not taken root in Japan, and most Americans had little or no understanding of Buddhism. Since the PCA would not allow filmmakers to ridicule any religious tradition, studios did not even attempt to accurately explain religion in Japan. Instead, they relied upon a caricature of emperor worship that avoided crossing the PCA’s line while still presenting the Japanese as strange, foreign, and unholy.  

Filmmakers treated the Germans with much more care and consideration. Fearful of angering the large number of German-Americans, studios chose to separate the Nazis from the rest of Germany. The average German was still Christian, these films argued, and German religious leaders occasionally challenged Nazi ideology. It was the power-crazed Nazi government that held no respect for organized religion. The Italians, when they were treated at all in film, were also divided between the citizens and the government officials who deceived the citizens into believing in the cult of Mussolini.

GERMANY

It took Hollywood some time to figure out just how to present the Nazis. Initially, studios treated Hitler and his followers as comic fools. They lampooned Nazis, portraying them as bumbling fools, mindlessly devoted to the Hitler. They caricatured

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181 “Derogatory reference or portrayal of Emperor Hirohito was forbidden so ‘as not to malign religion and thus add to Japanese fanaticism.’” Doherty, *Projections of War*, 134-135.
the Führer himself as a silly little man with an appetite for power that knew no bounds. Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) marked the high water of this approach, but its success came in part because American was not yet at war with Germany. It was much easier to laugh at the Nazis when they were not killing American GIs. As war became more likely, especially after Pearl Harbor, a number of commentators (as well as the Office of War Information) believed that Hollywood needed to take fascism more seriously. The industry responded by presenting the Nazis as much more sinister in their lust for power and their adoration of Hitler. Nazis were ruthless, capable of doing anything in order to take control. In some ways, studios went too far the other way, creating a Nazi monster that at times seemed as unrealistic as the comic version of fascism.\(^{183}\)

Religiously, the Nazis were presented as the antithesis of the American GI. They lacked an internal moral compass that would allow them to distinguish right from wrong. Without hesitation, Nazis were willing to rape women, convert houses of worship into stables or prisons, and use small children for blood transfusions.\(^{184}\) Their devotion to Hitler led Nazis to believe that he was somehow divine. In *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), a sign at the Gestapo headquarters in Prague reads, “He who serves Hitler – serves Germany. He who serves Germany – serves God.” In the *Cross of Lorraine* (1944), a Catholic priest attempts to pray over the small rations that the Germans have given their French prisoners. A German guard stops him:

> German: You forget you’re a prisoner. Don’t you know religious services are forbidden.
> Father Sebastian: We were only giving thanks to God for our food.
> German: You would be better off to thank the Führer.

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Nazis’ faith in Hitler so blinded them that they turned on organized religion, believing that it was a threat. In wartime films, the Nazis fire at their enemies from churches, rape nuns, arrest priests, and kill clergy members. Such is the case in MGM’s *Hitler’s Madman* (1943), one of two Hollywood films about the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi overseer of Czechoslovakia. Heydrich comes upon the local villagers preparing for their harvest celebration. Some of the villagers carry a statue of Mary as they begin their procession, which a local Catholic priest leads.

Heydrich: You have a permit for this nonsense?
Priest: We are merely on the way to bless the fields, sir.
Heydrich: There is an edict forbidding any public meeting. Don’t you read the papers?
Priest: I have no desire to read. What is new today is old tomorrow.
Heydrich: What literature do you consider worth reading, Father?
Priest: The Bible, sir.
Heydrich: Then you must have learned that it is necessary to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s due.
Priest: I have also learned the first commandment: Thou shall have no other God before me. And for him we save our prayers.
Heydrich: And what do you pray for, our downfall?
Priest: We pray for bread, and patience.
Heydrich: I see, political theology.
Hanka: This is a sacred procession, sir. It is part of our religion. It has nothing to do with politics.
Heydrich: And who are you?
Hanka: My name is Jan Hanka…
Heydrich: Who asked you to speak?
Hanka: I was merely trying to explain…
Heydrich: Speak when you are spoken to.
Priest: Quiet Hanka, turn the other cheek.
Heydrich: So that’s what you do, turn the other cheek?
Priest: So it is written (Heydrich slaps him) You can’t provoke us.
Heydrich: So I can’t provoke you?
Priest: Out of the dust man rises into the dust he shall surely return. And when the day comes you shall be judged less than the dust which covers your boots.
Heydrich: So you think I can’t provoke you, huh. (Takes cloth from statue of Mary) How is this my holy sufferer?
Priest: That’s sacred cloth
Heydrich: Judged less than the dust that covers my boots, huh. (Wipes boots with cloth) Was that it?
The priest moves to stop Heydrich from desecrating the statue, and Heydrich shoots him. The Nazis are familiar with Christianity, it is not a foreign religion but it is a faith that most have turned their backs on it. Heydrich knows passages of scripture, perhaps an indication that in his childhood or youth, before he became a Nazi, he was a civilized Christian. Now, the lust for power has so corrupted him that he is willing to wipe his boots with a holy cloth and kill a man of God out in the open.

Within Germany itself, Hollywood presented the Hitler cult less ambitiously. To venture too far into what was actually happening within Germany meant having to either claim that Hitler had crushed the churches in Germany (which was not true) or acknowledge that the most of the churches in Germany were not openly opposed to Hitler (which was true). When studios chose to portray religion within Germany, they opted for the former rather than the latter.\textsuperscript{185}

The best example of how Hollywood treated religion within Germany is RKO’s \textit{Hitler’s Children} (1943). Ann is an American studying in Germany before the United States enters the war. She is of German heritage, and, when the Nazi government finds this out, they refuse to allow her to leave the country. Instead, she is forced into a labor camp where pureblooded German soldiers impregnate young German women. Ann escapes from the camp and finds her way into a local Catholic church, looking for sanctuary. The priest, who is also a Bishop, is in the middle of Mass, and, as Ann sits in the congregation, a group of German soldiers enters the church and begins to search for her. The Bishop appears more annoyed by the soldiers than afraid of them. The Nazis show no respect for the church or the Bishop, and they begin to wander up and down the aisles even as the Bishop begins his sermon:

Bishop: My dear good people I shall not speak to you this morning upon the gospel for the day, for today the gospel must speak for itself. But I shall speak instead upon a very different gospel – the gospel according to Adolph Hitler. For the time has come my friends when you must choose, once and for all, between the gospel of Christ and the gospel of Hitler. There can be no compromise between what is right and what is wrong. For might does not make right, not even though it be German might. For there is not one set of rules for Germans and another set of rules for the rest of the world. The rules are the same for everyone the world over. We must love the Lord our God with our whole heart and with our whole soul and our neighbor as our self. Now, more than ever before, we who believe that the good life is eternal, that the grave is not the end, we must face the issue clearly. We solve nothing by running away from it. We must think what we live and live what we think. And if to do that is to die (INTERRUPTED BY GERMAN OFFICER who tells him to dismiss the congregation.) And so my dear friends if to live what I think is to die for what I think, why then I say let me die while I am still proud I am a German.

The Bishop comes down to the altar and the officer comes up to him with his gun pulled.

Ann, not wanting any trouble for the Bishop, comes forward to turn herself in and faints.

The Nazis take Ann to a labor camp to interrogate her. The Major, who is questioning Ann, asks why she ran into the church, suspecting that the Bishop is somehow involved. Ann denies that she is Catholic or that she knows the Bishop. At this point, the Bishop enters the room:

Bishop: Please, Major Koepel—I assure you, the young woman- and I have never met before.
Lieutenant: A likely story – I tell you, major, this Bishop is no better than all the rest of the traitors. Even while we were looking for the girl in his church, he was denouncing the Fuhrer from the pulpit.
Major: Do you deny this, Bishop von der Linden?
Bishop: (coolly) No. I have always denounced the Führer. He will bring no good to Germany.
Major: Enough—
Bishop: But I am no part of a conspiracy, gentlemen. Whatever I may do or say – is done in the open.

Anna pleads that the Bishop had no part,

Lieutenant: Nevertheless, this Bishop should be disciplined, too. He says the Church has rights which the State cannot take away. He says that a baptism before a Party leader is no baptism – that a marriage before a Party leader is no marriage. He says-
Anna is told that she will get ten lashes and then be sent to the clinic for sterilization.

The Bishop tells her to have courage, remembering his sermon, and she says she is not afraid. Then he makes the sign of the cross over her and says, “God bless you – God keep you”

Major: (angrily) You cannot trick me with your questions, Excellency. If I must choose between Christianity and the State, I am glad to choose the State. Christianity had its chance and it failed. And when the time is right, we shall break with it completely – once and for all.

Bishop: No wonder you take away the breath of life so readily. The breath of death is already upon you—

Major: (uneasily) No. We are not afraid, Excellency. But there is not need to make a martyr of you before your time. Besides, when the work of National Socialism is finished, there will be no one in the churches for the clergy to talk to…except themselves. Ah, good morning, Excellency.

Bishop: (softly) What a pity barbarians have so little time for history. Do you remember, Major, a man named Attila?—Attila—the Hun…Well, Attila and his German tribes are gone many years now. But the Church remains – the Church remains. Remember, Major, in the long run the light always outshines the dark…and good will always over come evil. It may take a little time, but you will see. For it is the way of life, and in the end life is always triumphant over death…I will go now and say a special prayer for our early destruction at the hands of our enemies.

There is a strange relationship between the church and the state in Hitler’s Children, one that reflects the uncertainty that Hollywood had with the subject. The Major’s dialogue makes it clear that the Nazis have no respect for organized religion.
They enter the church without any hesitation and do whatever they please during the service. The Nazis do not see the church as a threat, for they do not arrest the Bishop for his sermon even though he had previously preached against Hitler. Yet, for all of the Major’s rhetoric, the Nazis also respect the church. The Major refers to the Bishop as “Your Excellency,” and the Bishop has enough authority to get entrance to the Major’s office without being invited. Hollywood preferred not dealing in specifics when the subject of religion in Germany came up. It was content in most films to leave the impression that what was happening in the occupied countries was also happening back in the Fatherland.

While the Nazis were obsessed with their new god Hitler, Hollywood held out hope for the average German. As Michael Shull and David Wilt note:

Germans who became Nazis may be brutal and arrogant, but – unlike the Japanese enemy – they are of the same racial stock as most Americans, and, in many cases, capable of redemption…Hitler and the Nazi leadership are consistently portrayed in wartime American films as symbolic corrupters of a western culture. This implicitly absolves most other Germans – except the industrialists, the aristocracy and the officer class that sold out to the Nazi – of war guilt and ‘crimes against humanity.’

That redemption was one of the themes in Warner Brothers’ Hotel Berlin (1945). As the war drew to a close, studios began to work through what would happen next. This would be the second time in less than thirty years that Allied forces would occupy Germany. What did this say about the German people? Were they really hopelessly militaristic, or could they become a peaceful member of the world community? If the reputation of the German people were going to be salvaged, Hollywood would have to demonstrate that they were still a Christian nation. That common religious tradition

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186 Shull and Wilt, Hollywood War Films, 216.
provided the foundation upon which Americans could forgive the German people for their participation in the Nazi terror.

Early in the production process, the script included a scene that aimed to establish that the average German remained a person of faith. During an Allied bombing of Berlin, the residents of the hotel are sent to shelters in the basement. In the shelter, after the planes leave, an old woman reads a Bible:

Woman: “Now Jericho was straitly shut up, because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none came in…”

A bomb explodes and the people start to gather around her and listen,
Woman: “…the priests blew with the trumpet; and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet…”
More bombs, at the top of her voice
Woman: “The trumpets of Jericho!”

This was a very interesting passage to choose. The reference is to Joshua 6, where, as part of their conquest of Canaan, the Israelites lay siege to the town of Jericho. Under Joshua’s command, the priests and warriors march around the city once a day for seven days. They carry with them the Ark of the Covenant and blow horns, but do not attack. Then, on the seventh day when the horns blow, the walls of Jericho tumble down, and the Israelites march in and take the city with very little effort. The screenwriters used the passage to portray the Germans as the residents of Jericho, trapped within their city. The Allies are the Israelites (the chosen people of God), and the bombs are the trumpets. In other words, soon, the walls of Berlin would come tumbling down. But what would happen to the residents of Jericho?

The screenwriters dropped that scene from the film, in part because the allusion was a bit too confusing. In its place, the screenwriters included a much clearer Biblical reference. A German scientist and his former colleague, both of whom were imprisoned

187 Script dated 4/6/44, page 185, Hotel Berlin, Story File, WBA.
in Dachau, meet at the hotel. The scientist (Peter Lorre) is drunk and starts talking to his old friend about whether there are any good Germans left:

Scientist: A good German, huh...(laughs then coughs). Have you not read the Bible, Martin Richter? God would have forgiven Gomorrah if he could have found ten righteous men there, ten, only ten. But he did not find them and he destroyed Gomorrah. There are not ten good Germans left and he shall destroy Germany.

Later in the film, the scientist is with leaders of the German underground, helping to print up copies of a speech by Roosevelt. The words on the page melt his cynicism, and he feels compelled to read them aloud:

Scientist: “I should be false to the very foundations of my religious and political convictions if I should ever relinquish the hope and even the faith that in all peoples without exception there lives some instinct for truth and passion for peace...We bring no charge against the German race as such for we cannot believe that God has eternally condemned any race of humanity.”

The German people were worthy of redemption, the film argues. It claimed that God had not forsaken them and that neither should God’s chosen people, the Americans.

ITALY

The treatment that the Italians received from Hollywood differed greatly from Hollywood’s treatment of the Germans. Italy was never taken as seriously as Nazi Germany. Militarily, it was at best a second-rate power, dependent upon the Germans to bail it out of stalled campaigns in Eastern Europe. When Mussolini appears in motion pictures, he is more of a caricature than a legitimate demigod. In order not to offend powerful Italian-American groups, Hollywood, if it portrayed the Italians at all, did so as “hapless understudies who possessed none of the threatening élan and menacing aptitude
of the Teutonic Nazis.” Mussolini, not the Italian people, was given all the blame for the alliance with Hitler. This was particularly true after Italy declared war on Germany in October of 1943. For the rest of the war, Hollywood treated Italy in a manner similar to other occupied nations.\footnote{Doherty, Projections of War, 131-132; Fyne, The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II, 99.}

Even though \textit{The Story of G.I. Joe} takes place on Italian soil, the enemy is Germany. The Nazis are the ones who show utter contempt for the sanctity of the Christian faith and its holy places. In one scene, two German soldiers climb into the bell tower of a bombed out church (the audience is left to assume that it is the Germans who have done the bombing) and begin to fire at American soldiers. The Germans also occupy a monastery on the top of a hill and use it to attack the advancing Americans. In return for Mussolini’s ill-fated partnership with Hitler, the film argues, the Italian people are left with ruins instead of churches.

Like other people of occupied nations in Hollywood films, the Italians look to the Americans to restore their lives. In \textit{A Bell For Adano} (1945), the local Catholic priest works closely with the American commander of the liberated Italian village. He tells his flock to follow the instructions of the Major and to believe that the Americans will help rebuild the village. In return, the priest asks the Major to find the church bell that the Nazis stole. The bell held an important place in the lives of the villagers, and their attachment to it makes them appear somewhat irrational. Still, after a good bit of difficulty, the Americans come through, and Adano gets its bell back.

JAPAN
Hollywood did not ignore the Japanese. Because of their attack on Pearl Harbor, they were more of an enemy to America than the Germans were. While the OWI attempted to get studios to focus on fascism rather than race, Hollywood was unable to overcome its history of prejudice towards Asians. The “inscrutable orientals, sinister warlords, two-faced servants – were ready-made for wartime propaganda.” The surprise attack by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, only added fuel to the fire. In American eyes, the Japanese had no respect for the United States; the country that they believed had educated Japan’s children and showed it the way toward industrialization. The Japanese were not only sinister but also ungrateful, and the American stereotypes of the Japanese reflected this belief.189

In wartime films, the Japanese are capable of unbelievable brutality. Yet in many ways, their attitude towards organized religion was no more different than the Germans. Because the Japanese were not Christians, it seemed more dramatic when they attacked religious sites such as churches than when the Germans engaged in similar activities. In early drafts of the script for China Sky, the Japanese do not even respect Buddhism. When Sister Peter leads the medical team to the old monastery, she tells the American doctor Kate, “The Japanese seldom harm Buddhist monks. After all, many of the Japanese are themselves most devout Buddhists.” But when Sister Peter sees that the monastery has been bombed, she laments, “I was wrong. Nothing is sacred now to Japan – not even her own religion.” Even the religious practices of the Japanese seem barbaric: “Ironically, when Japanese pilots rammed their aircraft they were seen as religious

fanatics, adhering to a cruel paganish deity; when Americans sacrificed themselves they were heroic, dignified, eternal.”

Unlike with the Germans, the Americans did not distinguish the Japanese people from their leadership. Throughout the war, Hollywood treated the Japanese as a nameless, faceless horde. Screenwriters seldom created well-defined Japanese characters, and thus it was very difficult for audiences to think that there were “good Japanese” who opposed their government just like there were “good Germans” who opposed Hitler.

191 Doherty, Projections of War, 137; Fyne, The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II, 36-37; Shull & Wilt, Hollywood War Films, 230; Dick, Star-Spangled Screen, 231.
Motion pictures played a significant role in American propaganda efforts during World War II, and religion was an important tool used by filmmakers. Before America’s official entry into the war, Warner Brothers used religious characters and storylines to argue that, regardless of what happened in the Great War, God wanted the United States to stop the spread of fascism. Frank Capra’s Army films made a similar argument to the troops after the U.S. entered the war: World War II was nothing short of a holy crusade. Only God was not on the side of the Allies: rather, the Allies were on the side of the one who gave humankind freedom and democracy.

Still, there were those who had their doubts about whether all the suffering and loss was really worth it. Hollywood studios responded by reminding audiences about both the basic decency and the Christian nature of the American GI. Screenwriters also revamped the religious conversion narrative, and used it as a vehicle through which audiences could see that faith in both God and the Allied cause were crucial to victory. When necessary, producers included sermons and prayers from on-screen clergy to make their point clear. America could not win this war without God, they argued, because, after all, it was God’s war.

On the home front, studios used religion to reaffirm existing racial and gender stereotypes. The war brought changes to the roles of African-Americans and women in American society. While the OWI encouraged studios to make pictures that highlighted the important contributions of both groups, screenwriters interjected religious language and locations into their films to tell audiences that, in fact, African-Americans were still subservient to whites and that a woman’s real job was to support her man.
While producers used religion conservatively when it came to the home front, they were much more liberal when using it recast America’s allies. Both Hollywood studios and Capra’s Army unit employed religious language and symbols to gloss over any defects in America’s partners—i.e. England and Russia—and to make them look more like Americans. Religion, especially Christianity, was a way for filmmakers to create a common bond across cultures, even when such a bond barely existed in reality. In Capra’s films, religion helped to create a sense of superiority in American GIs. Capra invited the American GI to see himself as the divinely appointed savior to the occupied nations of Europe, as the answer to their prayers for liberation.

When it came to the Axis powers, filmmakers used religion in different ways. They used religion imagery and dialogue to demonize Hitler and Mussolini while offering up the chance of redemption to the masses who had fallen under their spell—the Germans and Italians with large immigrant populations in the United States. Filmmakers offered no such grace to the Japanese. In both commercial and Army films, the Japanese people, as well as the Emperor, were hopelessly lost, sub-human creatures who had rejected the godly ways of the west.

Over sixty years have elapsed since the end of World War II. America is a different place than it was in 1945, and much of wartime Hollywood seems foreign to 21st century audiences. The acting styles, the crudeness of the special effects, the black and white photography, the storylines, and the less-than-subtle propaganda are out of step with contemporary filmmaking. Further, marketing a movie during the war years did not include selling Happy Meal toys, film-based videogames, or poseable action figures. Even the way audiences view motion pictures has radically changed. Gone are the
newsreels, shorts, and double features; going to the movies is no longer an activity that takes up a whole Saturday afternoon. When so much has changed, it is difficult to gauge the influence that World War II-era films had and continue to have. Religion was a powerful tool for screenwriters during the war: did it have any lasting effect on either post-war audiences or the post-war film industry?

The absence of modern government-sponsored propaganda and formal movie censorship also complicate assessing the impact of Hollywood’s wartime use of religion. Congress, never comfortable with the idea of domestic propaganda, closed the Bureau of Motion Pictures in 1943. Its parent organization, the Office of War Information, was decommissioned by an Executive Order signed by President Truman in August of 1945. While successive administrations have tried to use the media to shape public opinion, none have been so bold as to establish another official propaganda agency. Ironically, it was Congress, not the President, who made the most recent ill-fated attempt to openly influence the content of Hollywood films. After the war ended, the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) resumed its assault on the motion picture industry. Communism was the great enemy de jour, and studios felt enormous pressure to prove their loyalties in the new Cold War world. Hollywood responded by disowning its own wartime pro-Soviet films and willingly sacrificing anyone who would not pledge to toe the anti-Communist line. Even after the fall of Joseph McCarthy and the end of HUAC, Hollywood continued to be a consistent supplier of anti-Soviet propaganda.192

The Production Code Administration survived long after the war, but the era of film censorship would soon end. In 1952, the United States Supreme Court reversed its earlier decision and declared that it was unconstitutional for state or local authorities to

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192 Winkler, The Politics of Propaganda, 149.
censor movies before the public saw them. It was the portrayal of religion in an Italian film called *Miracle* that helped bring an end to film censorship. *Miracle* opened at the Paris Theater in New York City in December of 1950. The plot involves a young peasant woman who becomes pregnant by a stranger she thinks is St. Joseph. Ridiculed by her village, the young woman runs into the hills and gives birth to her baby inside of a church. The New York censorship board gave the film an exhibition license, but it rescinded the license when the Commissioner for the board complained that he found the film sacrilegious. The court battle that ensued demonstrated just how different post-war America was. Massive protest efforts by the Catholic Church ultimately proved to be futile since a majority of Americans no longer believed that the state should protect organized religion.193

The courts spent years clarifying if and when movies could be banned, but the die had been cast. By 1960, American studios felt free to explore the contradictions and hypocrisies of organized religion. United Artists’ *Elmer Gantry* directly assaulted the sideshow preachers and revivalists who made their living in the American heartland. The subject matter was so explosive that the producers began the film with a disclaimer warning parents not to let young children watch it. Those with stronger constitutions watched as Burt Lancaster, Jean Simmons and Shirley Jones used sex, blackmail, emotional manipulation, and the name of God to make themselves rich. Sinclair Lewis had Amiee Simple McPherson and Billy Sunday in mind when he wrote *Elmer Gantry* in the 1920s. By 1960, however, the real-life enemies of the religious establishment had changed. Fearful of the growing power and popularity of revivalists, church leaders from

more prominent denominations targeted Oral Roberts and Billy Graham as the new charlatans of religion. How much had Hollywood’s respect for religion changed over fifteen years? The motion picture industry awarded Burt Lancaster with the Academy Award for Best Actor for his work in *Elmer Gantry*.

The PCA, however, existed to serve the studios, not the various censorship boards scattered across the country. Even before the *Miracle* decision was handed down, industry executives were clamoring for changes to the Code. After the war, movie attendance was down, profits were shrinking, and movie moguls started to become concerned. Throughout the 1950s, the motion picture industry suffered a number of serious blows: studios were forced to divest of their theater chains, Congress renewed its attack on Hollywood with a vengeance, and television steadily eroded interest in going out to the movies. A series of changes to the Code in the 1950s and 1960s did little to satisfy critics who believed that the document was rooted in an outdated moral worldview. Audiences wanted to see reality (or at least the entertaining parts) on the screen, not the Puritanical vision of conservative church leaders. If Hollywood did not catch up with the times audiences would leave it behind as another useless relic from the past. In 1968, studio executives finally agreed to discard the Production Code and replace it with a ratings system. Unlike the Code, which told studios what they could not put in films, the ratings system informed audiences what level of sex, drugs, and violence they could expect to see in a movie.\(^\text{194}\)

The disbanding of the Office of War Information and the abandonment of the Production Code freed Hollywood to present religion and war in new, and at times unsympathetic, ways. Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970) is a perfect example. Altman

\(^{194}\) Leff and Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono*, 272; Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 293-312.
released the film at a time when the Vietnam War was extremely unpopular and Americans were turning their backs on organized religion. Neither Altman nor Twentieth Century Fox had to run the script by Joseph Breen or his minions before they could begin shooting. There was no Bureau of Motion Pictures presenting the studio with a list of propaganda points to help sell the Vietnamese as worthy allies or to argue that the fight against Communism was a righteous crusade. In the absence of these influences, Altman was able to use religion in ways that were unimaginable during World War II.

Consider the character of Frank Burns, a walking parody of the God-fearing GI. Burns wears his faith on his sleeve, but his piety does not run very deep. His lengthy prayers and Bible study do not add credibility to the American occupation of Korea. Rather, they accomplish just the opposite by underscoring the hypocrisy of the whole conflict. Religion does not help Burns be a better soldier, and it certainly does not make him a more faithful husband. Instead, it literally (in a straightjacket) and figuratively binds him up in a series of contradictions that eventually drive him insane.

Compare the Catholic chaplains Father Mulcahey (referred to throughout the film as Diego Red) and Father Donnelly (Guadalcanal Diary). Donnelly is strong and fearless, present whenever his men are in trouble. Diego Red is gentle, well-intentioned, and completely useless. Father Donnelly conducts religious services for hundreds of men about to go into battle; Diego Red stands in solitude blessing a jeep. Whereas Father Donnelly helps save lives in the operating room, Diego Red wanders around that same space ignoring the living and gives last rites to the dead. When Painless comes to the priest to confess that he wants to kill himself, Diego Red has no idea what to do. Rather than offer any practical support, Diego Red must go to Hawkeye for advice. Hawkeye’s
answer: a mock Last Supper for the dentist where a sexual encounter with a female nurse “heals” him. In *M*A*S*H*, sex, not religion, allows the GI to survive the hell of war.¹⁹⁵

Altman’s use of religion in *M*A*S*H* would have been unthinkable in Hollywood during World War II. Such was the power of the PCA, the Legion of Decency, and the OWI. Does this mean that the religion found in World War II era films is completely distorted by the influence of censorship and propaganda organizations? Are all the religious characters, settings and language found in wartime films time-bound propaganda? Yes and no. Without the protection of the Code, religion became subject to the same scrutiny and exploitation as other taboo subjects underwent. Screenwriters and directors were free to mock and ridicule religion as much as audiences would allow them. After censorship ended, religion no longer got a free pass, though its defenders continued to battle against what they considered to be on-screen sacrilege, such as *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Still, Hollywood’s use of religion during World War II had some staying power even after the OWI and the Code disappeared. Throughout the war, screenwriters used religion to define America, its allies, and its enemies. It did not take long for religion to perform a similar function in the Cold War. The United States remained a righteous nation while the Soviet Union returned to its pre-war status as the poster-child for godless Communism. American clergy divinely sanctioned this duality when they willingly offered up theological justifications for the Cold War. There was no caution in the

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patriotism of religious leaders like Billy Graham who, in 1957, claimed that Communism was “master-minded by Satan.”196

Hollywood did its part by producing a slew of biblical epics that pitted the faithful servants of the Almighty against the godless Romans and Egyptians. Movies such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben-Hur* (1959) invited Americans to see themselves as the chosen people of God and faithful disciples of Christ. No matter how powerful the forces of evil appeared, God (and Charlton Heston) would always triumph—and so would America. Eventually, these films argued, the Soviet Union would be washed away by the waves of democracy and free enterprise that God himself had unleash from heaven above. The fascination with religious movies in the early years of the Cold War was itself a sign of America’s righteousness. During the 1950s, three of the top four box-office hits were religious spectaculars (*Ben-Hur* finished first, *The Ten Commandments* second, *The Robe* fourth). Only a truly godly nation would spend so much money on religious entertainment.197

During the Cold War, Americans used religion in ways that make the propaganda efforts of World War II seem almost pedestrian. President Eisenhower himself set the tone when he remarked, “Our government makes no sense unless founded on a deeply felt religious faith - and I don’t care what it is.” The most blatant manipulation of religion occurred on Flag Day, June 14, 1954, when the phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. Monotheism was wedded to democracy in a public display of piety that the Soviets could not come close to replicating. After that, every American

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child, regardless of his or her actual religious convictions, stood up at school each morning, hand over heart, and affirmed faith in God and country. Hollywood’s World War II fiction had become Cold War reality.

On the surface, America certainly appeared to be a religious nation. The United States was the only Western country to experience a boom in post-war religious affiliation. Over 90% of the population claimed that they believed in God, and they backed it up on Sunday morning. At the outbreak of World War II, 49% of Americans belonged to a church (up from 43% during the Depression). By 1950, it had jumped to 62%, and, by the end of the decade, nearly seven out of ten Americans held formal church membership. Much good would come from the post-war religious renewal. Both the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement were both firmly grounded in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions of social justice.\(^{198}\)

But the revival, if it can be called that, was driven as much by the culture of post-war America as it was by authentic religious convictions. Many Americans seemed to be interested not so much in religion itself but in the capacity of religion to justify their lifestyle and worldview. The eminent religious historian Martin Marty describes the new religious consciousness of the 1950s as having to do “with nation itself”:

Of course, believers practiced their old-time religions in old and new ways in church and synagogue, at home and work and military camp. But after the Second World War and during the Cold War, the new-time religion of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and many secularists was in new ways a religion not only of the American Way of Life but of America itself. Although such a religious outlook and practice had a prehistory reaching back for centuries, the emergence itself turned out to be a peculiar mid-century development.\(^{199}\)


Americans were quite willing to believe that their newfound affluence was a sign from God. Religious figures like Norman Vincent Peale grew immensely popular because, in the name of God, they encouraged their followers to strive for greater success and prosperity. Wealth was a sign of God’s favor, of hard work rewarded, and of faithfulness. What better way to celebrate the blessings of God (and cultivate business contacts for future blessings) than at church on Sunday morning? Church membership rolls skyrocketed in the 1950s in part because affiliation with the right congregation was a sign of one’s status in society.200

The price for the melding of religion and state in post-war America came in the form of sharp declines in church membership beginning in the 1960s. When a new generation challenged the structures of civil authority, the church went down as well. Record numbers of Americans still believed in God, but they soured on organized, established religion. This is the point of view that Robert Altman expresses in M*A*S*H. Organized religion was no different from the military or Congress. He presents the Vietnam War as part of the ongoing battle against godless Communism. For millions of Americans, it followed that, if the Pentagon was at fault for causing death and destruction in Indo-China, than the church was an equal partner in the disaster. It mattered little that thousands of Jews, Christians and Muslims actively opposed the war. The marriage of church and state was too well established.

On a more positive note, Hollywood’s wartime ecumenism was a harbinger of things to come. World War II-era films eliminated denominational differences among Christians, treated Judaism as an ethnicity rather than a religion, and ignored every other religious tradition. Divisions between Christians did not go away because Hollywood

200 Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, 82-83; Patterson, Grand Expectations, 331-332.
pretended they did not exist, but the years immediately after World War II were marked by a rise in church mergers and denominational cooperation. Conservative evangelicals got a head start when they formed the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, but the more established Protestant churches responded in 1950 with the creation of the National Council of Churches. Before the end of the decade, two of the largest northern Presbyterian communions had joined together, and the merger of three other Protestant denominations created the United Church of Christ. This was part of a larger, worldwide movement for unity. The outbreaks of the First and Second World Wars undermined early 20th century efforts among Protestant and Orthodox Christians to unite, but in 1948, the World Council of Churches finally came into being. While the Roman Catholic Church did not formally join the organization, it, too, participated in wide-ranging theological conversations with Protestant and Orthodox bodies.201

The ecumenical movement succeeded in part because World War II had forced new levels of cooperation among people of faith. Americans of different backgrounds and traditions worked closely in the military chaplaincy, the Red Cross and other organizations. The scarcity of resources made it unpractical for each religious group or agency to work in isolation. The affluence of post-war America allowed the various denominations to act more independently, but important relationships and trust had been established during the war. Those relationships were interfaith as well interdenominational.202

Another reason for the post-war ecumenical impulse was the growing consciousness of being American, something that the OWI and Hollywood had been promoting throughout the war. Films downplayed ethnic, racial, and religious differences during the 1940s. Whatever the color or creed, the thing that mattered the most was whether one was an American. This would continue to be an important theme in the early years of the Cold War, though creed could no longer include communism. By the 1960, this would break down, and religion would later be used as a way of deciding who was a “real” American.

Perhaps the most lasting impact of Hollywood’s wartime religion has been its ability to continue to define World War II as a righteous conflict, the last so-called “good war.” The idea, expressed most clearly in Frank Capra’s “Why We Fight” films, that the war was a clear battle between good and evil has had remarkable staying power. The religious interpretation of the war took on additional meaning when the extent of the Holocaust became fully known. Evil now included the brutal extermination of six million Jews. Certainly, Hollywood, and American culture at large, has taken a much more critical examination of World War II and the American involvement in the conflict. Yet after six decades, Hitler and the Nazis remain some of Hollywood’s favorite villains. December 7, 1941, is still seen as a day of infamy, and, while a host of movies (such as Midway and Letters from Iwo Jima) portrays the Japanese more humanely, they are still presented as the aggressors. Even guilt over the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has not changed that reality in American culture.


The Korean and Vietnam wars certainly helped propagate the myth of a righteous World War II. The clarity of purpose, the military might of the enemy, and the American victory, all characteristics lacking in Korea and Vietnam, make the Second World War much more morally justifiable. Another reason why Americans still view World War II as a war of good versus evil lies in need for Americans to make sense of themselves and their place in the world. When the war ended, the United States and the Soviet Union stood as the two greatest nations on earth. Forty-five years later, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, America stood alone. World War II made the United States into a superpower and validated what many Americans had always believed about their country—that it truly is a city on a hill, a nation set apart. Certainly, its success must have been the will of God. At least that is what many Americans want to continue to believe.

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