

## **GOD IN HOLLYWOOD: EXPLORING AMERICAN CULTURAL IMPERIALISM THROUGH POST 9/11 CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY BASED FILMS**

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### **Abstract:**

*With over 2.1 billion followers worldwide, Christianity is the world's biggest religion (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>) with 13.1 % of the world Christian population residing in the Asia-Pacific region in 2010 (<http://www.pewforum.org>). The ability to re-invent and control Christian religious iconography therefore places any image-making institution in a position of power. In our contemporary globalized world, imagining the divine for cinema is a complex exercise contingent on several factors- from production to reception, both as an economic as well as ideological product embedded in the current socio-political practices of the time. Ten Commandments (1956), Oh, God! (1977), Dogma (1999), Bruce Almighty (2003) and Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014) are Hollywood films which have represented the Biblical Judeo-Christian God in some form. Ten Commandments featured God as a Burning Bush with only his voice being heard (similar to the Bible); Oh, God! depicted God as an old White beardless man wearing modern day shirt and trousers; Dogma depicted God as a young woman; Bruce Almighty featured God as a middle-aged Black man; while Exodus: Gods and Kings depicted God as a mercurial child.*

**Keywords:- Christian, contemporary, Ten Commandments..**

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- **Jyoti Mishra**

Over 2.1 billion followers worldwide, Christianity is the world's biggest religion (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>) with 13.1 % of the world Christian population residing in the Asia-Pacific region in 2010 (<http://www.pewforum.org>). The ability to reinvent and control Christian religious iconography therefore places any image-making institution in a position of power. In our contemporary globalized world, imagining the divine for cinema is a complex exercise contingent on several factors- from production to reception, both as an economic as well as ideological product embedded in the current socio-political practices of the time. *Ten Commandments* (1956), *Oh, God!* (1977), *Dogma* (1999), *Bruce Almighty* (2003) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) are Hollywood films which have represented the Biblical Judeo-Christian God in some form. *Ten Commandments* featured God as a Burning Bush with only his voice being heard (similar to the Bible); *Oh, God!* depicted God as an old White beardless man wearing modern day shirt and trousers; *Dogma* depicted God as a young woman; *Bruce Almighty* featured God as a middle-aged Black man; while *Exodus: Gods and Kings* depicted God as a mercurial child. All these representations differ from the dominant Christian iconography of God as an aged, bearded, White male patriarch (for instance Michelangelo's depiction of God in the fresco painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel- "The Creation of Adam"). Our visual imagery of God has come from paintings and religious/mythological iconography created from the fertile imagination of our artists. But many a times these images were created within a particular socio-cultural structure or commissioned by a religious authority like the Church. God as the Father within the Christian Trinity- his image has been derived from

existing idea/images of the Jewish Yahweh, the bearded patriarchs Zeus and Jupiter from Greek and Roman mythology etc. (Didron *Christian Iconography* 1907; Williamson *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* 2004). As the films mentioned above can attest, Hollywood has portrayed God in various forms over the years. In this paper I would like to interrogate the different portrayals of God in two post 9/11 movies- *Bruce Almighty* (2003) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) and aim to provide a contextual framework to view the texts. *Bruce Almighty* (and later on its sequel *Evan Almighty* [2007]) re-imagines characters (Judeo-Christian God specifically), tropes and events from Christian mythology and situates them in contemporary modern America, while *Exodus: Gods and Kings* re-tells the Biblical story of Moses and the Exodus of Jews from Egypt as found in the Bible.

I hypothesise that these texts have re-imagined Christian religious elements, Biblical stories and events to attract audiences and cinematically construct America along American Exceptionalist ideological lines as “the savior nation...of the world” (Flesher and Torry 6). As Flesher and Torry note, American Exceptionalism is a long-lasting flexible myth founded on the belief that God chose America to lead the world into an ever-improving future, which promulgates the idea of the nation’s political character possessing a divinely ordained purpose (5). Hollywood’s handling of a cinematic God and prophet/hero figures in the primary texts of study, can be suggested as ways in which its dominance and its divine purpose as the “savior nation” is re-inforced. For instance, in *Bruce Almighty*, God manifests in the land of America and glorifies American cultural and ideological discourses. Concomitantly, the underlying ideology of American Exceptionalism in the primary texts privileges the White, Christian (mostly Protestant) Male which is problematic in terms of the religious and ethnic diversity of America itself. The aim of this paper is to critique the varied representations of God and other divine blessed/mythological characters in the films; analyse how the idea of faith and belief have been negotiated in the primary texts as a means to further an American Exceptionalist Agenda; and note the subversive potential of each representation vis-a-vis the dominant

iconography of God. The changing portrayal of God may suggest the changing conditions of both film production and reception, a growing global multi-cultural audience, change in socio-political conditions, and this article will interrogate the selected texts to arrive at a coherent conclusion.

Gods, heroes, prophets are easily recognisable signifiers in popular culture today and in my opinion may be used to disseminate, reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies to a mass audience through the popular medium of films. I offer this critique from a post-colonial non-White non-American perspective, while being aware that the movies have been constructed in a White dominant, powerful, American culture industry like Hollywood with their own profit-making as well as respective covert/overt ideological agenda. For Louis Althusser, films are specific sites of ideological discourse, theoretically lending to the ways in which film as an artistic medium, not only mirrors life, but structures and reproduces it. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni have likewise argued in "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism" (1971), that every film is political because it is the product of an ideological system. Furthermore, it can be seen that many recent films (the ones produced after the 9/11 New York terror attack) and their narratives consciously/unconsciously react to and comment on current socio-political concerns and beliefs. In a post 9/11 world, with the supposed global "war on terror" led by America, various strategies are required to legitimate and validate the country's political and ideological stance. This has been observed by scholars like Lissovoy, Ramaprasad et.al. in their article "Scripted Fantasies and Innovative Orientalisms: Media, Youth, and Ideology in the Age of the "War on Terror"". In my opinion films which consist of content that overtly/covertly glorifies America, for instance recent religio-mythological films like the texts under study, may work towards that end.

With this understanding, the broad focus of my research is to understand the construction of America as a dominant geo-political power through popular religio-mythological Hollywood films and hence, I would like to examine the ideological/textual

ways in which this dominance is disseminated, maintained and reinforced for a global audience. An understanding of the film's overt/covert ideological structure is necessary to affirm its usage as a vehicle for furthering American cultural imperialism.

## **A Black Man and a Child: Visualising God**

*Bruce Almighty* and *Exodus* are primarily subversive in terms of their portrayal of God, but the narrative themselves might favour a White, patriarchal hegemony with a male-centric plot and a male protagonist. I would like to interrogate the texts in this sub-section to understand the various ways in which they have negotiated race and gender vis-a-vis the re-imagination of religious elements.

*Bruce Almighty* has complex equations in terms of race. The film is subversive in that it has portrayed a man from a historically marginalised and oppressed race as the Judeo-Christian God. Black-American actor Morgan Freeman as God in *Bruce Almighty*- wearing a white suit- debonair, witty and magnanimous appears in the popular imagination as the image of a cinematic God. This portrayal is subversive and empowering at many levels. The film has been welcomed for its portrayal of God by Freeman, revolutionary in fact. Freeman is humorous and witty, grave and serious, child-like and God-like at the same time. He delights in performing miracles and displaying his god-hood to Jim Carrey's character, Bruce. He transfers his divinity to Bruce and makes him God for a week, in order to teach him life lessons about love, acceptance, friendship and family. The film focuses on the journey of Bruce towards wisdom and self-realization with a narrative avowal of Christian ideals identified with American values, American dream and the Protestant Work Ethic. However other scholars have critiqued the film and its depiction of race as an example of "cinethetic racism", that is latent cinematic racism touted as racially empowering. Matthew W. Hughey in "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films." notes:



“Freeman’s manifestation at the film gala was hailed as a grand success and local papers ran headlines such as “Morgan Freeman’s Second Coming” and “God is Coming to the Virginia Film Festival.” Not long ago, the thought of an African American playing the role of the Divine would seem impossible at worst and highly improbable at best. On the surface, the advent of such a character, and the ease and celebration of it, suggests that strong rather than subservient African American characters are now accepted in the white mainstream....While African American characters are now more than stereotypes of “mammies,” “coons,” and “bucks,” as they currently portray lawyers, doctors, saints, and gods, they seem welcome only if they observe certain limits imposed upon them by mainstream, normative conventions. As Laurence Gross (2001) notes, “when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interest of those powerful people who define the public agenda” (p. 4). Visibility and acceptance is not a guarantee of legitimacy or decency, but it is a precondition of regimes of surveillance. The dominant features of previous social orders—restrictive Jim Crow folkways and *de jure racism*— were clearly articulated through media images. Today, media exercises no less an influence in promulgating and protecting *de facto racism* through the patterned combination of white normativity and anti-black stereotypes under the guise of progressive black-white friendships that supposedly indicate improving race relations.” (544)

Hughey also talks about the stock character of the “Magical Negro”, a black man with supernatural powers who helps out the broken White man. He studies this “cinethetic racism” as seen in the Magical Negro films like *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, 2003) and of course *Bruce Almighty*. He says,

“Within this milieu, I note the emergence of an explicitly positive, but latently racist character in Hollywood film—the “magical negro” (“MN”). The MN has become a

stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation." (544)

On Morgan Freeman's character in *Bruce Almighty*, he observes:

"In *Bruce Almighty*, Morgan Freeman, although playing the character of "God," is first introduced as a janitor, mopping floors in an unoccupied building. And although he takes on a number of different positions throughout the film, by the end, he is returned to the station of a Christ-like sacrificial servant/janitor, leaving audiences with the suggestion that this placement is his "authentic" earthy form." (556)

Similarly, Cerise L. Glenn, and Landra J. Cunningham in "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film" note that in the "movies depicting male-male interaction between the magical Negro and the White male lead, the Black characters have no real role in the film outside of assisting their White counterparts. These magical Negro characters rarely interact with characters other than the White lead, and their purpose for appearing in scenes is to provide guidance....The film *Bruce Almighty* (2003) also only shows the gifted Black male character, God, when he is guiding or assisting Bruce, the White male lead. The only contact he has with the other characters occurs when he takes the form of a White male street person."(143). As such, according to them-

"God is portrayed as a Black man, who serves Bruce most by teaching him lessons. When God gives Bruce all of his powers, Bruce learns that humility and unselfishness are most important in his relationships with God, his girlfriend, his career, and other people. God places himself in service roles in the movie - he appears in the form of a janitor, an electrician, and an enlightening homeless person.

God and the other magical Negro characters in these films exist primarily to provide services for the White characters they support." (144)

The above mentioned critique by Hughey, Glenn and Cunningham bring out the latent racism in *Bruce Almighty*, but at a surface level, casting Freeman as God seems subversive in terms of providing alternate images to the dominant iconography of a White Male God.

The plot however still revolves around a male hero and is completely male-centric. Women are given supporting roles which revolve around the male protagonist. In one disturbing scene, Bruce uses his divine powers blow a gust of wind which blows a woman's skirt in the street to reveal her underwear. He also uses his divinity to romantically and sexually impress his girl friend and increases the size of her breasts for his pleasure. These women thus become objects for his erotic pleasure and are objectified on the screen for the audience's pleasure. Laura Mulvey's theorization of the gaze is appropriate in this instance. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey talks of the male gaze, with the spectator (seen as male or in terms of the "masculinisation of the spectator") who identifies with the male hero and considers the female character as a scopophilic object. She states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be looked-at-ness*.(19)

In 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', she revisited this gaze to take in the female spectator. For her the female viewer, trained by the male gaze of the director and the characters on the screen, has to cross-dress at the movies and become a man for the occasion. This process is however not stable and requires constant negotiation. She finally observes:



...Freud's concept of 'masculinity' in women, the identification triggered by the logic of a narrative grammar, and the ego's desire to fantasise itself in a certain, active, manner. All three suggest that, as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.(33)

So as the viewer, we are invited to undertake voyeuristic pleasure with Bruce, when the woman in the street's shapely legs and skimpy underwear is put on display. The entire scene is designed to titillate with its suggestion of voyeurism, obsession with up-skirt images to reveal hidden female lingerie/genitalia. Similarly, increasing the breast size of his girl friend, played by Jennifer Aniston, is emblematic of a consumer culture obsessed with body augmentation and modification, and also the fetishization and eroticization of bigger breasts through various mass media, including pornography. So even though, the film is subversive in terms of religion and normative religious iconography, it attests to White, patriarchal dominant narratives in terms of race and gender.

*Exodus: Gods and Kings* portrays God as a young child, who is fleeting, mercurial and ineffable. God as a child has divine rages, is empathetic and sympathetic, full of wisdom and yet cryptic. In my opinion, the film has tried to represent God in an androgynous pre-pubescent child-like body, wherein the sexual and gender differences are not yet physically distinguishable. Though it seems that the child is a boy, in my opinion the portrayal is more androgynous. So we do not have sex and gender markers like breasts, beard, or masculine-feminine voice registers. The child has cropped hair and an androgynous pre-pubescent voice, with gender neutral robes. His/her moods instantly change like a child's, but is still grave and serious. The version depicted here is similar to the wrathful God of the Old Testament, but in an androgynous child's body. The attempt here is to transcend questions of God's gender and age. Even though God appears here as a child, there is no doubt of the divine power of his/her actions. When Moses asks, "Who are you?", during their first

meeting, he/she thunders: "I AM!". It thus posits that God is everything, all-powerful, and omniscient, and cannot be categorized in human terms. This portrayal thus challenges the dominant iconography of the Judeo-Christian God. Age which is generally associated with wisdom and experience, is completely subverted in this portrayal but the power of God is established through various events. The plagues in Egypt for instance, attests to God's power. This film retells the story of Moses and Exodus, and in terms of plot is similar to Cecile DeMille's classic film *The Ten Commandments* (1956). However, the treatment of the events and characters differ to complement our contemporary times. Thus Moses mentions the economical structure of Jewish slavery on which the Egyptian empire is built, which echoes post-colonial critique of slavery and colonialism. The famous plagues of Egypt are shown to have a scientific basis, for instance the crocodiles which muddled the Nile river bed led to frogs leaving the river and caused the plague of frogs. The muddled river led to the death of the river fish, the rotting of which increased insects and spread diseases and so on. The focus on science and scientific means in this movie is different from the unquestioned divinely ordained plague as seen in *Ten Commandments*. The film as a retelling of Biblical stories is influenced by its original mythical narrative structure. Thus the patriarchal male-centric narrative of Moses in the Bible is duplicated in the contemporary text. The plot revolves around Moses as the hero, the prophet, the leader and the grand patriarch, and propagates a form of heroic masculinity. Moses, Abraham, Noah are some of the grand patriarchs from the Biblical tradition and movies like *Ten Commandments*, *Exodus* or the recent film *Noah* (2014) privilege a White masculinity, glorifying qualities of strength, leadership, wisdom and unerring belief in God in the figurehead of the male patriarch. In terms of race, this film has been criticized for severe white-washing of its characters. Major Egyptian characters are all white including Rameses II who is played by Australian white actor Joel Edgerton. Minor characters like Nefertari – The wife of Ramesses II is played by Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani and Indian actress

Indira Verma plays the High Priestess. This film thus propagates a White Patriarchal ideology throughout its narrative.

## **Furthering American Exceptionalism: Hollywood and Globalization**

Scholars have noted that Hollywood movies in their drive for increased profit from a global audience have been modifying their aesthetic in terms of plot, casting of actors and locations etc. To illustrate, Diana Crane in her article "Cultural Globalization and the Dominance of the American Film Industry: Cultural Policies, National Film Industries, and Transnational Film" (2013) explores the idea of the "transnational film" in relation to contemporary Hollywood wherein American studios have been modifying the content and producing films which incorporate themes, motifs, plot lines from different cultures and film industries in order to appeal to a global audience - with the aim of increased profit from a global market. American Cultural Imperialism is then toned down, is less American-culture specific, in order to appeal to a mass audience. In the same vein Scott R. Olson, in his article "The Globalization of Hollywood" (2000) puts forward the idea of a "Hollywood Aesthetic". He notes that "Brazil, Hong Kong, and other centers of international television and film production have joined with the United States in forming a global Hollywood media aesthetic in the scramble for audiences. It means engaging audiences with media texts in a way that allows vastly different kinds of audiences to make sense of them...Hollywood is not particularly an American aesthetic...Hollywood is a global aesthetic, and that in a nutshell sums up its transnational appeal" (3-4). I agree with Olson's idea of a global Hollywood media aesthetic that produces texts which can appeal to global multi-cultural audience. It would be too simplistic to berate Hollywood movies as having an American imperialistic agenda without taking into account the forces of globalization and its impact on film content. Both of them are equally true and mark the complexity of our globalised world, as American ideological domination and cultural hegemony is mediated by other global multi-cultural forces and their "culture factories" as well as a global

audience with different cinematic expectations and choices. However, in this section, I would like to focus on the ways in which the primary texts propagate American cultural imperialism.

*Bruce Almighty* is set in contemporary small town America. It cinematically constructs America and everyday American way of life for the audience. God appears in America and gives his powers to an American man. These important plot points establish the primacy of America in the audience's imagination. *Exodus* is however set in the Biblical past, where Jews are slaves under the rule of Pharaoh Rameses in Egypt. There is no mention of America in any way. To understand this film, we can go back to Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* and its agenda. In "*The Ten Commandments and America's fight against Tyranny*", Flesher and Torry note:

The film portrays the liberation of the Israelites from oppression by Egypt and their foundation as a new nation under God's law. This nation is governed by the "Law of Freedom"... and stands in opposition to the "tyranny" of Egypt....To ensure that the audience understood that God's Law of Freedom in opposition to tyranny was not simply an issue for ancient times, Director DeMille himself opens the film by stepping onto an empty stage and giving an introductory speech. He tells the audience that "this same battle continues throughout the world today." In this way, he reveals the true identity of the film's protagonists and antagonists. The oppressive Egyptians stand for the Soviet Russian Communists, while the liberated, God-fearing Israelites point to America. (71-72)

Flesher and Torry further notes that Moses becomes a *type* of Christ, one who leads and liberates, and this struggle between the two sides becomes a *type* of eternal struggle between freedom and tyranny. They further observe that "...what the audience sees in *The Ten Commandments* is Israel as a symbol for America. Israel's release from slavery into freedom and its founding of a new nation upon law points, for DeMille, to the founding of America as the escape from British oppression and the formation of a new nation in the

New World ruled by law rather than the whim of a monarchical dictator... *The Ten Commandments* mustered the country's anti-British heritage for the new battle of ideas with Russia."(89). Having similar narrative and plot structures, we can question what is the ideological agenda of the *Exodus*? It is very apparent that the audience is supposed to sympathise with the oppressed Jews under the Egyptians who live in luxury and comfort. The Jews do not have the freedom to pray to their own God, or live their lives the way they want. They are slaves. Moses, as a *type* of Christ, leads them towards freedom and out of the shackles of Egyptian tyranny. Christian Bale, the actor who plays Moses and who has previously play American super-hero Batman, symbolises American leadership against tyranny. One of the most common rhetoric in relation to America and the American President, is leader of the free world. With its focus on freedom, the film unconsciously attempts to parallel and allude to America as the land of the free. Freedom thus, becomes the key-word in this context. Thus, we can see that with the use of religious elements and a Christian framework, the idea of America as the land of God, of freedom and morals is propagated to the audience through the texts.

## Conclusion

The texts under study, I feel form narratives of religious subversion which straddles the territory between belief and atheistic negation, and encourages popular culture fuelled dissemination of alternate images of God against the discourses of legitimacy propounding the dominant and hegemonic idea of the One True God by the institution of the Christian Church (the Church itself being fragmented into numerous sects and belief systems within America and the world). The films retain a sense of reverence and religiosity even in a comedic text like *Bruce Almighty*. The final message seems to be to continue having faith and belief in God even if the texts have re-imagined God in their own terms. The subversion does not downplay the role of religion and God in people's lives, but instead focuses on modern day apathy, oppression of orthodox religious orders and religious intolerance. The



use of figures from Christian mythology attracts not only a global audience but also the use of religious figures ensures its relevance in public discourse and imagination. Moreover, continued telecast of these films on TV channels and their availability on online video portals maintains their visibility. This leads to the audience's unconscious internalization of the films' ideological agenda i.e. the centrality and supremacy of America and hence makes them vehicles for furthering American cultural hegemony on a global scale.

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