

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

Agora:
Know Thy Neighbors
and Their Differences

Dodi-Lee Hecht

[WARNING: SPOILERS ALERT]

Our world today is wary of religious faith. We have ethics – comfortable, neutral, white-picket-fence-appropriate – and we have cultural idiosyncrasies - where we worship, who we worship, how we worship. But we shy away from the possibility that one ethic can be so overpowering AND mutually exclusive as to demand of a person that he or she disregard the commonly accepted ethical norm. What really is the difference between Christmas and Chanukah in the minds of so many? A decorated tree versus a candelabra? If one were to suggest the difference comes down to a fundamental understanding of one's interaction with the rest of the world or a foundational notion of who exactly will suffer in hell for all eternity – I think most people would laugh. It is, after all, really about presents.

But it's really not. It's about the birth of Jesus in a manger or it's about fighting off Hellenistic influences in the streets of Judea. It's a commemoration of the birth of one religion or it's the commemoration of the violent affirmation of an entirely different religion. So, while it's great that the local mall puts a menorah next to a crèche – to those of us who believe in what we each think that time of year represents...trust me, it doesn't represent that.

But what, you ask, does this have to do with the movie *Agora*? Well, to answer that, let me let you in on a little moviemaking secret. Historical films are not just about the period they portray; they also say something about the period in which they are made. Okay, so maybe it's not such a secret.

Agora is an historical drama set in Ancient Alexandria circa the end of the fourth century. It is a time of political and social unrest. Christianity, until recently banned by the Roman Empire, is gaining ground, i.e. disciples and followers. Hungry to rid the city of heresy and infidels, the Christians attack first the Great Library of Alexandria and the Pagan religion worshiped within its walls; then, once that success is achieved, they shift focus to the Jews and other nonbelievers. Against this backdrop of religious conquest, *Agora* follows the life of Hypatia, a Roman woman, mathematician, philosopher and atheist as she navigates this tumultuous time.

Hypatia is portrayed as the one sane voice, the Cassandra of religious tolerance, all the while remaining steadfast in her scientific research – determined to unlock the secrets of the universe. We watch her try desperately to keep her Christian and Pagan students from quarreling by reminding them that “We are all brothers” and, later, she challenges the seat of government itself when the Christian bishop of the town turns his forces on the Jews. Unfortunately, her words fail against the power of Christian rhetoric. She is denounced as a witch and condemned to die. The true travesty, as portrayed at the end of the film, is twofold: Hypatia dies just hours after she comes to a staggeringly important conclusion in her studies of astronomy – a conclusion that, thanks to the Dark Ages, would not be uncovered again until centuries later and she is, in her last moments, abandoned by the very men she called brothers.

Methinks the filmmaker is a bit scared of religious extremism. Methinks that *Agora* is a veiled commentary on the events going on in our world today. Allow me to demonstrate. Okay, so we have a woman scientist preaching religious tolerance and being ignored. We have a fanatic sect of a newly spreading religion converting the poor and oppressed like missionary-wildfire and generally wreaking havoc wherever it goes. We have the less fanatic sects of that religion impotently cowering in the corners. We have the old religion all but wiped out and with it the wisdom and culture of an Empire. And we have the Jews, as usual, caught (and killed) in the middle.

Now, let’s call the old religion Christianity and the Empire the Western World. Let’s call the newer and fast-growing religion Islam. And let’s call the Jews...the Jews (because, apparently, we don’t change – which must be why the film thinks klezmer music existed in Ancient Egypt). So, Hypatia, who, by the way, was actually a Pagan in real life, becomes the voice of secular, atheist, scientific reason – the voice that says: No God is worth dying for; now let’s all just celebrate our similarities and get along.

When you think about it, an historical drama that goes all the way back to when Christians first started killing people in the name of their god is a pretty good way to get the message across that we should nip this in the bud now. I’m sold. But let me just be clear on this – if I don’t want to kill people I need to: 1. Denounce God, 2. Denounce religion and 3. Denounce that there is anything different about me. Then, and only then, will I become a good person and be able to sit back and study the stars.

Huh?

This brings me back to “Happy Holidays”. I am not an Orthodox Jew because I like to light candles in December. I, in point of fact, spent much of my childhood trying to convince my parents that we should trade the menorah in for Christmas lights because they were prettier. (For the record, Rabbi and Rebetzin Hecht, usually so quick to give me what I wanted, did not, for some reason, ever give in.) I believe in God, my God. And He’s a God that tells me to light candles. He’s a God who did not have a son by a virgin mother. So if I did see Jesus walking down the street I would see only a man. And that makes me different than all the Christians of the world.

And I understand that. I embrace that. Because I believe in the marketplace of ideas, the value of the cacophony if one ultimately wants a symphony. Yes, to some extent, Hypatia is right – we are all brethren. But not in the classroom. Not when it comes to thought. In thought we are decidedly different. Because I do look at Jesus and see a man and so do the Muslims and atheists (although that is where the similarity dies – because Allah is not just another word for God and God isn't just another word for “help I'm scared to admit the world has no Creator”). But most Christians see the son of god. And that's going to alter how they live their lives in a way that is unique and not at all like the way I live my life.

The point is, I understand religious conviction and I understand that it means different groups can't always agree. But here's the real kicker – Hypatia herself understood it also. Because, in the movie, she's offered a choice – baptism or death. Apparently, while she believed no God is worth dying for, she obviously believed 'no God' is worth dying for.

Telling everyone to give up God, join hands and sing “It's a small world” is as crazy as trying to get the whole world to join hands and sing “It's a small world.” For most of us, God isn't a choice or a balm for the oppressed. It's a tenet of belief. So the message of this movie is going to preach to the choir of some and fall on deaf ears with the rest. Which is a shame because *Agora* is, for the most part, a really really intelligent film. Its exploration of the complexity inherent in a world of differing and conflicting belief systems is fascinating and its portrayal of a woman navigating the world of men is quite intriguing. I actually admire *Agora* for admitting the presence of religious conviction – even though its message condemns it; not a single character is found to act because of base or hypocritical drives – although *Agora* does implicitly fall back on dear old Marx and his “opiate for the masses.” Still, *Agora* is epic and beautiful; well acted and well written. A rarity in the theatre these days and, despite its flaws, very worth watching. Cautiously.

Because, unfortunately – it had multiple advisors on Ancient Rome and only one advisor on Ancient Religion. As if to say that all religions are similar enough that they can fall into one category. As if to say that the world would be a much more peaceful place if all us religious people just realized this. The world, truth be told, would be a much more peaceful place if, 2000 years ago, all of us had just shut up and converted to Christianity. Or Judaism.

Or Atheism.

But we didn't and we won't. For the same reason Hypatia didn't let herself be baptized and for the same reason I don't have a Christmas tree. WE DON'T BELIEVE THE SAME THING.

One advisor on religion?

Seriously?

No wonder the Jews looked like Chassidim...

© Nishma, 2010