

OF GODDESSES AND FECKLESS THUGS

By Michael Ventura

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Consider the following address, to none other than God, delivered in a cathedral while facing the Cross:

"You're a sonofabitch, You know that? She [a friend and mentor of the speaker] bought her first new car, and You hit [and killed] her with a drunken driver -- what, is that supposed to be funny? 'You can't conceive, no one could, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,' says Graham Greene. I don't know whose ass he was kissing there, 'cause I think You're just vindictive ... Have I displeased You, you feckless thug?"

That speech was in the season finale of *The West Wing*, an Emmy-prized, top-rated NBC program. The speaker is Martin Sheen playing Josiah Bartlet, the president of the United States. It would be unusual for any character on any screen to say those words. But for someone portraying an American president on prime-time TV? It's nothing less than amazing -- all the more so, because by the end of the episode he doesn't retract or apologize. (Only slightly less amazing is that the speech quotes an opaque thought by a novelist whom the viewer is expected to know. Even independent films don't often do that.) This president ordered the Secret Service to empty the cathedral precisely to speak alone to God in this manner; there can be no doubt that he means what he says.

Stranger yet, the network didn't censor the speech, apparently unworried about flak from viewers or advertisers. Strangest of all, the network was right: There was no chorus of protest, no noticeable outcry.

Something is changing out there.

TV can afford to be hypocritical about sex and violence because America shares the hypocrisy: "Sex is shameful, violence is awful, we wanna see more and more of both." But since the rise of the Christian Right as a political power in the mid-Seventies, God has been a touchy subject. You don't go around calling the Deity "a feckless thug" in public unless you're looking for trouble. But there was no trouble. Which may be a small but significant sign, as yet unnoticed by commentators and politicians, that the wave of fundamentalist feeling that has been so influential for a quarter-century has begun to ebb.

Abortion and homosexuality are still hot topics, and the Christian Right and the Pope are willing to condemn humanity to needless suffering rather than have our government support stem-cell research; but things are getting a little looser, not because a speech like *The West Wing's* can be made, but because it inspired no opposition.

Taken alone, one speech on one show isn't much. But TNT's recent production of *The Mists of Avalon* is another thing entirely. Its star, Julianna Margulies, was featured nationwide on *TV Guide's* cover. Part One aired prime-time on a Sunday night. The ratings, though good for a cable production, weren't major; but again what was enormous was the silence -- the lack of response to a work that could easily be taken as a direct attack on Christianity.

The novel, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, I found unreadable. Its prose squats somewhere between a Hallmark card and an adolescent's diary. But what Bradley does with the structure and valence of the Arthurian legend is original and provocative. Told from the viewpoint of Morgaine La Faye, Arthur's half-sister, Bradley describes the conflict between "the old religion" and "the new religion," as they're still called in parts

of Ireland -- the ancient Celtic worship of the Goddess, and the invading doctrine of the Father. *The Mists of Avalon* is squarely on the side of the Goddess.

Early in the film Morgaine, about 12 years old at this point, is riding with her little brother Arthur -- they've run off from their instructor, apparently a priest. They see peasant women in a field performing a harvest ritual. "They're praying to the Goddess," the girl says. "The Goddess," her brother says, "the one [the Christian priest] doesn't like? So these people don't like Jesus Christ?" "Some of them do, but others still pray to the Goddess." "Can there be a god and a goddess at the same time?" "Of course. It's just like having a father and a mother."

In Christian terms, this is blasphemy. Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, insists there is one god and that it's male. Beginning with the Epistles of Paul, Christian doctrine holds that other gods are agents of the devil. In Goddess religions there is no devil. As Viviane, the high priestess of Avalon (Anjelica Huston), explains: "The Goddess is everything in Nature, and everything in Nature is sacred; she is everything that is beautiful -- and everything that is harrowing." She behaves like Nature, which has sunny days and storms. "The Goddess holds all things in balance: good and evil, death and rebirth, the predator and the prey. Without Her, destruction and chaos prevail."

That's quite an endorsement of blasphemy for a TV movie. Especially so because, whether we've read the book or not, we know how the story ends: The Goddess is suppressed, the Father wins -- for we live in a world of dominant Father religions. But within Viviane's description is a prediction: If the Goddess loses, there will be destruction and chaos -- i.e., Christianity is the embodiment of destruction and chaos.

There's much in the history of Christendom to support Viviane's view. And these filmmakers know it. As the story unfolds, Camelot will be destroyed, Chaos (the Father) will win, and humanity will look back toward Camelot as a brief time when the promise of life was fulfilled -- which will be the Goddess' sole victory.

But *The Mists of Avalon*, as presented in this film, is not a simple good-gals/bad-guys tale. Damningly, the Father and his agents are not nearly strong enough to beat the Goddess on their own. The Goddess fades, and Avalon disappears into the mists of history, because in her fear of defeat the high priestess Viviane overreaches. In the intense sexual rituals of The Feast of Beltane -- portrayed in this film with surprising frankness -- Viviane arranges for Arthur and Morgaine to make love and conceive a child. They have not seen each other since childhood, and anyway they are masked, so they are innocent of their incest. But Viviane is not. (So she's no stranger to chaos herself.) She wants a king of their blood, and she's willing to twist fate to get him. To put it mildly, she's made a mistake -- and doomed them all.

Later there'll be another kinky scene. The Christian princess Gwenhwyfar doesn't know her womb's been cursed by Viviane's evil sister so that she can't conceive. But poor Arthur keeps trying, and thinks it's his fault. So, on another Feast of Beltane (still a significant Celtic holiday), Arthur invites his best friend Lancelot into their bed. There's the three of them, Arthur kissing her bare back while Lancelot kisses her mouth. This is television? (*The Sopranos* and *Sex in the City* are conceptually timid by comparison.)

Anyway, it doesn't work. There is much weepy talk of Gwenhwyfar's "courses" (her period). "My courses have come on me again." Even sleeping with Arthur and Lancelot together, she'll not beget an heir. She'll end a nun instead -- in this film, not an enviable fate.

Merlin, Viviane's teacher and servant, will die. As he's dying she expresses the fear that she's been a failure. It's an understatement. Merlin's last words console her with his truth:

"We lived our lives with passion and commitment. We should be grateful for that." Then he says: "I think the Goddess lives in our humanity and not anywhere else."

Again blasphemy -- but now toward the Mother as well as the Father.

Morgaine: "Will Camelot and Avalon disappear into the mists?" Viviane: "I see a land that runs red with blood, where chaos rules." Chaos -- again, Christianity.

When Viviane is murdered, the sky is darkened by an eclipse of the sun -- exactly as it is darkened in the New Testament when Jesus dies. No one versed in the Bible could fail to see the correlation. Not quite blasphemy, but almost.

Everybody in *The Mists of Avalon* goes down bad. Nobody gets what they want or even what they need. (Which no doubt is the reason that the novel never became a theatrical Hollywood movie.) Morgaine is the only character who survives. She says, "The Goddess was forgotten, or so I was convinced for many years." Then she sees people praying to a statue of the Virgin Mary. "I realized the Goddess had survived. She had not been destroyed, but had simply adopted another incarnation. And perhaps one day future generations will be able to bring her back and renew her in the glory of Avalon."

Famous last words. And blasphemy again. To look forward to a new "glory of Avalon" is to look toward a time when the Father will be overturned and again the Goddess will reign.

For myself, gender (whether female or male) is too confined a concept for the immensity of God. (Blasphemy on both your houses!) But that's not the point here. The point is that something's changing out there in America. A story that most Americans (if we believe the polls) would define as blasphemous was produced, widely publicized, and broadcast, largely without comment. No stir. No protest. Even *TV Guide* thought it was safe. The wave is ebbing.

We are being governed by people who don't know that. Many of them are fanatics, and fanatics (in any cause) do nothing but harm. But this, too, will pass. Something unexpected is afoot.

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