

Contending for Faith  
Analyzing The Assault On Faith In *The Truman Show* And *The Ladykillers*

by

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Two very different movies in recent memory, *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Ladykillers* (2004), share a similar subtext: faith. More precisely, through that subtext they both explore whether faith in God can survive various assaults. By analyzing the way each film answers this question I believe we can gain an insight into how the contemporary Western mind is handling this crossroads of conscience.

### *The Truman Show: Faith, Skepticism and Realist Epistemology*

*The Truman Show* was written and produced by Andrew Niccol. He was originally slated to direct but was replaced by Peter Weir early in the project. If this film has an *auteur*, Niccol is probably the closest we can get to it. This cannot be pressed too far, however, since Niccol did not have total creative control. Numerous endings were shot for the movie and it was Weir who selected which one made it to the screen. Also, Niccol's script had a darker, more paranoid mood than was realized under Weir's direction. Still, Niccol's deep, thoughtful writing comes through even when tempered by Weir's direction. Niccol wrote and directed *Gattaca* (1997) which maintained that darker edge and slightly paranoid feel. Both *Gattaca* and *The Truman Show* share thought-provoking scenarios that ask genuine questions about human existence and in both, it seems, Niccol finds answers in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Peter McGregor has recognized Nietzsche's influence in *The Truman Show*.<sup>1</sup> When analyzing Christof's statement "we accept the reality of the world with which we are presented" McGregor explains that it "could be considered as a realist epistemology...as expressed for instance by the nineteenth century German philosopher Nietzsche: 'most people

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<sup>1</sup> Peter McGregor, "The Truman Show as a Study of 'The Society of The Spectacle'", *Australian Screen Education*, no. 32: 112.

think that nothing but the wearying reality of ours is possible." This is Christof's explanation as to why Truman has been content to remain in the world created for him. Truman has accepted that world even with outsiders have snuck onto the set to try to tell him the truth. In this way, Truman is Nietzsche's every man.

Nietzsche's theory of the "will to power" could be said to be the foundational premise of *Gattaca*. There is a deleted scene on the DVD titled "Coda." In it text scrolls across a star field explaining how evolution has delivered us to the point that we can now guide and direct our own evolution. It goes on to say that if years ago we'd had the genetic technology depicted in the film some very important people would never have been allowed to be born and it lists their "defects." They include Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Ray Charles and others. The scene ends by reminding the viewer that it is quite possible their own birth might have been likewise prevented. *Gattaca*'s subtitle is "There is no gene for the human spirit." What Niccol is saying is that what dominates is the will to power. The "fittest" that survive, for him, are not the ones with the cleanest DNA (natural selection seems to have run its course) but the ones who will to conquer. Conquer disability, disadvantage, ignorance, intolerance, whatever holds them back.

This is not to say that Andrew Niccol completely buys all of Nietzsche's philosophy. Niccol lacks the pessimistic nihilism of Nietzsche. *The Truman Show* ends with Truman leaving the soundstage and running not in to nothingness but toward a beautiful woman and the promise of a new life. *Gattaca* likewise ends with the genetically imperfect Vincent Freeman riding a rocket to the stars, not oblivion. His genetically perfect donor has left him enough material so that, upon his return to Earth, Vincent will have enough to maintain the

deception "two lifetimes." There is optimism in the success of Vincent's mission and his safe return.

On the surface, *The Truman Show* is about a man who doesn't know that his entire life is a television show. He lives on an enormous set littered with 5,000 cameras that broadcast his every move 24 hours a day around the world. Ostensibly, the film is about the media's invasion of our lives and our growing collective voyeurism. It foreshadowed the recent spate of "reality TV" programs. But the film has another layer of meaning. It represents man's movement from a faith that simply accepts things as they are to an ultimate confrontation with God.

In the film, the producer of *The Truman Show* is named Christof and when he introduces himself to Truman, he says, "I am the creator...of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions." The verbal pause is unmistakable. Furthermore, his description of the television show is one that is often applied to religion. Christof clearly represents God in the film. Truman's friend Marlon says, "Look at that sunset. It's perfect. That's the big guy. Quite a paintbrush he's got." Yet this is a fake sunset projected on a fake sky. Christof is the Big Guy.

When Truman and his wife attempt to escape his island home, Christof uses a staged forest fire and then the ultimate fire, a nuclear accident, to turn him back. This could be seen either as the threat of the fires of hell used to keep the faithful in line or possibly an inversion of Eden. In Eden, God sent an angel with a fiery sword to keep fallen man out of the garden (Gen 3:24), Christof uses fire to keep his ante-fall Adam *in* his garden home.

What begins to stir Truman's suspicions (as well as our own) that things are not all they seem to be is a studio light that falls from the "sky". When Truman investigates it we

can see that it is labeled "Sirius (9 canus major)". A "star" has fallen to earth. The Bible uses this fallen star imagery in reference to Satan. Isaiah 14:12 says of him,

How you are fallen from heaven,  
O Day Star, son of Dawn!  
How you are cut down to the ground,  
you who laid the nations low!

In Luke 10:18 Jesus says that he "saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." In Revelation a star falling from heaven brings countless woes to the earth. In the movie, this event happens within the first scene, much like the Bible.

During an interview with Christof we see scenes that show young Truman had a growing wanderlust that had to be stifled. He tells a teacher "I'd like to be an explorer like the great Magellan!" Since Truman lives on an island, Christof scripts his father dieing at sea to instill a fear of water in young Truman. Likewise, when Truman visits a travel agency to book a trip to Fiji, the travel agency walls are covered with posters that tell of a horrible world filled with murder, terrorism and poverty. There are images of airline accidents that announce, "It could happen to you!" The actors on Truman's stage constantly reinforce how wonderful Seahaven is and how scary it is out there. They repeat a litany of how they would not want to live anywhere else. All of these things are intended to keep Truman happy in his world. The theological import of this idea will be explored in the last portion of this paper.

The man vs. God theme is most evident at the film's climax. After Truman escapes from the cameras, he takes to the sea. Here is the showdown between man and his maker. Christof throws everything he has at Truman's boat, the *Santa Maria*, in order to persuade Truman to turn back. Like Yahweh in the story of Jonah, Christof hurls a storm upon the sea to stop his escaping prophet. Like Jonah, Truman goes under the waves apparently dead until

God/Christof relents. The storm ends and the clouds part. Truman is not dead and the *Santa Maria* sails literally to the end of world.

The final confrontation come as Truman ascends a staircase in the 'clouds' and opens a door out of the world Christof has created for him. In a last ditch effort to turn Truman back to Seahaven and away from the door to another world, Christof tells him, "There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. The same deceit. But in my world, you have nothing to fear." It is noteworthy that Christof acknowledges that what has been going on is indeed a lie. Contrast this to his comments at the beginning of the film:<sup>2</sup>

We've become bored with watching actors give us phony emotions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is in some respects counterfeit, there's nothing fake about Truman himself.

At the beginning of the movie Christof merely concedes that what he's created is "in some respects counterfeit" but now he confesses that it is lies and deceit. In that same opening sequence Truman's best friend, Marlon explains, "Nothing you see on the show is fake. It's merely controlled."

Before providing a theological analysis of all this, I want to introduce the second movie that also takes the matter of faith as its subtext: *The Ladykillers*.

### *The Ladykillers: Faith Under Attack*

*The Ladykillers* was written, produced and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen. It is a remake of Alexander Mackendrick's 1955 British black comedy of the same name. The

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<sup>2</sup> This brings up another allusion to Christof as God. The movie begins with only Christof speaking. Likewise the Bible, "In the beginning God..." (Gen 1:1).

Coen's were originally approached to write the screenplay for Barry Sonnenfeld to direct. Sonnenfeld moved to producing the film and the Coen's took over.

Where identifying the *auteur* of *The Truman Show* was rather tenuous, with *The Ladykillers* it is obviously the Coen brothers. It turns out that the Coens even edit their own movies under the pseudonym "Roderick Jaynes", as they did with *The Ladykillers*. With as much control over the film as they had, it is their voice that comes through.

Identifying the Coens as the *auteur* was easier, understanding their worldview is more difficult. Their interest in religion in film came bounding to the forefront in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2002). Their heavy reliance on Southern gospel music in that film was a surprise success to the music industry. Though that film was loosely based on Homer's *The Odyssey*, themes of Christian religion are prevalent.

While the gang is hiding out in the woods, a robed choir softly sings *Down to The River to Pray* as they approach a river for baptism. The scene is so captivating and inviting that Pete and Delmar are swept up in moment and are baptized as well. Afterward they can't stop speaking of their redemption, at least for a few more scenes. Also, they recast Homer's Cyclops as Big Dan Teague, a crooked, eye-patch wearing Bible salesman.

In *O Brother* there is nothing hostile to faith. Christianity is not tied to any of the negative things it could have been. Though Big Dan is a thief, it is fairly clear that he is exploiting religion, not representing it. Nor is it ever seen as anything but a positive influence in the criminals' lives.

*The Ladykillers* is similar in many ways. The film opens with the gospel song *Let's Go Back to God*. Marva Munson, the landlady in the film and a central fixture, is a devoted Baptist and is never portrayed as anything less than a sincere believer. Some of the other

characters in the film have their doubts about her sanity but not because of her religion.

There is a prolonged scene of her church service that again does not lampoon the worship of God as it could have. The Coen's appear to be at least sympathetic to the exercise of religion.

Frustratingly, this is about as much information as we get from the Coens about what they think or believe. Interviews with Coens seldom yield much beyond the facts of the film they are involved with. Still, it seems sufficient to say that from this meager evidence, the brothers seem positively disposed toward faith.

*The Ladykillers* is an ensemble film with each of the members of the gang representing a different attack or response to faith:

The Intellectual: Tom Hanks' character Goldthwait Higginson Dorr, PhD

The Fascist: Tzi Ma as The General (a mixture of Pol Pot and Hitler)

The Liberal: J. K. Simmons as Garth Pancake

The Gangsta': Marlon Wayans as Gawain MacSam

The Ignorant Masses: Ryan Hurst as Lump Hudson

G. H. Dorr is, of course, the mastermind of the criminal group. He has planned to rob the casino riverboat the *Bandit Queen*. The plan is simple enough. The group will tunnel from Miss Marva's root cellar to the counting room of the *Bandit Queen*, break through the masonry wall, empty the holdings, repair the wall, collapse the tunnel and no one will be able to figure out what happened. They need an "inside man" to work in the riverboat to patch the wall after the heist. Gawain MacSam gets a job as a custodial worker on the boat. The General, who has "massive tunneling experience through the soil of his native French-Indochina", will lead the tunneling effort. Garth Pancake is a munitions expert who will do any blasting necessary. Lump Hudson's job is only to provide muscle where needed.

Marva Munson the simple, black, Baptist widow rents a room to Dr. Dorr. She represents faith in God. Monthly, she sends \$5 to Bob Jones University, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Bob Jones University banned black students until the 1970s, and up until 2000 did not allow interracial couples to date. Miss Marva speaks often of (and with) her deceased husband Othar whose painting hangs in her living room. Othar seems to represent God in the film. He looks down from his place above her mantle and is circled with candles. Though silent, the expression in the painting changes throughout the film.

A minor character in the film is Sheriff Wyner. When Miss Munson comes to complain about a neighborhood boy playing his "hippity-hop" music too loud, the sheriff is kind but skeptical. When Marva explains that the music is bothering Othar too, his deputy displays his disbelief too. Both seem to think Marva is going a bit senile. Later, Sheriff Wyner stops by to report that he has talked to the young man and Marva offers to introduce him to her new friend. Professor Dorr hides under his bed to avoid the authorities. Marva sees him and begins speaking to him while the Sheriff looks on in disbelief. It only seems to confirm his suspicions about Miss Munson. This seems to represent an indifferent and skeptical government. They (reluctantly) provide basic services but do not really take her very seriously.

An interesting and important character in the film is actually a location. The film opens with a scene of a bridge with a black raven perched on a gargoyle. As the credits roll, a boat whistle is heard and barge full of trash slowly passes under the bridge. The camera follows the barge upstream revealing an island full of trash in the middle of the river. The meaning is made absolutely clear in Marva's pastor's sermon:

We got to stop that decline. And scramble back up to the face of the almighty God! ...'Stead a worshipin' that golden calf, that earthly trash on that garbage

island! That garbage island in that shadowland way outside the Kingdom of God! ...That garbage island where scavenger birds feast on the bones of the backslidin' damned!

This sermon does not immediately follow the opening sequence and so its interpretation may be missed. Every time the island is shown, the gospel song *Let's Go Back to God* is either sung or played and birds swarm around the island. The island, which comes up again a few more times in the film, obviously represents hell. This fact is easily missed since Marva's pastor's sermon is a few scenes removed from any of the garbage island imagery.

When the caper is complete and the money is in Mrs. Munson's basement, she stumbles upon the truth. These men are not musicians playing Baroque instruments, they are thieves. She threatens to turn them in unless they return the money and they all go to church with her. The group finds this an unacceptable alternative and it is decided that she must die. Each person in turn attempts the murder and each is, in turn killed in the attempt. Marva escapes unscathed and with the money. In one way, *Ladykillers* is much like *O Brother*, both involve men pursuing an elusive treasure that they do not get in the end.

### The Fate of Faith

What both *The Truman Show* and *The Ladykillers* have in common is that they represent threats to faith. In *The Truman Show*, faith is no more than Truman accepting the world as he finds it. It is simplistic and unfocused but it is faith nonetheless. The threat it must face is skepticism and reason. In *The Ladykillers*, faith is more complete and its threats are more complex. Faith (Marva) is threatened by rationalism (Professor Dorr), fascism (the General), hedonism (Gawain MacSam) and empty-headed indifference (Lump Hudson).

Liberalism (Garth Pancake) is more interested in providing for itself (he attempts to steal the money from the gang and flee) and ignores faith, apparently not seeing it as a threat.

Truman is constantly fed reasons to stay in Seahaven. He is shown newspapers that proclaim Seahaven as the best place in the world to live. He is told that there really is not much out there to compare to Seahaven. Everything he could want is provided for him there. When those enticements are not enough to keep him rooted, fear is employed. A fear of water is generated in young Truman. The posters at the travel agency reinforce what he's told. Apparently Niccols understands religion to operate like this. Those inside a religious system have many voices telling them how wonderful it is in that system. Pastors, preachers, parents, holy writings, etc. all "conspire" to keep the faithful locked inside the system. That is buttressed with the threat of hell if one departs. Death and destruction wait outside the safe bounds of faith. But like Christof, the god(s) of these systems know that they are false.

For Niccol, religion cannot survive that assault from reason and the soul longs to escape. Here Nietzsche's voice is heard in Niccol's script. Truman breaks free from the world as it has been interpreted for him. Nietzsche said it like this:

The long bondage of the spirit...the discipline...to think in accordance with the rules of a church or a court, or conformable to Aristotelian premises, the persistent spiritual will to interpret everything that happened according to a Christian scheme...this tyranny...has *educated* the spirit...One may look at every system of morals in this light: it is "nature" therein which teaches to hate the *laisser-aller*, the too great freedom, and implants the need to limit horizons<sup>3</sup>.

Truman longs for that "too great freedom" and to escape from the "limited horizons" of his soundstage. This was Christof's point when he said, "we accept the reality of the world with which we are presented." Truman presses beyond the "limited horizons" and chooses

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Helen Zimmern trans., (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1967), 108-109

freedom, he breaks free, abandoning his 'faith' and seeking to find the answers himself. In an interview, Christof acknowledged this possibility, "If it was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him from leaving." And so Niccol's "True Man" escapes.

Here is the fallen state of man. Adam and Eve sought to determine, quite apart from God, what was good and what was evil. They rejected the "soundstage" of God's law and followed their own script. What it got them was not the freedom they sought nor the wisdom they thought they'd gain. What they got was misery and strife. Mankind has been thinking that same vain thing ever since. We assume that God is really just pulling one over on us and that we know better. If our desire for "freedom" were more than "just a vague ambition" we could get free of the constraints placed on our thoughts. But Nietzsche was wrong in putting man as the ultimate end. If life is about us, then how does one think of death? I think Niccol knows the answer. When Truman walks off the set and the transmission is over, there is wild cheering from the viewers. For a moment. Then one viewer turns to the other and asks, "What else is on?" Even man's "greatest achievement" turns out to be of limited interest. In other words, we soon get tired of thinking about it look for the next thing to stimulate us.

This leads to the next problem: we think the universe is all about us. The cameras are all focused on Truman, the audience is glued to their televisions to see what happens to him. There is the equivalent of "the population of an entire country to keep the show running." A show about one man. Here is human vanity. We are consumed with ourselves. The rapid pace of turn over on reality TV shows should immediately prove this wrong. We get bored of each other fairly quickly, the universe cannot be about "me" if the universe does not care about "me."

With *The Ladykillers*, faith is given a more positive expression and in the end triumphs. I do not suppose for a moment that the Coen's are Christians. It is my suspicion that they employ Christian imagery because they feel it is an expression of faith their audience can easily identify. Though faith triumphs here, there are still distortions that we need to learn from.

The political commentary of the film is fascinating. In the end, the gangsta' is reduced to a scared little boy and cannot kill Marva because she reminds him of his mother. The liberal, who earlier gave an impassioned speech about what he did to get the blacks the right to vote, accidentally kills the gangsta'. The fascist then kills the liberal. When the fascist goes to kill Marva, he chokes and dies under his own weight when he falls and breaks his neck. The ignorant "everyman" attempts to kill the intellectual, fails and then ignorantly shoots himself. The intellectual is hung by his own pretentious appearance when he falls off the bridge and his cape snags on a gargoyle. Each and every body ends up falling on to a garbage barge headed for that "garbage island" to be devoured by "scavenger birds." The episode of death ends when Marva's cat Pickles drops Garth Pancakes finger (which he lost in an accident earlier in the film) onto a garbage barge. No one escapes judgment. Since the indifferent authorities do not believe her, they tell Marva to keep the cash the criminals stole. The meek inherits the earth and the wicked are sent to hell.

These seem like good lessons and if it were not for the constant stream of profanity that emanates from Gawain's mouth, this film could be used as an object lesson. But there is a danger beyond the vulgarity. While faith is given a good ride in this film what is missing is God. If Othar represents him, he represents a silent, distant, dead God. Othar is present only in a painting high above the scene, looking on but unable to act. He is in a shrine, circled

with candles and talked to by Marva, but he never answers. God is far off and silent. The "bad guys" do themselves in and God does not judge.

There is a faith presented here that we must be weary of also. What is missing is redemption. Marva's faith is in moral reform. Her pastor's sermon is all about getting people to behave. Her response to catching the criminal is that they must give them money back and come to church with her. In short, there is no gospel. Faith for the Coen brothers is a positive force for good in our culture. It will withstand the assaults of various worldly systems not because it is superior but because it is simple and good. This is faith in faith but not faith in God. Again, Othar is not involved; he is a spectator to all that is happening and nothing more. Faith stands on it's own.

Putting together the views of faith presented in *The Truman Show* and *The Ladykillers* may seem like an impossible task but really the answer is the same. If the Western mind is dissatisfied with pretend faith, or assumes that faith is a positive social influence and nothing more we should ask where this misconception came from. It probably came from caricatures of religion pictured on television or passed on verbally in jokes. What the church must be careful of is to make sure that they are not correct. If we are committed to following Christ, these distortions should never fit us.

Christians certainly do not agree with Niccol that our world is a fabrication and our god an impotent sham, but we can still learn from him. Niccol's message is to be suspicious of the world we're presented and to think outside the box. Truman got free and so can you. But what "fiction" was Niccol presenting in that soundstage? Was it genuine Christianity or was it the sham we all react against? The staged cheeriness of Seahaven can easily be repeated in our churches. We can be tempted to put on that fake smile and glad hand our way

through a Sunday morning talking vaguely about "The Big Guy" and, like Truman, be ultimately dissatisfied. We can be tempted to put on thick make-up to cover our scars and sins, showing a perfect face to those around us. But we're offered more than a shallow, thoughtless faith held in place by pretend cheeriness. God did something that Christof could not. He became a man and he came to serve. This is an aspect of faith that is missing from Truman's soundstage. Yes, Christof seems to really love Truman. He lovingly touches and strokes images of him from his control room 221st floor of the stage, but Christof never came to him.

Our God is not a feeble watcher we can elude the eye of. Neither is he an aloof image stored in a temple. If our culture asks God "was nothing real?" his answer is "Me. I am real. And I came to you in the person of My Son, Jesus Christ." The message of both of these films is that God is not here. He is removed from us. It is a false message that we cannot speak against as well as we can live against. The answer we have to offer our culture in the face of these charges is transformed lives of genuine love and commitment to Jesus and one another. Not at the expense of truth, or we are in Marva Munson's world of faith abstracted from its object. Not truth at the expense of life, or we have joined the cast of *The Truman Show*, knowing the lines and going through the motions but not being real.

God is not far off, impotent and silent. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2). If our culture's thoughts of faith in God are lost somewhere between *The Truman Show* and *The Ladykillers*, the Church's answer is as it has always been: Jesus Christ. The way we can change our culture is by living lives under the headship of Christ that are transparent and transformed. Our worship should be Christ-focused and sincere, not

entertainment. When we speak of Jesus our words and thoughts should betray a heart that is captivated by his glory. In other words, we have to be Christians who cannot fit the stereotypes our culture has cast. It would be a mistake live only in a way that reacts to what the culture is thinking, instead we should be "the light of the world." We contend for the faith by deepening it and living it. Genuinely.