
The historiography of religion and American film—particularly as it relates to various religious communities and their leaders’ concerns about film immorality—has been dominated either by histories of the various Jewish studio owners producing films or the various Catholic clergy fighting to control their content. Foundational works—like Neal Gabler’s An Empire of Their Own. How the Jews Invented Hollywood (New York, 1988) and Gregory Black’s Hollywood Censored. Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies (Cambridge, 1994), and The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940–1970 (Cambridge, 1998)—have shaped the debate, which (on reflection) presents the image of two groups of religious outsiders vying to be the most “American” in their own way; Jews as “rags-to-riches” entrepreneurs or Catholics as neo-Puritan moralists.

William Romanowski makes a major contribution to this debate by describing in great detail the role Protestants played in this significant twentieth century cultural debate. His thoroughly researched work describes how representatives from (mostly) mainstream Protestant denominations, primarily through the offices and ministrations of the cross-denominational Protestant group the Federal (later National) Council of Churches (FCC/NCC), struggled over competing Progressive Era desires to protect filmmakers’ freedom of speech and artistic license while at the same time stewarding cultural morality for the masses. Combined with a strong desire to enlist the film industry into the service of Christian mission, and also to keep the Catholic Church from imposing its own standards, the various Protestants involved were nonetheless hamstrung by the same institutional barriers which gave rise to the diversity of American Protestantism in the first place: a near total lack of structural impetus to participate in a unified, Protestant-wide, institutional effort. All of this results not only in the continued frustration of those who are the focus of the investigation, but also this reader, who at times felt overwhelmed by the litany of players’ names and the “alphabet soup” of abbreviations Romanowski uses for the various organizations (and accompanying committees and subcommittees). Thankfully, the author provides a dramatis personae at the conclusion of his study (in addition to an index).

Unfortunately—and this, too, might also be blamed on the nature of the topic and the characters involved—no annotated list of characters could change what actually happened, and this work often reads like the account of a major naval battle of ironclad ships, told from the perspective of the fish. For the longest portion of the time covered, the Protestants were neither able to agree on an approach nor able to persuade others of its validity. They also seemed constantly to be playing
catch-up to the Catholic clergy who were able to take advantage of their own more focused (and disciplined) institutional structure—as well as the distribution system used by film studios to release new films—to secure a significant role (or the appearance of it, in any case) in guiding the development of the Hollywood “Production Code,” and (at least symbolically) the nature of Hollywood film during the 1940s and 1950s. One wonders if the volume’s title—*Reforming Hollywood*—is not a bit of an overstatement, while its subtitle—*How American Protestants Fought for Freedom at the Movies*—is not a bit ironic.

Like any good narrative, however, the story does have a dramatic climax, which occurs in the late 1960s when the relevance of the historical cultural barriers separating Protestants, Catholics, and Jews had begun to fade. It was only at this point that what Romanowski has been describing as the Protestant perspective—self-regulation rather than prior censorship, with a meaningful system of age-based ratings—became the foundation for the current American film rating system. (Modifications made during the past 30 years have simply amplified this “victory.”) The irony of the story, however, is that by the late-1970s, culturally conservative Protestant evangelicals—mostly overlooked by Romanowski’s establishmentarian approach that focuses on the FCC/NCC to the end—insinuate themselves into the debate, outflanking the “old” establishment FCC/NCC who, by contrast, seemed to have become more in sync with the general culture and less like the vanguard of public morality.

Even those only modestly familiar with the scholarship in this field will know that strong elements of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism animated much of the debate over how best to handle the film industry. Romanowski does more justice to the first of these—illustrating the Protestant sense of disdain for the Catholic approach, and the resulting (and not-so-subtle) sense of competition between Catholic and Protestant perspectives for control of the agenda—than he does to the second. In the mind of this reviewer, this privileging of the articulation of the one conflict over the other gives the works an intellectual “gap” (modest, and with no malicious intent, to be sure), a lingering sense of things not said.

Of greater concern—and this too is not meant as a condemnation of the work, but merely as a reflection on the larger debate in which the volume participates—is the dilemma of how to label those who participated in the debate. If it is a matter of Protestants versus Catholics versus Jews, from the perspective of the present it would seem that the Catholics “lost,” the “establishment” Protestants were “impotent,” the Jews “won,” and the conservative Protestants are still fighting them over it. But like any generalization, this is as misleading as it is true, if not more so. More satisfying might be an approach pitting the tradition-bound against those not bound by tradition, where—because of the shifting nature of religion and society in American culture—those not tied to traditional mores