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exegesis

MOBILIZE AND CONTEMPLATE

by *Nathan Schneider*

What's spiritually at stake in *The Tree of Life*?

Something, proverbially, was off about the advance screening where I went to see Terrence Malick's long-awaited film, *The Tree of Life*. The setting was perfectly usual for these sorts of things: a small theater in the basement of an extremely swanky SoHo hotel, with bold



orange seats plusher than the seats are at above-ground theaters where most people go to the movies. But, besides that, this was not regular.

My associate could sense the difference immediately, instinctively, without knowing exactly why at first. An experimental-film critic from Los Angeles, she goes to screenings a lot, and she knew this was not the normal crowd. Afterward, she explained all the subtleties of their misbehavior. They didn't applaud when you're supposed to. There was talking and rustling around during the credits—a big no-no, apparently. These people were cliquy, but differently so.

What she could sense, I was able to fill in with a little more data: the room was full of religion people. I know because I am one, I guess. (She is not.) First, I recognized one of my editors at a Catholic magazine. There was also a man with a badge from the American Bible Society. When we sat down, I heard the group of dashing, coupled young professionals in front of us discussing things one doesn't expect most young professionals to be talking

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about, like grace and the Seven Deadly Sins and plans to give a sermon.

Next, another dashing young professional raised his voice above the chatter. Tall, blond, and neatly-blazered, he welcomed us, said he hoped we would enjoy the film, and invited us to discuss afterward how we could collaborate and “mobilize” “our communities” around it. That was another difference between this and the usual screening. We weren’t there to criticize, but to mobilize.

The Tree of Life began: mysterious light, voices, prayers, cosmos, family, Brad Pitt.

By then, though, I was preoccupied with thinking back to the email invitation that had brought me there in the first place. It came from Corby Pons, representing a company called Different Drummer, a self-described “audience and fan mobilization agency.” The blazered blond guy was the second of three partners, Erik Lokkesmoe. The third’s name is Marshall Mitchell. All former Congressional staffers, the three of them started the company back in 2008 in Washington, DC. Now they’re spread from Los Angeles, to Philadelphia, to New York. I asked Lokkesmoe what they do exactly. Religious marketing? Are they, as the fashionable euphemism goes, “faith-based”?

More or less. “Interfaith,” he preferred to say, but not quite even that —“spiritual.” He said they look for things that reveal “goodness, truth, and beauty” and showcase them. But he did say the three of them are all “faithful.”

Marshall Mitchell, I learned later, is a preacher’s kid and Union Seminary alum, in addition to having been the youngest chief of staff in the history of the US Congress. Lokkesmoe, together with George W. Bush’s onetime head of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, has written a book on Jesus Christ’s teachings about public relations: *The Revolutionary Communicator*. Faithful, indeed.

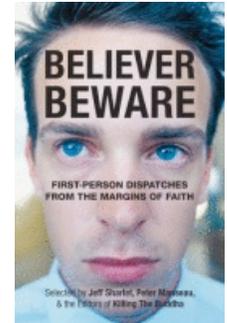
While Lokkesmoe and I talked, I kept getting distracted by the people in the group next to us debating whether Terrence Malick—recluse extraordinaire—is a Christian.

*

A relatively big deal has been made over the past few years about the growth of religious entertainment marketing, in Hollywood especially. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* was a watershed, becoming the highest-grossing independent film in history. Then came other guaranteed pew-pleasers, like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, from Walden Media, owned by conservative Christian Philip Anschutz, and *Left Behind*. Rupert Murdoch’s empire tried to sprout its own FoxFaith division, and marketers like Grace



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Hill and Motive Marketing began acting as go-betweens for big studios that want to reach churchy audiences.

In 2006, *Amazing Grace* appeared, a costume “political thriller” about how the pious William Wilberforce got the British parliament to ban the slave trade two hundred years ago. (It was co-produced by Terrence Malick.) Erik Lokkesmoe was working for Walden Media then, and he took charge of the publicity campaign for the film. It was a rare kind of campaign—talk about mobilizing. Rather than just plastering ads everywhere and soliciting reviews, he went about building a movement, orchestrating constituents the way he’d done in Washington for Senator Jim DeMint. Lokkesmoe and his team at Walden supplied discussion guides and video clips for churches, as well as opportunities for them to help fight modern-day slavery through a campaign called The Amazing Change. *Amazing Grace* was no *Passion*, but it did much better than expected, partly thanks to Lokkesmoe’s do-gooding efforts.

On the heels of that success, in 2008, Lokkesmoe, Pons, and Mitchell started Different Drummer, a “high-touch, high-tech, fast-breaking” firm, according to their website, with a “double-bottom-line’ social good commitment.” Like Lokkesmoe’s work at Walden, they’ve used a community-organizing style of marketing for outfits like Magnolia Pictures, ABC, the National Urban League, Warner Brothers, Disney, and many more. And, of course, they have their own “proprietary audience mobilization technology.” They’ll philosophize without a lot of arm-twisting. “Awareness is a 1990’s word,” they reflect in an article on “Marketing vs. Mobilizing.” “Action is the word of today.” Living up to this kind of jargon sets them apart from the more old-school religious marketers like Grace Hill.

The Different Drummer guys play this faith-based game, but they do much else too. Their self-definition purposely blurs the line between sacred and secular. Lokkesmoe talks about the Calvinist notion of “common grace”—that God’s grace can work not just in Christian people and Christian spheres, but anywhere. In pop-culture terms, this translates roughly as “crossover appeal.” It’s a sentiment that reminds me of the philosopher Jacques Maritain’s classic little book *Art and Scholasticism*: Art isn’t made Christian simply by having a Christian *subject*, he writes; regardless of the subject it can still have a Christian *character* about it. For example, Lokkesmoe assured me that they’re not interested in projects like *Fireproof*—a didactic evangelical parable (and indie blockbuster) starring the former child-star-turned-street-preacher Kirk Cameron. Instead: Owl City, the Jonas Brothers, and *The Tale of Despereaux*.

A few years ago, Marshall Mitchell told the Capitol Hill insider rag *Roll Call*, “We are judicious about the clients we accept. It has to have some redemptive value. It has to prick the conscience or trouble people who are

comfortable.” And, as Lokkesmoe confided to me at the screening, “Politics is entertainment, and entertainment is political.” It’s not obvious what kind of politics he had in mind. The Different Drummer guys have some interesting religious-right connections in their pasts: Chuck Colson, and The Family/Fellowship, and jobs with conservative Christians on both sides of the aisle. (They declined to comment for this article; my conspiratorial imagination goes wild.) But with documentary-movie clients ranging from Michael Moore’s *Capitalism: A Love Story* to the Tea Party favorite *I.O.U.S.A.*, they seem determined to confound any attempt to put them in a familiar political box. “This just may be the most diverse client list you’ve ever seen,” they brag on their “Clients” webpage. “Well, that’s exactly the way we like it.”

Such political expectation-busting extends to theology. One of Different Drummer’s recent projects was helping to promote the “rock star” pastor Rob Bell’s new book, *Love Wins*. Lokkesmoe made sure I knew that Bell had just been on the cover of *Time*. What got him there was that, in *Love Wins*, Bell innocently wonders whether Christians can be so sure who is and is not going to hell, provoking accusations of heresy from across the evangelical community. It is, practically by definition, Not Your Father’s Evangelicalism.

The code-word for this sort of thing lately is “emergent church.” It’s a combination of massive business and pop-culture savvy with a lot of vagueness about the status of the politically and theologically reactionary evangelical convictions many of its adherents grew up with. One gets the feeling like they’re waiting for some Invisible Hand to tell them not only where the market is going but also where they stand. In the meantime: look sharp, make some money, pick an unassailable social-justice cause (fight human trafficking rather than, say, abortion), and stir things up.

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Even before you see *The Tree of Life*, it’s evident that the film has something to do with religion, though it’s not at all clear what. Co-star Brad Pitt has been making remarks to the press that he found his own religious upbringing to be “stifling.” (He and Angelina Jolie are widely thought by the atheist community to be kindred spirits.) It’s the story of a 1950s Texas family that happens to be Catholic, and whose reality and language is very much framed in those terms. The official synopsis leans toward something even more abstract: a “lost soul in the modern world” learns the lesson of “unselfish love.”

But, then, is this a *religious* movie? Well, it’s not exactly confessional. It certainly doesn’t make one long for a revival of 1950s suburban Texas Catholicism, or much of anything else. There are religious *themes*, yes, but it’s not preachy by any stretch. Suggestive. Or, to use Erik Lokkesmoe’s

could-mean-anything word, “spiritual.”

As the lights dimmed in the screening room, a passage from the Book of Job appeared on the screen, the start of God’s monologue from the whirlwind. A woman’s voice tells us about the choice we have in life between nature and grace, and this opposition maps itself onto all that follows.

Brad Pitt is the nature-father, steeped in playground-variety social Darwinism; Jessica Chastain is the radiant grace-mother, from whom all good things come. Their three boys make mischief that keeps bringing them agonizingly close to disaster. One dies. The eldest grows up to become Sean Penn—the aforementioned lost soul—an alienated architect of bland modernist structures. He has built a whole world around him but something is missing inside.

And then there are also protracted scenes of cosmic evolution, of stars being created and computer-generated forms of life washing up onto the shore. The familiar and temporal stand in juxtaposition with the just-about-eternal. Our lives, we’re being told to recognize, are implicated and intertwined in the whole history of universe. What fantasies I’ve had about being a filmmaker, actually, have mostly revolved around making a film like this.

We hear the family’s prayers in voiceover. They even pray to each other. There are planted trees, transplanted trees, indoor trees, and wild trees. We hear choral and orchestral music, some of it liturgical. Heaven is on a beach. I couldn’t help but think to myself, *I’m watching an artsy movie*. It’s hard to know what to *do* with that.

Okay, then, put the question another way. The Different Drummer Way, perhaps. What kind of politics might it service? What kind of “action” and “mobilization” could it inspire? Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* is one of the best war movies ever made. I bet it could stop a war in its tracks if shown to the right people at the right time. What about this one?

In public life nowadays, religion and its concomitant politics tend to adopt a certain obnoxious kind of form. Religion insists, it takes stands, it demands, it resists. We expect that of our religion then, that it has a platform and a position—an *agenda*. How could it not? You can always follow the money.

This movie, and in particular the subset of its marketing campaign managed by the Different Drummer guys, is supposed to belie that. They’re trying to turn our attention elsewhere: to contemplation. It’s a contemplative movie about contemplating. That’s what we’re being asked to do, as far as I can tell, so far. Contemplate. *Spiritually*. No new movement was announced at the end for us to join, or no official take-away. Erik Lokkesmoe warned us that this was the kind of movie that

makes people want to go out afterward and discuss with their friends. Is that their idea of mobilizing, in this case? In contemplation alone, I guess, there can be goodness, truth, beauty—whether you're almost-post evangelical Christian, or ambiguously-potentially atheist like Brad Pitt, or somewhere else among the rest of us.

The passage from Job that *The Tree of Life* starts out with, in retrospect, is an affront to any attempt to seek out ulterior motives. Job has just finished presenting a rational complaint against God for an injustice done to him, a righteous man. The real reason for it, of course, is that God made a bet with Satan. But God doesn't tell him this. Instead, God's answer blows Job's attempt to make some kind of sense over in the whirlwind, and drags him to the beginning of time and back, all as a way of stating the question from which any serious contemplating begins: "Just *who* in the heck are *you*?"

*

Over a Cuban-fusion dinner after the fact, my associate and I found ourselves debating, even more than the film itself, what Lokkesmoe had said about goodness, truth, and beauty.

Is that what art really should aspire to? Can it? I wanted to take Lokkesmoe's side. I think it can and should. It's a hobby of mine to rail against the nihilism in art nowadays. If it's not somehow, somewhere for the good, I'm not interested. But she said no. How, after all, can you demand goodness, truth, and beauty while being anything but coercive? Art, to be free, can't work under those constraints.

She has a point. From Plato onward, this kind of language has been the stuff of tyrants, deceptively enough. The good, true, and beautiful almost always take their definitions from power—the more absolute the power, the better.

To help me think through this quandary Different Drummer-style, I turned to a 2006 essay by Lokkesmoe on Townhall.com, a conservative news and opinion website, on "10 mistakes conservatives make in art and entertainment." (Though no longer available at Townhall.com, it can be found through the Wayback Machine at Archive.org. Nothing is ever lost.) He basically excoriates his fellow conservatives for failing to support art with either their dollars or their offspring and, when they do take an interest in it, opting for the didactic and soothing.

For art to tell the truth and have a real impact on culture, says Lokkesmoe, it needs to be surprising. Even, when necessary, offensive. Real art isn't safe, or easy, or trite. "Art incinerates polyester/velvet dreams of inner healing and cheap grace," he rhapsodizes, between quotations from Francis Schaeffer, the long-haired evangelical guru of a generation or two ago. But

art also does more than incinerate. In a recent essay elsewhere, Lokkesmoe adds that it should “be a vehicle for recreation and re-creation, an echo of grace that reminds us what it means to be human and more than human.”

I hope that what he’s looking for is possible, in other than stereotypically Christian-rock style, a facsimile of the Real Thing. Can truly challenging, confrontational, incinerating art still be “conservative”? I certainly wouldn’t claim real art for being “liberal” or, worse, “progressive.” Conservatives might make unconservative art while still being (economically neoliberal, say) conservatives. And there are certainly plenty of politically-liberal artists making illiberal stuff. Progressive art (prog rock? Obama campaign posters?) is doomed to disappoint.

Goodness, truth, and beauty, as I’d hope they must be, shouldn’t admit to such labels. The society that’s open to them doesn’t know where it is headed, exactly. The artists guided by them feel their way through the dark, though always with a bit of light. Is it good enough to *hope* that one is on the right track? How does one know?

In the dark of the theater, I went in circles thinking about these things. That’s probably why I couldn’t quite bring myself to enjoy *The Tree of Life* like I otherwise might have, distracted as I was by trying to figure out what I should be getting from it in the minds of those who had brought me there.

But my associate liked it. She told me a few days later that she was planning to see it again, at another, less-weird screening. She ended up giving it a good review.

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