



Humanist

PERSPECTIVES

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MINDING *the* MEDIA

*THE CBC GOES WRONG • IDOLATRY •
MEDIA & PROPAGANDA • JULIA SWEENEY •
WHEN THE CHURCH CENSORED MOVIES*

Creating narratives is one of the most peculiar, wonderful, and defining aspects of being human. Religious stories are really important, entertaining, and have life lessons in them... I only think it's dangerous when people say that the stories are literally true, because they aren't.

This issue's cover features Julia Sweeney, photographed in Las Vegas by Emrys Miller.

Julia is familiar with storytelling, from consulting for award-winning primetime television, to her skits on *Saturday*

Night Live, to acting and producing in Hollywood, to her live stage monologue telling of her personal journey to atheism.

This is the 16th portrait in our cover series showing the many faces of humanism.



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FEATURE

JULIA SWEENEY

is an American actress and comedian who lives in Hollywood, California. She is known for her roles on *Saturday Night Live* in the early nineties, and for her critically acclaimed 1996 one-woman monologue, *God Said, Ha!* in which she addressed her experience of surviving cancer. She has consulted on television shows *Sex & the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, has appeared as a guest star in several TV shows, and has written and performed two other monologues, *In the Family Way* and *Letting Go of God*, the latter explaining her conversion to atheism.

In *Letting Go of God*, she discusses her Catholic upbringing, early religious ideology, and the life events and internal search that led her to believe that the universe can function on its own without a deity to preside over it.

She began performing the show live in Los Angeles. In May 2006, she performed the piece at The Paramount Theatre in Austin, Texas, which was followed by a half-hour discussion between Sweeney and Ira Glass (host of *This American Life*). An excerpt of the show subsequently appeared on *This American Life* in an episode entitled *Godless America*.

In 2006, Julia was awarded the Richard Dawkins Award and the American Humanist Association's "Humanist Pioneer" award, and joined the advisory board of the Secular Coalition for America. She also does radio commercials for the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Humanist Perspectives caught up with Julia to ask her about humanism in the media...

What are you working on now?

Right now I'm editing the film version of *Letting Go of God*, which is a film of the monologue that I've been performing on stage for the last two years. It's not a dramatization, but a performance film of my show. I have the camera come in close, so it's a little different from a concert film. We've worked from a very low budget for Hollywood standards, and are now going to submit it to a couple of film festivals, including the Toronto Film Festival, after which we'll just wait and see what happens.

Are there any obstacles to producing a show that is so critical of religion?

I haven't really run into very much resistance, but I'm performing in very specific environments. But even when I did my show in Spokane (a quite religious small town, relatively speaking) I found most people hungry for this kind of show and topic.

At first, your show seemed to share a message similar to that of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens – the message that religion is unhealthy. But by the end of your show, you also showed a fondness towards the community and rituals from your own religious upbringing.

I think that the Unitarians and some humanists are taking what's good about religion and leaving the bad. But I feel with Dawkins and Hitchens they want to throw the baby out with the bath water. Those communities that are built up around churches are really important. Community is useful, enjoyable, and helpful. It helps to create meaning and connection between people – we're social animals. But though I know it's good for so many people, I'm personally not going to Unitarians or humanism for my community. I have a different life than my parents' life growing up. I don't

really need a church. I get community from other places like the tennis club, parents and children at school, and the great neighbourhood I live in.

Your show tells your personal story, but it was illuminated by many humorous rants about the absurdity of Biblical stories.

I don't go after the hierarchy of the church, the priests, the community, or the rituals – though there are many dark issues there. I really only go after the stories it's all based on, that is, whether the myths are true or not. I think religion really has a lot to offer. Obviously it works and it can be beneficial to people for a variety of reasons. For this show I just focused on the stories that religion was based on, and I made a specific point not go after anything else.

Why are people drawn to such stories?

We are story-telling animals. The way our minds work is by telling stories about ourselves. Creating narratives is one of the most peculiar, wonderful, and defining aspects of being human. Religious stories are really important, entertaining, and have life lessons in them. Before we could make movies, people told these stories and they were all important – though not all equally important and profound. Now we have movies. The movie *Star Wars* is like a myth. People gravitate towards it, love to think about it, manipulate it in their minds, and I think that's what the myths do too. I only think it's dangerous when people say that the stories are literally true, because they aren't.


I think people who take the Bible literally are missing not only what is most fun about the Bible stories, but they're missing the whole point of the Bible stories. There is actually a lot to be learned, insight to be gained, and

understanding of our psychological and historical past from the Bible. By saying that it's absolutely true you wreck the Bible. It makes me sad, because it's almost like all these literal believers have been inoculated against actually getting something out of the Bible!

You are a humanist who has worked in a variety of popular media – television, Hollywood, live theatre. What do you think of how humanists and atheists appear in the media?

The media goes for clichés, because they don't have time to look for subtlety. Non-religious people are known as angry atheists. They want you to be angry; therefore they see it as a confrontation. Usually when non-religious people appear in the media they're pitted against religious people, so people can watch them argue. I think that's a mistake. Somehow the secular coalition people and humanists need to be in the media simply demonstrating a way of life, not necessarily in response to religion.

What would you like to see change about humanists and atheists in the media?

I think the best thing for humanists would be to let people know it's okay to say, "I'm a humanist" without feeling that they have to be part of an organization. Most people I deal with are just not religious, but that does not mean they don't have a moral code, don't care about others, and don't do things in their community. They don't want to say "atheist" and they don't really know what it means to say "humanist". So they just say non-religious which sounds like a person who is just opting out. I think the average person who has kids suddenly feels socially required to make a stand on religion for some reason. It would be great if the word "humanist" was more widely known. 

FEATURE

MOVIES IN THE SHADOW OF THE CHURCH

by Jim Skinner

Since its inception, just over a century ago, the moving image has been the target of an assortment of censors. In 1897, barely a year after the first public theatrical screening in the USA, the distributors of *Fatima Dances*, a thirty second vignette, were obliged to draw a series of thick parallel lines across the more-than-adequately covered bosom and lower torso of the gyrating performer because of concerted expressions of shock from assorted clergymen and sundry other moralists.

One might reflect that there would be cries of outrage and recourse to First Amendment or Charter of Freedom Rights if art galleries, book stores and the live theatre were forced to exclude potential patrons as a matter of legal observance on the basis of age, or have their offerings classified, emasculated or even confiscated by government agencies or industry boards whose collective and individual identities were unknown to the general public. The motion picture has always laboured under such restrictions. Why this visual medium should be singled out for such stringent treatment is not difficult to deduce. From the moment of their invention, films were designed for mass consumption with scant pretensions to artistry. Their audience has always been overwhelmingly proletarian, and the very nature of spectatorship permits the viewer comparatively inexpensive entry and a seat in the anonymity of darkness. As the preamble to the Hays Code (of which more later) states bluntly: "Most art appeals to the mature. This art appeals to every class, mature, developed, law-abiding and criminal." Classical music, sculpture, painting, drama and literature – all were assumed to be the provenance of the better educated with a more refined aesthetic. The pernicious influence of 'the flicks,' on the other hand, was attributed to their vulgar popularity and easy accessibility. It was, as Martin Quigley, co-author of the Hays Code, put it, "the mass audience ... impressionable people ... and those who consider themselves to be of inferior status" who patronized these picture shows with deplorable regularity. It was the duty of their moral superiors, protests from libertarians

notwithstanding, to save them from their baser instincts.

The first three decades of the last century saw a steady growth in what might be termed the censorship establishment. In Canada, most provinces had their own boards staffed with political appointees while in the USA more than ninety cities and states had equivalents. A US Supreme Court decision of 1915 had denied motion pictures protection under First Amendment rights, judging their exhibition to be nothing more than a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit like circuses or carnival side-shows. Rev. William S Crafts, mindful of the religious affiliation of those entrepreneurs who now dominated Hollywood, spoke of his supporters as "patriotic, gentile Americans with a mission to rescue motion pictures from the hands of the Devil and 500 un-Christian Jews." Following a series of sex scandals, Hollywood in 1922 hired Will H Hays, a Republican politician in Harding's cabinet, to burnish the tarnished image it projected. One result was the issuance of a series of 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls' that proscribed profanity, nudity and sexual perversion (homosexuality) and cautioned the mode of presentation of seduction and rape.

With the triumph of 'the talkies' over 'the silents' in the late 1920s, a new element – spoken dialogue – was introduced to audiences. Hollywood turned to Broadway and London playwrights, one result of which was franker themes and outspoken dialogue. This was also the era of Al Capone and other notorious hoodlums. Gangster movies relished employing a more colourful language than had been possible in pre-sound days. All of a sudden, Hays' request for compliance by the studios seemed wanting. What was required was a rigid code of iron-clad rules and machinery to enforce its strictures. Two Catholics duly obliged. Publisher Martin Quigley and an academic, Father Daniel Lord, authored the Production (Hays) Code in 1930. Each movie would now be required to conform to its strictures before being granted a certificate for distribution. Of the twelve categories defined, eight dealt with some form of sexuality. Quigley and Lord were at pains to distinguish the



type of sin that should be permitted on-screen – that which repels by its very nature as distinct from that which attracts. If a film contained moral transgressions, compensating moral values had to be inserted as a counterbalance. The list of forbidden topics included: divorce as a solution to marital breakdown, adultery, sex hygiene (including any reference to birth control, abortion or venereal disease), suicide, euthanasia and clergymen as figures of evil or ridicule. Pregnancy and childbirth were indecorous subjects to be referred to, if absolutely necessary, in as circumlocutory a manner as possible. Nudity, complete, partial or in silhouette (even of babies) was to disappear from the screen. Bedroom locations were to be “governed by good taste and delicacy,” so establishing the customs of single beds for married couples. Quigley never deviated from his view of movies as entertainment for the working class that should have no pretensions of advancing the frontiers of literary achievement. The filmmaker’s duty was to provide wholesome family fare in accordance with Catholic Church values. Moviegoers should exit theatres no less moral than when they entered.

Unfortunately for its authors, the Code was to remain something of a dead letter for four years after its introduction. The reason was the Great Depression. Hollywood, already fighting incursions on its audience by radio, was now hit with the century’s worst economic slump as millions of poor and unemployed found it hard to afford ticket prices. A solution was to lure them back with racier fare. Movies became more outspoken than ever before. No one figure raised censorial ire to a higher degree than Mae West with her double entendres and frank appreciation of the pleasures of the flesh in such pictures as *I’m No Angel* and *She Done Him Wrong*. Elsewhere, the death of the gang leaders in the final reel of *Little Caesar* or *Public Enemy* was seen as scant retribution for what had been presented till then as an exciting life of casual violence, luxury and sexually available molls. The publication of a sociological study, *Our Movie Made Children*, in 1933 crowned the edifice of protest, so to speak. In breathless prose it described the awful effects on youth of exposure to such fare – delinquency, rapid eye movement, excitability and insomnia, to mention but a few. The cry for action was deafening and it was answered by the Catholic Church as an institution representing twenty per cent of the North American population.

The formation of the Legion of Decency in 1934 was a masterstroke. Within six years its membership had grown to eleven million, making it the largest voluntary organization

in the USA. Legion members took an oath to boycott “vile and unwholesome pictures.” A ratings system was instituted with six categories ranging from A-1 (morally unobjectionable for all) to C (for condemned). The individual’s obligation to avoid a Condemned movie equaled his or her obligation to avoid an occasion of sin. The very act of attending such a film stemmed from a morally evil decision on the participant’s part.

The Catholic hierarchy took into consideration the fact that its adherents were, on average, poorer and less educated than the majority of North Americans. They went to “the movies” as distinct from seeking out a specific movie, without considering what they were about to watch. In his encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, Pope Pius XI enunciated the nature of the Legion’s enemy: “It is unfortunate that in the present state of affairs, the motion picture’s influence is frequently exerted for evil. So much so when one thinks of the havoc wrought in the souls of youth and childhood, of the loss of innocence so often suffered in theatres, there comes to mind the terrible condemnation pronounced by Our Lord upon the corrupters of little ones – ‘whosoever shall scandalize one of these little ones who believe in Me it were better that a millstone be hanged around his neck and he be drowned in the depth of the sea.’” The Legion’s classification system served as a guideline for more than the vast membership that had taken the pledge.

Since moviegoing then, as distinct from today, was very much a family affair, it was reassuring to parents of many faiths to know that nothing unsuitable would pass by their offspring’s gaze. A perusal of the Legion’s correspondence during the era of its hegemony shows overwhelming gratitude for its role as moral guardian. Nor can it be denied that this period coincided with Hollywood’s golden era of great stars and enduring pictures. Perhaps the very existence of censorship stimulated the imagination as creative talent wrestled with ways to circumvent the obstacles placed in their path. Not infrequently the purpose was achieved with a subtlety that is perhaps preferable to today’s sledgehammer approach. When the newly-wed Clark Gable blew a toy trumpet and caused the blanket between his bed and Claudette Colbert’s to fall at the conclusion of *It Happened One Night*, there was no need to tell adults in the audience that the marriage was about to be consummated even as the children remained blissfully ignorant. Occasionally, a fireworks display would signify orgasm. Hitchcock wickedly included a brief view of a train entering a tunnel at the conclusion of *North By Northwest* as Cary Grant climbed into Eve Marie Saint’s bunk.

That said, there is much to regret. In effectively banning movies not in conformity with Christian precepts, the Code and the Legion of Decency could be found wanting. Those movies that passed muster seldom portrayed life as it was but as wish fulfillment. In so doing, they portrayed a world that did not exist – of good invariably triumphing over evil, of justice fairly meted out or impossibly happy resolutions that made all well ‘twixt errant husband and wronged wife or feuding boy and girl. To insist that films always be consistent with Judeo-Christian principles was to deny them an ability to approximate to reality. Sin and imperfection are constants in society. Their inevitable conquest on screen gave those works a hypocritical tone that robbed them of moral complexity. Because of Code intervention, the film adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* has Stella punishing her brutish husband, Stanley, for the rape of her sister by refusing to live with him any longer. The stage version was altogether more nuanced. Despite the wife’s revulsion, carnal attraction is sufficient to keep her in the relationship. The physician in *Detective Story*, another Broadway



play, had his profession changed from abortionist to that of ‘baby farmer’ in the film since the former topic was still taboo in 1951. It made nonsense of a plot that hinged on the discovery by a self-righteous Catholic detective that his wife had undergone the procedure prior to her marriage.

In the late 1950s a number of factors conspired to undermine the censors’ grip. A liberal US Supreme Court extended a degree of constitutional protection that had been denied the motion picture for a generation. Harsh economic facts, especially the challenge of television, drove the industry to make pictures for select audiences that were often younger, more sophisticated and sexually more liberated than their predecessors. Too, church leaders no longer exerted quite the same control over their flocks as in bygone years. Though it would exist in a somewhat attenuated form until 1980, the Legion of Decency rapidly lost its power of coercion as the permissive ‘sixties brought forth hits that would have been considered unthinkable even a decade previously. *Lolita*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Blow Up* and *Rosemary’s Baby* exploded, respectively, the prohibitions on sex, bad language, nudity and blasphemy that had been the letter of screen law since the early ‘thirties. In 1968, faced with a revival of local censorship in reaction to the new permissiveness, Hollywood reluctantly launched its

own classification system. It is with us to this day. The game continued to be a search by filmmakers to find out how far they could go in the inclusion of racy ingredients, but now it was played at what many considered a debased level. Initially there were hopes that the ‘X’ category, prohibiting attendance by minors, would encourage a more mature approach to adult themes. The aesthetic possibilities were never realized and the rating quickly became synonymous with cheaply made hardcore pornography as ‘Triple X’ movies flooded first theatres and then, that newcomer to the viewing scene, the video store.

Clark Gable’s utterance of ‘damn’ in *Gone With The Wind*, the degree of Jane Russell’s breast exposure in *The Outlaw*, the heroine’s reference to her ‘virginity’ in *The Moon is Blue*, the graphic labour pains of an unmarried field hand in *Bitter Rice* – how remote and trivial these issues appear today and how risible to contemplate the spectacle of men and women spending wearisome hours on their resolution. There is a tendency to dismiss much of it as a tempest in a tea cup, the concerns of a vanished era whose only lesson is to illuminate the obscurantism and narrow mindedness from which we have happily escaped. The difficulty with this interpretation is its supposition that the battle has been won and that freedom of expression reigns supreme. No one would deny that the degree of licence afforded scriptwriters and directors nowadays has allowed for a more honest approach to themes that were forbidden a generation or two ago. Yet it is surely no cause for celebration that screen violence has reached a point where, in the writer’s view, it can only be described as pornographic. On the other hand, to equate graphic violence with sex and lump the two as a grave problem is to do a disservice to the portrayal of the latter.

The struggle for control of the screen is unending. Clauses in contracts stipulate that the finished product must earn a rating in the United States that will not exclude juveniles as long as they are accompanied by parent or adult guardian. That concession allows access by all ages to virtually all material in cinemas. Beyond this specific issue is a noisy crusade by the Christian right to regain control of film content at the production level, based on the belief that much of what emanates from the entertainment establishment is a threat to youth and family values. The shadows of the clericalism of the past have not dissipated entirely. Loquacious televangelists may have replaced the self-effacing priests and bishops who once enforced the precepts of the Hays Code and the Legion of Decency, but their spirit lives on. HP

Jim Skinner was vice-chair of the Manitoba Film Classification Board in the 1970s. His work, The Legion, The Cross & The Cinema, was published by Praeger in 1993.