

# FAITH & FREEDOM

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**MEDIA VALUES VS.**

**RELIGIOUS VALUES**

**THE CONFLICT AT THE HEART OF OUR CULTURE**

# Media Values vs. Religious Values: The Conflict at the Heart of Our Culture

MICHAEL MEDVED

*This mini publication has been graciously updated by Michael Medved and is based on his lecture at the 2016 Annual Conference, "Media and American Culture: How the Church, Ideas, Elites, Social Networks, and Technology Shape Society."*

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Michael Medved hosts a daily talk radio show and podcast that combines politics and pop culture, history, and values. He is also a *New York Times* best-selling author of 14 nonfiction books, including *Hollywood vs. America* (1992) and *God's Hand on America* (2019). Michael has worked as both a political speechwriter and Hollywood screenwriter, and lectures for religious, political, and academic audiences.

For generations, religious and pro-family organizations have tried to encourage our mighty mass media to generate more wholesome and uplifting messages in the entertainment they produce. In 2004, the release of one fiercely controversial faith-based movie underlined the argument that more respect for traditional values could benefit Hollywood's bottom line at the same time it served the industry's conscience.

Dollar for dollar, the *Passion of the Christ* qualifies as very possibly the most profitable movie ever made. Worldwide box office receipts totaled more than \$600,000,000 for Mel Gibson and his fellow producers—more than twenty times their initial investment of \$30 million for production and marketing. Given the fact that most films either lose money or struggle to break even, you'd expect this unexpected blockbuster (with the Biblical dialogue delivered in ancient Aramaic, then translated into subtitles) would have inspired some soul-searching (not just of the spiritual kind) among hard-driving executives who run the profit-hungry companies that dominate the entertainment industry.

The most unmistakable message from the film's shocking success demonstrated the unrecognized, stubborn survival of a huge, eager international audience for high quality entertainment featuring positive religious themes. These faithful filmgoers once ruled the box office, making 1950's Biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* among the most celebrated cinematic spectacles of that (or any) era.

While no one could claim that *The Passion* instantly inspired a revival of the Biblical Blockbuster, "Sandals and Sandstorm" epics of the mid-twentieth century, the first decades of the twenty-first century did witness an explosion of highly profitable, independently produced religious films that broke through to surprisingly substantial



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audiences. For instance, the *God Is Not Dead* series began with an audacious and provocative picture in 2014 with a story of a committed Christian college kid battling an atheist philosophy professor who threatens failing grades to students who won't sign statements affirming the non-existence of God. With a miniscule \$2 million production budget, God still managed to reappear in time to deliver an utterly miraculous \$62 million at the box office, along with a popular sequel—and more on the way.

Such spiritual success stories—and there are scores of them—raise an obvious question: how can religious messages manage to connect with a public that is, according to all surveys and social analysis, more secular and less engaged with organized faith than ever before?

While religious involvement remains far more common in the United States than in other wealthy countries of the Western World (Britain, France, Germany, Scandinavia and so forth), we've still experienced a sharp, undeniable decline in church and synagogue membership, regular participation in sacred services or Bible study, and other common measures of commitment to organized faith.

In 2014, for instance, the Pew Research Center conducted a massive study that highlighted "the rise of the 'Nones'" – the rapid emergence of those with no faith-based identification of any kind as by far the fastest growing segment of America's "Religious Landscape." Pew identified 55.8 million American adults as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular." Just seven years earlier (2007) only 35.6 million had similarly rejected organized religion. Worst of all, the alienation from faith has become especially acute among young adults. The Pew study showed that Millennials – those below 35 at the time of the study – showed more than a third who felt no connection with any religious tradition.

The reason that the entertainment industry generally ignores, or underestimates, or often insults church-going audiences, isn't the product of anti-Christian bigotry or some radical secular conspiracy. Sure, a personal bias against belief may exist from some prominent figures in the media business, but the deeper difficulty arises from the very nature of the media themselves. To paraphrase the late Marshall MacLuhan: "It's the medium, not the message."

The very nature of electronic, visual entertainment – motion pictures, television, and material streamed to billions through various internet platforms – works against the traditional Biblical messages that organized faith attempts to transmit. In other words, the extent of your immersion in media stimulation matters far more than the specific content of the media you watch.

The heart of the struggle between Hollywood Values and Religious Values isn't the low quality of entertainment messages, it's the high quantity of that material most

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Americans watch. If, as all medical and sociological studies conclude, a typical American adults spend more than 35 hours a week watching entertainment and news programming on screens, then even if they select the most admirable programming that investment of time will work to undermine the healthiest and most nourishing values of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Consider the way that essential qualities of the modern media-verse inevitably conflict with the three primary emphases of all major faith systems.

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### **Immediate Gratification vs. Eternal Perspective**

Television and movies by their very nature train the minds and the souls of billions of avid viewers to expect quick, neat resolution of every human problem. Whether you're watching a half-hour sitcom or an hour-long police procedural, the scriptwriters are expected to write story lines with an intriguing beginning, an unsettled center, and a neat, satisfying conclusion. How many challenges or joys in real life unfold in such a predictable and reassuring manner? The solution of significant problems in a matter of minutes, or even hours if you're consuming a miniseries or podcast, conveys an impatient message that contradicts the perspective and patience at the heart of spiritual values.

Of course, the prominent presence of commercials in television broadcasting only reinforces the idea of immediate gratification: the best commercials prompt you to want that juicy hamburger or that spiffy exercise machine right away - no delay. The essence of righteous behavior involves deferred satisfaction or even suppressed gratification if what you've craved is inappropriate and self-destructive.

Watching the world of a screen will also make you impatient for the next episode of entertainment, while religious teaching demands focus beyond this world - to what Jewish tradition calls "the world to come," or the afterlife. The old saying in politics holds that the cheap political operator thinks exclusively of the next election, while the true statesman focuses primarily on the next generation. By the same token, the entertainment addicted think only about the next diversion, while the religiously-minded will consider the next life.

Finally, the American Academy of Pediatrics and other medical groups have warned of the negative impact of television viewing for infants and young children - especially when it comes to developing the extended attention span that will make success possible in school and in life. Religious faith also promotes the crucial role of an eternal perspective, in the face of impulse and impatience encouraged by media.

### **Superficiality vs. Substance**

On another point of obvious conflict, a religious point of view not only demands a more patient consideration of our reality, but a deeper look - a probe beneath the surface of the challenges and temptations we face. Visual media, on the other hand, are by definition superficial - engaging the eyes more immediately and decisively than connecting with the heart, mind and soul. What we remember above all about the

greatest stars of film and television isn't the way they speak or behave in the make-believe worlds they inhabit, but the way they look. This is inevitable for a medium in which the characters maintained an elegant silence for several decades after movies had become the world's favorite form of entertainment.

This, of course, contradicts an oft-repeated Biblical message that warns against placing a priority on physical beauty or glamor. In the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, recited by observant Jewish husbands every week on Sabbath Eve to honor our wives, the text concludes: "Many daughters have amassed achievement, but you surpassed them all/False is grace and vain is beauty/But a God-fearing woman – she should be praised."

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John opens emphatically and unforgettably: "In the beginning was the Word." It doesn't say "in the beginning was the video" or "the vision." The Judeo-Christian emphasis remains unmistakably focused on words and hearing when conveying the most important truths. The Jewish prayer "the Shema," recited twice a day, every day, commands us to "Hear, O Israel" – listen, rather than watch. In fact, in the third paragraph of the same prayer, God warns us not to "explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray."

It is worth exploring, however, the way that media influence led us astray in making our present politics superficial and shallow. During recent presidential debates, numerous observers have raised the question of whether Abraham Lincoln, an odd-looking, over-sized candidate with a distinctive manner of speaking, could have possibly succeeded in the television era. In fact, this one-term Congressman from the Illinois frontier actually made it to the presidency on the strength of a series of seven debates in a Senatorial campaign that he *lost*, just two years before his nomination for the presidency.

In these verbal battles with Stephen Douglas, the incumbent Democratic Senator, Lincoln didn't benefit from sound bites – with no microphones or recordings (alas!), the candidates had to excite their fans by shouting their one-hour opening statements to crowds of up to 30,000. Millions more around the country eagerly awaited newspaper transcripts of their words.

One hundred and two years later, the first televised presidential debates, between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, offered a distressing contrast. Instead of substantive, impassioned disagreements over life-and-death issues surrounding slavery and union, the decisive elements in the 1960 debates concerned Nixon's terrible make-up job and exhausted appearance, in contrast to JFK's telegenic cool and youthful vigor. In fact, the 30% of Americans who listened to the confrontation on radio, rather than watching it on "the boob tube," felt overwhelmingly that Nixon had won the debate. The majority who judged the televised images went for JFK – making him president and, ushering in a new "television age" to our politics. Ever since, questions of media projection – who flashed the better smile, or deployed the sharper wit, or displayed the mystical, indefinable, magic of "charisma," or even who seemed a better guy to have a beer with – mattered more than governmental achievements or substantive policies.

### **Self-Pity vs. Gratitude**

Most people would agree that the shift to superficiality constituted bad news for the Republic and its political system, while the consuming obsession with bad news in

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general represents the most damaging aspect of mass media's impact. The infamous slogan defining the priorities of local TV News – "If It Bleeds, It Leads" – reflects the desire to boost ratings and ad revenues through saturation coverage of both natural and man-made disasters. Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, murders, free way pileups, pandemics, political corruption – all seem irresistible to programmers and journalists with vast stretches of air-time to fill – with riveting, frightening and horrific footage, if they're lucky. An extraterrestrial civilization judging planet earth based solely on the TV broadcasts they might pick up on their distant planet, would reach the conclusion that our piece of orbiting rock constituted

a sorry world indeed. There's also scant chance that they'd ever realize how much life on earth has actually improved in recent centuries, with dazzling developments in health, food production, scientific understanding, and even the spread of liberty and the decrease of violence.

This disproportionate focus on the destructive and frightening helps to explain the certainty that many Americans have felt in recent decades that civilization is collapsing around them. Like our aforementioned imaginary Martians, contemporary citizens depend on media to understand what's going on in the wider world. A plethora of polls indicate a peculiar contradiction in public sentiment. Most people remain decidedly optimistic about their personal prospects and the future of their families, but for at least forty years they've felt consistently negative about the fate of the country and the world. How can this be? Different sources of information. People know the facts about their own lives through personal, lived experience, but they learn about the lives of others through the overwhelmingly alarming images on their TV and computer screens. We don't have a functioning, fair-minded news business in this country. We have instead a bad news business that highlights the dark side of developing stories from the break of each new day.

Consider the everyday miracle of air travel: crashes or mishaps of any significant scale have become exceedingly and blessedly rare. Tens of thousands of aircraft land safely and on-time every day, and you hear nothing about them. But if something goes terribly wrong and people perish it will dominate cable outlets and conversation for weeks at a time.

This focus on disaster, this pattern of pessimism, fosters an ever-mounting tidal wave of self-pity. Individuals, families, and major segments of the population that have no valid basis to the mantle of suffering still insist on claiming the status of victims. They do so not just to gain sympathy or support, but because they're convinced by media narratives that they actually deserve it.

In every sense, this negativity works against the major focus of religious believers, with their practice of daily prayer. Yes, we may plead with the Almighty for succor in

our travail, but the essence of most prayer in every religious tradition is an expression of gratitude – for the light that anoints our world at dawn, the delicious food that nourishes our bodies, the understanding that can heal and uplift our sometimes-beleaguered spirits.

### **A Media Sabbath**

In a Bible class in which my wife participated some twenty years ago, they probed two important questions related to the self-pitying, media-drenched aspect of today's society. The first question: what is the opposite of happiness? The answer can't be unhappiness – that indicates merely the absence of happiness.

The true opposite of happiness is anger – that distorting rage that blinds you to the goodness and generosity that actually surrounds you.

And then, the all-important follow up question: what is the opposite of anger? The answer is gratitude, because thankfulness fills the heart in a way that blocks the temptation to resentment and self-pity.

The three major results of media immersion – impatience, superficiality and self-pity—make for unhappy individuals and a less happy society. We all know people around us who may demand instant gratification, focus entirely on the least enduring and meaningful values, and feel sorry for themselves whatever their circumstances, with no confidence in their own ability at improving their condition.

In these ongoing conflicts between timeless religious attitudes and the messages of contemporary media, the side of shallow entertainment wields one overwhelmingly powerful secret weapon: a huge advantage in terms of time investment that most Americans have given to the side of media consumption.

Every year, the United States Department of Labor/Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles The American Time Use Survey to report on how typical citizens spend their waking hours. In 2014, this federal project showed the ordinary American adult giving more than nineteen hours per week to television viewing alone – not counting additional time expenditures on video games, social media and other screen-based activities. The authors of the study concluded: “Americans watch far more TV in their downtime than doing anything else. Of the 5.26 hours per day Americans had for leisure time on average, we spent most of it watching TV. Nothing else even comes close.” Certainly not “church and community activities”—a category which includes services, study and volunteer work—to which our normal fellow citizen gives less than one-fortieth of the weekly hours devoted to televised entertainment.

Is there any way that we could redress this balance, and give religious answers a better chance for meaningful competition with media messages?

The best strategy awaits our attention in the most obvious and logical of sources: the Ten Commandments.

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Number Four of the Big 10 (as enumerated by Protestants and Jews) tells us to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” To religious Jews that means learning to live without media distractions and attractions for one full day each week; increasing numbers of committed Christians have also begun trying to incorporate some form of “media sabbath” into their weekly routine. If nothing else, placing some restriction on your media immersion for a set space of time on the Lord’s Day (whether you observe it on Saturday or Sunday) reflects a determination to give the word of God precedence over the images of the entertainment industry. That regular commitment can provide a boost to the side of cultural combat that promotes an eternal perspective, a determination to look beneath the surface of things and expressions of gratitude as the best path to optimism and contentment.

Of course, this determination to reduce all media consumption for the sake of your society and yourself can’t work if you make exceptions even for well-produced pro-religion movies and TV shows – no, not even *The Passion of the Christ* or *God Is Not Dead*. Logic and science both indicate that entertainment with noble intentions may reduce the toxicity of passive watching, but it would not eliminate the ongoing push toward impatience, superficiality, and self-pity embedded in the media themselves.

In Jewish law, for the 25 hours of the Sabbath from sundown on Friday till full dark on Saturday night, we don’t turn on any electronics, don’t answer phone calls, don’t check our e-mails. You’re disconnected from the urgent in order to connect more fully with the important. What a blessing!

And what a powerful means to reduce the influence of media in your home and your life. Take one day a week where you listen to the voices of people who are actually in your presence. Where you experience life in its immediacy, not filtered through various screens and maybe even listen to that “still, small voice” that the Bible views as the essence of holiness.

One traditional Jewish phrase describing the Sabbath says it’s “a taste of the world to come,” meaning it’s a little bit of Heaven. That taste of eternity also reminds us that we are mortal, with limited time to savor the blessings that surround us. We don’t want to abuse that time in a manner that’s destructive to us as individuals or that undermines the values we seek to advance—values of perspective, substance, and gratitude that will continue to sustain and nurture this greatest nation on God’s green earth.

Note: if you would like to view the entire lecture by Michael Medved, please visit [www.faithandfreedom.com/2016-Michael-Medved](http://www.faithandfreedom.com/2016-Michael-Medved)

## STUDENT FELLOW SPOTLIGHT



### **Joy Zavalick '22**

is the Dr. Richard A. Morledge '54 Student Fellow double majoring in political science and Spanish with a minor in philosophy. Joy currently works as a Research Assistant for the Center for Human

Dignity at Family Research Council (FRC). Joy spent the summer of 2021 interning with FRC in Washington, D.C., where she worked on policy projects relating to the sanctity of life and defense of human dignity. During the summer of 2020, Joy interned with the Republican Committee of Lancaster County in her hometown of Lancaster, PA, where she had the opportunity to learn about grassroots activism working on local, state, and national Republican campaigns. Joy also worked with the Susan B. Anthony List as a canvasser advocating for the pro-life cause. She currently serves with Concerned Women for America of PA as an issue specialist researching the topic of sexual exploitation.

On campus, Joy is the founder and president of GCC's Young Women for America chapter. Joy also serves as the secretary and treasurer of the law society and is a member of the Theta Alpha Pi sorority. Joy is passionate about the defense of traditional values and is interested in pursuing a career in policy research.



### **Kyle Sweitzer '22**

is the Robert '63 and Gail (Holmgren '66) Hunter Student Fellow studying political science and minoring in national security. Growing up in Hudson, Ohio, Kyle developed an interest

in politics from studying the American Founding. Kyle is the senior class president in the student government association. Kyle also serves on the social executive team for orientation board, welcoming new freshmen on campus. Kyle is interested in the intersection of issues in criminal justice, communism, and Christian ethics.

This past summer, Kyle worked at the Acton Institute as part of their Emerging Leader Program. Kyle worked in the programs and development departments and furthered the pursuit of a free and virtuous society. He hopes to better educate the younger generations on key issues through non-profit work.

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**April 7-8, 2022**    **Annual Conference: The Limits of Government**

### FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN LEADERSHIP SERIES

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**December 7**    **“December 1941: 31 Days that Changed America and Saved the World”** with Craig Shirley, Found & chairman of Shirley & McVicker Public Affairs, bestselling author, and historian

**March 22, 2022**    **Indianapolis: The Story of the Worst Sea Disaster in U.S. naval History** with naval historian Lynn Vincent

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