CATHOLIC INTOLERANCE IN THE MOVIE 'DOUBT'

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Abstract

1964 was a time of change, fear, uncertainty and doubt in the USA. The shifts of many ideals in America took place in the Catholic Church as well. Although intolerance has been a prominent characteristic in the history the Catholic Church, the movie director presents the clash between uncertainty and moral conviction. On the one hand, we have the classic, change-resistant, conservative, intolerant side of the Roman Catholic Church represented by Sister Aloysius and, on the other hand, we have Father Flynn who stands for its liberal, rebellious, and humane side, which reflects the changing, uncertain times.

The producer does not favor any side. The idea behind the movie is to make people explore their own doubts and certainties. There is no solid evidence either way, so any conclusion is completely based on individual speculation.

Keywords: doubt, Catholicism, conservatism, change, intolerance

Motto: "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty"
(Doubt)

Introduction

"Doubt" is the 2008 film adaptation of John Patrick Stanley's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Prize fictitious stage play "Doubt: A Parable". The movie centers on the dynamic between the austere and uncompromising nun Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep), director of a parochial school St. Nicholas from the notorious Bronx neighborhood of New York, and Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), one of the most popular teacher priests, whom she suspects of abusing a twelve-year-old black student.

The action takes place in 1964, when a wind of change blows across the USA, while conservatism is very high and the Catholic church very strong and strict. The conservative atmosphere of the 60s is highlighted by the dull atmosphere, the slow movement of the film, its dark and monotonous nature, and also by the static camera shots, the facial expressions and body language.

It was a time of change, fear, uncertainty and doubt for the US. The Cold War between the Western world (the US and its allies) and the East (the Soviet Union and the communist block) was in full swing. The US was still reeling from the near disaster of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the assassination of their president, John F. Kennedy in 1963. The civil rights movement and the youth movement were both taking hold. Young people started listening to music on small radios hidden under clothes, sweets came into fashion; black students started being admitted in private schools, the Beatles made their first appearance in America, and American troops would soon be entering the Vietnam War. The profound shifts and tensions taking place in American society and culture as well as globally, were felt in the Catholic Church as well. In the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican in Rome (1963), Pope Paul II addressed an appeal to renew the

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Catholic Church, to restore unity among all Christians, and to start a dialogue with the contemporary world by becoming less severe and more modern: "I want to open the windows of the church so that we can see out and the people can see in." (qtd. in Stoker1)

Pre- and Post-Vatican II Philosophy

The church was also changing after 1963. It came closer to the people: "we [the clergy and the nuns] are really just like them" (Doubt), says Father Flynn to Sister Aloysius. He reflects the thinking of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. Sister Aloysius's answer, "We are not like them. We are different, and we must be different. These working-class people depend on us" (Doubt), reflects the old thinking of the Bronx (New York) of the 1940s and 1950s. The Church was a protector, but a distant one. However, due to immigration, things were changing in 1950s America. Gradually, the people and the clergy came to resemble each other; they became "the same people", as Father Flynn said. Then, quite suddenly, a shift away from religion appeared. The number of the clergy started to diminish dramatically.

The wind of change is forecasted by the flower petals (symbols of spring, new life, change, innocence) that Father Flynn keeps in his bible at the beginning of the film and which he leaves on Aloysius's desk at the end.

The opening of the film, Father Flynn's sermon on the topic of doubt, is a nice way to introduce the central theme of the movie. "What do you do when you're not sure?". Father Flynn describes doubt as an integral part of one's relationship with God: "Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty." Although we may at times waver or get lost during our faith journey, Flynn assures his listeners that, "Even when we are lost, we are not alone." (Doubt). His message resonates the Pope's appeal at Vatican II towards the Catholic clergy of being in close connection with community, less rigid and more friendly.

Father Flynn's sermon about spreading rumors with the pillow feathers having been blown by the wind is associated with the rumors that cannot be taken back once put out there. Sister James finds it brilliant, but her superior, Sister Aloysius, is puzzled by it: "Is Father Flynn in doubt, is he concerned that someone else is in doubt?" (Doubt), she asks.

The middle-aged school principal Sister Aloysius is traditional in her approach to education. She represents the classic, change-resistant conservative. To her, Father Flynn embodies a rebellious liberal who contradicts the obedience and dogma that defines the Church and her life. She believes the hard way is usually the right way, harshly reminding her nuns, "Every easy choice today will have its consequences tomorrow." She believes in strict discipline and clear boundaries, in an authoritarian code of conduct between adults and children. She expresses some old-fashioned ideas in her talks with the younger Sister James: she rejects lay historical heroes and worldly writing instruments such as ballpoint

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pens: "Students really should only be learning scripts with true fountain pens" (Doubt). She also considers "Frosty the Snowman" a pagan song, as it does not contain the word 'Christmas' in its lyrics.

Her protective attitude towards children whom she would not allow any harm to happen, her powers of observation and intuition, although traditional, balance the bad connotation the word 'tradition' has in the movie.

Nothing suspicious so far. We begin to suspect Father Flynn when we find out that he has taken Donald Muller, a black boy, under his special protection, that he has been alone with him in the rectory and has returned to Sister James's class smelling of alcohol.

Our suspicions increase due to the scandals involving Catholic priests. Sister Aloysius has to respect the patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church, so she cannot go to the Bishop, Monsignor Benedict, to complain. Moreover, she knows Monsignor Benedict "thinks the sun rises and sets on Father Flynn" so he will not support her. In order to find out the truth and to protect the child, she takes the matter into her own hands. She calls Mrs. Muller, the black boy's mother, and has a heated and revealing conversation with her.

Mrs. Muller seems less worried about her child's supposed molestation. She knows she is black and lives in the reality of the 1964 uphill battle for civil rights. In a segregated society, any person protecting a black boy is accepted as a friend, and that leads to the acceptance of pedophilia and homosexual relationships as well. She also fears her son would be expelled from the school before graduation. She wants her son to finish this school in June, and then to go to high school and college. Thinking of her child's physical abuses by his father and by his public school classmates, for apparently being gay, all she wants is for him to graduate, which will happen soon, in eight months' time. She tells Sister Aloysius: "Let [Donald] take the good and leave the rest when he leaves this place in June. He knows how to do that. I taught him how to do that" (Doubt). Whatever Father Flynn's intentions may be, Donald's mother is happy to have somebody interested in her son.

After this meeting, although Father Flynn starts avoiding Donald Muller in an attempt to protect him against any harm, Sister Aloysius starts an investigation on her own. In the beginning, she considers inappropriate to ask the priest about her doubts. So does Sister James (Amy Adams) who oscillates between believing Sister Aloysius or Father Flynn. Sister Aloysius prefers to ask about his behavior in the previous parishes, especially because she knows about an earlier such case. In a male-dominated world and church, Sister Aloysius proves to be a strong woman, determined to protect the reputation of the church as an institution and to prove the guilt of Father Flynn: "I will do what needs to be done, Father, if it means I am damned to Hell!" (Doubt). Guilt exists and must be proved for sure is her intransigent Catholic message.

Her moral inflexibility is counterbalanced by Father Flynn's flexible, humane, unconventional character. Father Flynn, unlike Sister Aloysius, is close to his students. He

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coaches them in basketball, advises them on hygiene, , preaches sermons on tolerance and the destructive nature of gossip. While Sister Aloysius does not approve of the Pope's message to have more contact with the people, and hence advises Sister James to be less conversant with her students, Father Flynn is a modernist priest with long nails, who accepts all the worldly practices (pens, long nails, sugar in the tea, wine, 'pagan' songs, etc.) and intends to take his pupils out on a trip.

The Catholic Priest strongly denies the charges against him, believing that the school principal, Sister Aloysius, will never be able to find any incriminating evidence against him. He tries to defend himself, first by claiming authority as her superior, then by accusing her of simple intolerance.

During this time, Sister James is found in the middle of this scandal with sexual connotations; she is not fully convinced of Father Flynn's guilt although she is the one who tells Sister Aloysius about the meeting between Father Flynn and Donald, the black boy, in the rectory, about Donald, the altar boy, smelling of alcohol, and about the T-shirt secretly being returned to the boy's locker by Father Flynn. An innocent nun, she insists on seeing the best in people – whether it's her pupils or the unconventional, spiritually challenging new priest.

Flynn's explanation is that he wanted to protect the child and his privacy. The more suspicious Sister Aloysius is, the more confident Father Flynn seems. The end of the movie finds Father Flynn in a promoted position (a pastor in another parish) and Sister Aloysius lingering personal doubts in her mind about Father Flynn in particular and about the Catholic faith in general.

Catholic Intolerance

Intolerance is a prominent characteristic of the Catholic Church. The movie tackles themes of doubt, faith and certainty as well as themes of gossip, religion, morality and authority, moral ambiguity and Catholic intolerance. The title completely compresses the movie. Nothing is made amply clear, everything is subtle and blurred. However, the movie draws the viewer into the plot conclusively, with all the little clarity he is given, and is left with a tangible sense of doubt at the end.

The movie messages are both pro and against catholic teaching. Shanley, the movie producer, exploits the child molestation scandals afflicting the Catholic church. However, being set forty-four years ago, long before the molestation scandals, when Catholic priests were still highly respected even by non-Catholics for their morality and dedication, we think of guilt, doubt, faith and innocence as never being absolute truths.

The movie brings in the limelight Shanley's own experience in a Catholic school. The producer highlights the little contact between priests and nuns in the educational process and in the views about the world. On the one hand, we have the authoritarian, rigid, austere, and disciplinary side of the Roman Catholic Church represented by Sister Aloysius and, on the other hand, we have Father Flynn who stands for its loose and humane side.

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Shanley does not provide a definite answer about guilt or innocence at the end of the movie. Either side can be guilty or innocent. He is not interested in proving it one way or another. What he seems to blame is the lack or impossibility of dialogue and certainty. Absolute certainty is impossible. Sister Aloysius's certainty is based on instincts, not on evidence. At the end of the film, she loses what was most important to her: her blind Catholic certainty and faith in 'believe and do not inquire'.

On the other hand, there is a finger pointed at the male domination in the Catholic Church and the need for female 'holy terrors' to compensate for this inequality. We can assume Sister Aloysius resents Father Flynn among other things because he is a man who runs everything. To show us the discrepancy between the lives of nuns and priests, Zimmerman shows Sister Aloysius at "dinner with a handful of sisters who eat their meal politely and quietly, sipping their milk, exhibiting no sense of pleasure from the food that has been served to them. The film then cuts to a scene of Father Flynn and two other priests at dinner laughing and eating heartily, with drinks and cigars in hand, and telling indecorous stories which exposes the inequitable, hierarchical structure in the church that Sister Aloysius finds so infuriating but is helpless to do anything about – except seethe and conspire and perhaps let her imagination run away with itself." (6)

Conclusion

The conflict between Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn is "the conflict between old and new, between "status and change, between infallibility and uncertainty. Representing the modernizing tendencies appearing in the Catholic Church at the time, Father Flynn truly cares for the children at school and thinks it (the Church) should change its approach to teaching, while Sister Aloysius, representing the rigid, traditional, conservative side of Catholicism, believes in discipline and rules. And Shanley leaves us doubting. It causes us to start thinking and we never stop. Think how rare that is in a film" (Ebert 107). Indeed, as an audience, we are left to our own devices in judging Father Flynn's relationship to the young boy. This uncertainty and the clash between uncertainty and moral conviction is a rare and valuable thing in film today, especially in American film where, historically, the battle lines between right and wrong are clearly delineated, and the certainty of happy endings leaves nothing for the viewer to make his own.

The dilemmas and thus the questions in the mind of the viewer continue to the end. Why does Donald smile at the end of the film when Father Flynn, his mentor and only defender, leaves him? Then we have Sister Aloysius. The blind Catholic faith and the shadows of priestly pedophilia turn into shadows of her own. When Sister James says feeling suspicious about Father Flynn makes her feel farther from God, Sister Aloysius replies, self-confidently, with no shade of doubt, "When you take a step to address wrong-doing, you are taking a step away from God, but in his service"; however, the end of the film finds Sister Aloysius crying out "I have Doubts" (Doubt), which can refer to her doubts about Father Flynn's inappropriate behavior, or it can refer to her personal

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beliefs, doubts related to her decision, to the patriarchy of the Christian church, to her choices as a Catholic nun, or to her doubts about the life she has chosen.

Doubt is not weakness. Doubt brings about change. When doubts arise we start to question, and questioning brings about progress. 'Doubt' forces people to explore their own doubts and certainties, their pre-conceived notions and their inner restlessness. There is no solid, objective evidence either way, so the truth is open to individual interpretation; the viewer can thus re-create reality, progressing in the knowledge of both himself and the world.

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