

Nathan Wright
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“I Am Legend” – Mirroring Symbolic Religious Culture in America

The recent release of the movie “I Am Legend” has triggered chatter across the worldwide blogosphere and in thousands of movie theater lobbies; “This may be Will Smith’s finest hour,” “How completely can one person ruin a script?” “The car was cool.” This writer has previously commented on “I Am Legend” as a cultural statement on ethnicity, citing the anti-racial tendencies of directors, producers and casting directors. The movie could also be analyzed from several cultural viewpoints, such as; the historical context of pandemics in the world; the cultural context of subjects such as human isolation, human/animal relations, anarchy vs. civility, euthanasia, science vs. religion, product placement, the modern gatherer/hunter, and others; or the cultural context of the use of media within media. All these cultural topics would make for interesting analysis, but must be stayed for another time. Neither is it the point of this analysis to discuss whether this movie becomes a blockbuster, a cult classic, or is just another in a long line of remakes. This analysis will discuss the historical context of the novel, similarities between the novel and the movie, and how both the novel and the movie use the culture of religion and God as a framework for cutting out a place in America’s ever-increasing media landscape.

In 1954, author Richard Matheson wrote a book that mirrored his times. The times were filled with exciting new technologies that also caused trepidation. People of the United States of America were observing and talking about the new world they were very much a part of. It was a year that held many firsts. The world’s first atomic power

station constructed near Moscow, Russia and the launch of the world's first nuclear powered submarine, the USS Nautilus. The spread of disease was foremost in people's minds as this was the first year that a mass vaccination of children for polio began. Fear of the "Red Menace" was rampant as the cold war was in full swing, and Senator Joseph McCarthy continued his hunt for communist sympathizers. All this created a framework and worldview that readers of Matheson's book, and later, viewers of the movies based on the book, could most certainly relate to. Mr. Matheson traces the roots of his story back to a singular event:

[I Am Legend] came about because, when I lived in New York, I watched Dracula, the old Lugosi Dracula, at a motion picture theater, and it just occurred to me that if one vampire was frightening, then a whole world of vampires would really be frightening. That was the derivation of it (Riordan).

The 1954 Story

Post-war dust storms spread deadly bacteria across the earth causing a disease worse than death. Blue collar worker and family man Robert Neville faces the ordeal of having to send his deceased daughter to the fire pit, and burying his wife, both who died from the dreaded plague. Neville learns first hand why government officials insist on the cremation of dead disease victims when his wife returns from the grave, desiring only to suck her still-living husband's blood. Neville's daily routine includes restocking supplies that allow him to stay in his fortified home safe from the night-stalking vampires. He owns a lathe that he daily uses to make stakes to aid in the disposal of vampires he finds during the day. Neville is alone, the last uninfected human on the earth. And although he was a family man, he now finds comfort in liquor. It allows him the opportunity to forget

his loneliness for a time. At one point Neville sees a dog wandering the neighborhood that is not only alive, but appears uninfected. His desire for companionship is strong and so he leaves food for the dog on his porch in an effort to earn its trust. But at long last, just as the dog is nearing domestication, it is infected. Neville nurses the dog for a week before it dies. While burying his hopes with the dog he sees a woman in the distance, chases her down and compels her to come with him to his house. The woman, Ruth, claims to also to be immune and uninfected but through a blood test he finds she is lying. She knocks him out, afraid what he might do to her, and flees. Ruth is part of larger community of people who have kept their infection in check through a vaccine. Although she was sent to betray Neville to her people, she leaves a note telling all and giving him the chance to escape. He waits too long and is taken by the “new society” to await execution (Matheson).

The culture of religion in America

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” With that open invitation, U.S. citizens freely practice, preach, denounce, and shun religion. America is one of the most religious countries in the world.

Nearly every religion in the world has adherents or organized institutions in the United States. American religious institutions are large, powerful and influential in social and political life. Even Americans who are members of no established religion are likely to believe in God. According to a Gallup opinion survey, nearly all Americans, 98% of them, do, compared to 84% in Switzerland, 73% in France and 60% in Sweden (Essman).

In all iterations of “I Am Legend” the subject of God seems to play a central role in the framework of the story. In the 1954 story, Matheson fully explores why it is that vampires abhor the Christian cross. He explains that the cross is usually representative of eternal life with God, freedom from pain and strife. But vampires, who previously were Christian, “...regain consciousness beneath hot, heavy soil and know that death [has] not brought rest. To find themselves clawing up through the earth, their bodies driven now by a strange, hideous need” (Matheson, 105) could, he explains, cause psychological fears concerning anything religious or seemingly holy. A reflection of religion and God is now a reminder of what an individual spent mortal life yearning toward, but that now will never attain. In an effective flashback, Matheson places Neville wandering the streets where he is accosted by a religion hustler who invites him to “Come and be saved, brother, *saved*.” And although he resists, he finds himself in the middle of a revival where attendees are encouraged to confess their sins and be saved from the ungodly plague that has ravaged the earth. In prophetic utterance, the preacher in the revival tent asks his infected flock, “Do you want to fear the holy cross of God? Do you want to look into the mirror and not see the face that Almighty God as given you? Do you want to come crawling back from the grave like a monster out of hell?” Driving his point home the preacher asks the ultimate question: “I ask you—do you want to be turned into godless, night-cursed husks, into creatures of eternal damnation?” (Matheson, 102-3) thus sealing the psychological fate of all believers who find themselves lying in the cold, hard earth rather than walking through the pearly gates. Matheson appears to be reviling the religious mindset of life after death and personal worthiness before God. But it’s not just the Christian who will abhor the holy following his non-death. He explains that no matter

the religious affiliation, once the advocate finds himself in an eternal non-heaven, it's what he or she found holy previously that causes psychological breakdown; to a Jew the Torah, a Muslim the Koran, etc.

The impetus for this paper is the December 2007 release of the Warner Brothers movie "I Am Legend." The role of Robert Neville was played by Will Smith, it was directed by Francis Lawrence, with the screenplay written and adapted by Mark Protosevich and Akiva Goldsman. There are some similarities between this movie version (as opposed to two previous movie versions) and the 1954 story, but it is plain the screenplay was completely reworked and updated for the 21st century. For instance, in the mid 50s it is post-war dust storms that spread the deadly virus. In the new century a supposed cure for cancer has mutated and killed a vast majority of the world's population. Another: in the story he is simply a blue collar worker who learns by trial and error about the science of virology; in the movie of 2007 he is a military virologist desperately trying to solve the worldwide problem. As alluded, another difference between the novel and the most recent movie is the use of religion in the storyline. Matheson seems to use the aforementioned revival as an "I told you so" commentary. Whether Mr. Matheson is himself a religious man is not know to this author, but the 21st century story is influenced heavily by the culture of God and Christianity. The viewer gets an early foreshadowing of this as Neville races his GT500 Mustang through the empty streets of Manhattan. Amidst the abandoned vehicles, plastic-wrapped buildings, and weed-overgrown streets we see a poster as he drives by: "God Still Loves Us." Above the words on the poster is a familiar graphic butterfly image from the 70s. Moviegoers are left to wonder if this, in a similar manner to the original story, is poking

fun at believers with another “I told you so.” It is actually setting up an on-going symbolic butterfly theme that will be discussed in detail.

As viewers’ knowledge of Neville increases they find he does possess a very lonely, fractured version of faith in God. Based on his adoration of singing legend Bob Marley he believes, as the song states, “every little thing is gonna be all right.” And with that latent faith, Neville continues his daily routine that allows him to work out the salvation of man (Kuritz).

The Butterfly Symbol

Throughout the movie, at key points in the progression of Neville as a believer and the storyline in general, one or more butterflies appear. The first appearance, after the setup of the “God Still Loves Us” poster, is from Neville’s daughter, Marley. In this flashback she is seated in the back seat of the Explorer while the family is fleeing Manhattan Island before a quarantine takes effect. Like the hand-shadows created for childhood amusement, Marley attempts to interrupt her parents, “Daddy, look at the butterfly!” At that same moment the President of the United States is heard on the car radio, having issued a pandemic lockdown, and utters the words, “God save us all.” Minutes later, as Neville puts his wife and daughter on a helicopter to expedite their escape from the island, the little family offers a quick prayer for safety, Marley hands him her German Shepherd puppy to keep him company, and she is again seen showing her father the hand-made butterfly.

The butterfly symbolizes different things in different cultures. A French representation of the butterfly symbol seems best to capture these scenes from the movie.

Freedom is a concomitant characteristic of flight; [butterflies and moths] represent aspects of both flight and freedom. The French author and former prisoner of Devil's Island, Henri Charriere, had a butterfly tattooed on his chest. It symbolized freedom to him and gave him his nickname, "*Papillon*" which means butterfly in French (Gagliardi).

The double meaning of the word flight seems to dovetail nicely with the butterfly symbol and its use in this part of film. Not only does Neville hope the helicopter flight will take his loved ones to safety, they are also literally in a flight, or are fleeing for their lives. So symbolically, Marley expresses her family's urgent need for both freedom and flight using a simple hand-formed butterfly.

The next appearance in the movie of the butterfly symbol is the only time viewers see a live, or should it be said computer generated, butterfly. Neville is going about his tasks of the day, which include picking corn in his Central Park garden. He's talking to his dog, Samantha. As the dog looks up at her master, a butterfly flits closely by. Chance? Hardly. Within a few scenes both dog and master are thrust into a tomb of blackness as they barely escape with their lives from a lightless bank building. But knowing the location of a mutant hive allows Neville to set a trap and capture a young female mutant for use in his continuing attempts to find a cure. A compound that showed promise with rats, however, has no effect on the mutant human. Later that day Neville is lured into a mutant trap and Samantha is infected. Neville attempts to cure her with the same antidote, but in the end must put her down.

The Christian version of the butterfly symbol seems appropriate for its garden/Samantha appearance.

To Christians, the three stages of the butterfly's metamorphoses are symbolic of the three stages in the life cycle of Christ and the Christian. The caterpillar's non-stop eating and excremating reminds us of normal earthly life where people are often preoccupied with taking care of their physical needs. The chrysalis or cocoon resembles the tomb and the butterfly represents the resurrection into a new and glorious life free of material concerns and restrictions (Tucker).

The appearance of the butterfly near Samantha foreshadows the dog's death and passage into a glorious existence, as Tucker explains, "free of material concerns." Sam's death severs the last remaining link to his departed wife and daughter, and apparently his will to live as he attempts a suicide mission the following night. The dog had figuratively taken the place of his daughter as viewers see Neville early in the movie threatening loss of privilege if she didn't eat her vegetables.

In Neville's attempt at vengeance for the death of Samantha, he has knowingly put himself at risk. As a large mutant closes in for the kill flares light up the night and he is saved. A woman named Anna and a young boy named Ethan have followed Neville's radio signal and have, quite literally, arrived in the nick of time. She transports Neville back to his home just as the new day approaches, but in the process inadvertently betrays their location to the mutants. Later that day Neville gets acquainted with his new houseguests and takes exhausted Ethan up to his daughter's bedroom. As he lays the boy on the bed viewers see a pillow covered with felt butterflies. The significance of the butterfly in dreams is explained by the Blackfoot Indians:

You know that it is the butterfly who brings us our dreams -- who brings the news to us when we are asleep. Have you never heard a man say, when he sees a

butterfly fluttering over the prairie, ‘There is a little fellow flying about that is going to bring news to someone tonight?’ Or have you not heard a person say after the fire burns low and the people begin to make up their beds about the lodge, ‘Well, let us go to bed and see what news the butterfly will bring’ (Gagliardi)?

The question now is, what news does the dream butterflies bring to young Ethan while he slumbers? Following the pattern established up to this point, they are bringers of very bad news. But while Ethan sleeps, Neville prepares for night by closing and locking doors, windows, and reinforcements. Anna invites Neville to come with her and Ethan to the survivor colony in Vermont but he refuses to believe such a colony exists and questions Anna how she would know. She confesses that God told her and that was how she found Neville as well. “The world is a much quieter place,” she says. “All you have to do is listen.” Adamantly Neville refutes Anna’s claims of personal revelation and proclaims “There is no God!” Soon the sounds of the night stalkers are heard closer than usual and it is determined the mutants followed them home the previous night. Mutants swarm toward the house. Neville has prepared for this contingency and throws a breaker that fills Washington Square with dazzling light. The mutants are undeterred and knock down and destroy the lights. His last line of defense is explosives planted in abandoned cars. Many of the mutants are taken out in the blast, but the leader and another horde soon follow. Neville, Anna, and Ethan retreat to the downstairs lab and the protection of a Plexiglas enclosure which also contains the sedated mutant female – except she’s not a mutant any longer. Neville’s most recent efforts have created the cure.

This revelation puts Neville in the position of savior, and his long-sought desire to help the human race has come to fruition. The mutant leader is bent on eating the flesh of the three humans and body-smashes the enclosure, creating ever-increasing cracks in the glass. Neville attempts in vain to communicate with the mutants. "I can help you! I can save you! I can still fix this!" In the midst of this noise, everything for Neville goes quiet. He sees the bloodthirsty mutant still smashing the glass, he sees the frightened Anna and Ethan, and he sees the cured mutant. And then he hears the voice of his daughter say, "Daddy, look at the butterfly!" It is at this point the remaining two symbolic butterflies appear. Neville again looks at the glass and sees a large golden butterfly emerge from the cracks. He turns and looks at Anna and for the first time notices a small butterfly tattoo on her neck.

Ronald Gagliardi points out another butterfly symbolism, this one regarding divine inspiration.

Whenever the Blackfoot Indians incorporate a butterfly symbol on one of their lodges "it signifies that the designs and colors adorning that lodge are not those of the mortal Indian who painted them but were shown to him in a dream by the Great Spirit." The same butterfly symbol is interpreted differently depending on where it is placed. If it appears embroidered on a piece of buckskin and tied in a baby's hair it means dream-or sleep-bringer. If seen on a lodge it signifies divine inspiration.

Neville finally knows what must be done. Not only does he know God exists, he knows what he must do to help further God's plan. He extracts some blood from the cured mutant, fills a vial and hands it to Anna. "Maybe this is why you're here." He

opens a small alcove with a metal door, ushers Anna and Ethan inside, and starts to close the door. “You’ll be safe in here. Wait till morning and then you can get away.” But Anna hesitates. “There’s room for you. What are you doing?” Neville refers to the mutants. “These guys are not gonna stop. And maybe I’m finally listening.” With that, Neville pulls out a grenade, and like a moth to the flame meets the mutants head-on in a fiery sacrifice.

When asked if they noticed the butterfly theme and what it meant to them, moviegoers included comments such as “change,” “transformation,” “freedom,” “peace,” and “beauty” (Wright). Success in a cultural context could include all these, but the overarching theme of success in this movie, based on its title, is immortality. By finding the cure and stopping the antagonists, he not only saved his friends but saved the remainder of the human race, thus reaching the status of legend.

Conclusion

The culture of God in America runs very deep. There are people, based on the aforementioned First Amendment, who take both sides of the God/religion debate very seriously. The separation of church and state is a concept that people on both sides favor, but find they disagree just how much or to what degree. When a media offering such as “I Am Legend” hits the streets, it is expected to satisfy and/or dissatisfy consumers on many different levels. For instance, on one level Will Smith fans will likely be pleased no matter what. His performance was fine and there were enough scenes without a shirt to make the rest happy. Another level would be fans of the original story by Richard Matheson. Movie reviewer Bob Bloom says reading the credits signals a problem with that. “The credits read screenplay by Mark Protosevich and Akiva Goldsman, based on a

screenplay by John William & Joyce H. Corrington, based on the novel by Richard Matheson.” On another level, many moviegoers were likely in the dark about the origin of the story and only went because it looked exciting or interesting. Once the movie was out and received reviews some viewers may have attended on recommendation. The level at which the movie is analyzed in this paper may or may not be evident to moviegoers who come only expecting a happy ending. But that’s what they get.

“I Am Legend” goes full circle from certainty that God does not love us anymore – evidenced by deserted streets and near-zero population – to the emergence of a new prophet; a prophet who believes so strongly in his newly acquired faith and God’s plan, that he is willing to “lay down his life for his friends” (John).

Rise up this mornin',
Smiled with the risin' sun,
Three little birds
Sit by my doorstep
Singin' sweet songs
Of melodies pure and true,
Sayin', ("This is my message to you-ou-ou:")

Singin': "Don't worry 'bout a thing,
'Cause every little thing is gonna be all right."
Singin': "Don't worry (don't worry) 'bout a thing,
'Cause every little thing is gonna be all right!"

Bob Marley

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