

Come Again?! Cecil B. DeMille's Belief in Reincarnation and Karma: Its Cinematic (and Other) Consequences

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Abstract

The legendary movie director, Cecil B. DeMille, helped co-found both Paramount Pictures and Hollywood, and quickly became America's preeminent biblical filmmaker. He employed numerous strategies to achieve his artistic ends, but none as astute as the audiovisual engineering of his profound belief in reincarnation and karma; which is still not very well-known today amongst the public or scholars. Consequently, the critical religion, film, and DeMille literature, along with selected feature films highlighting his esoteric views, were reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens. It was concluded that DeMille's religious beliefs were complex, wide-ranging, and included various reincarnation and karma incidents deftly engineered throughout his filmic fare; thus needing urgent critical reappraisal of his entire cinematic *oeuvre*. Further research into DeMille studies, sacred cinema, and the hidden metaphysical teachings therein is highly warranted, warmly recommended, and already a long overdue aspect of Hollywood history.

Introduction: Hollywood's Best Known Unknown

Legendary producer-director¹ Cecil B. DeMille² (1881-1959), affectionately known as "CB", was a progenitor of Paramount Pictures, a seminal cofounder of Hollywood, and an indelible emblem of the Golden Age of the American cinema. During his artistic apprenticeship and seventy feature films history, he pioneered numerous innova-

tions in the arts, sciences, and business of moviemaking.³

Not only did he become the iconic image of a Hollywood film director, especially wearing his trademark puttees and barking orders through a megaphone to milling minions, but he also became "a master of the film narrative."⁴ He is chiefly remembered today for his four unforgettable Bible movies: *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), plus "the near impossibility of mentioning his name without the epithet "master of the biblical epic" attached to it."⁵

And yet, despite his exceptional filmmaking fecundity, fame, and fortune, DeMille still remains "Hollywood's best known unknown,"⁶ ironically, due to his directorial longevity (1913-1956) coupled with being "one of the most complex and multi-faceted men in America."⁷ Indeed, "no one on the Hollywood scene ever contradicted his own legends more consistently than he did as you got to know him better and better."⁸ As Hollywood's leading cinematic lay preacher he became "virtually the Sunday school teacher for the nation,"⁹ or as one anonymous Protestant churchman proudly proclaimed:

About the Author

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“The first century had its Apostle Paul, the thirteenth century had St. Francis, the sixteenth had Martin Luther and the twentieth has Cecil B. DeMille.”¹⁰ Although Cecil claimed near the end of his life that: “my ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has,”¹¹ his own religious heritage and esoteric interests were just as complex and unappreciated as the public man himself.

Consequently, to address this underappreciated facet of Cecil’s life, work, and art, selected feature films along with the critical religion, film, and DeMille literature were reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (i.e., focusing primarily upon the textual world *inside*, but not *outside*, the frame).¹² This film studies methodology assumes that audiences are cultured, enjoy, and accept the cinema as fine art, whilst it fosters the interpretation of motifs, symbols, and themes deployed therein. All of which are fruitful pedagogic steppingstones for guided discussion within the classroom, home, or pulpit.

DeMille’s Complex Religious Heritage and Inter-Faith Interests

Cecil was the biological son of a Christian father, Henry Churchill DeMille, an “Episcopal lay reader”¹³ who studied for the church but was never ordained,¹⁴ and a Sephardic Jewish mother, Matilda Beatrice “Bebe” DeMille nee Samuel,¹⁵ an “English Jew.”¹⁶ Consequently, Cecil has sometimes been academically described as a “half-Jew”¹⁷ which he also called himself,¹⁸ but nevertheless, he firmly declared within his autobiography that: “I am an Episcopalian.”¹⁹ Although DeMille *was* “a religious man, a genuine believer,”²⁰ he had an *unconventional* belief in religion and God and was “no Bible-thumper. He put a far higher premium on faith than on dogma, but belief was there,”²¹ and as filmographer Robert S. Birchard noted: “Despite his religious epics, DeMille had made some disturbing films

hinting that he didn’t exactly embrace the old-time religion: *The Godless Girl* [1928] showed some sympathy for the atheist heroine, and *Adam’s Rib* [1923] had an evolutionary flashback to caveman days.”²² Nor did his religious orientations and unconventional tastes stop there.

Throughout his life, DeMille explored numerous religious phenomena *beyond* the traditional mainstream faiths, as his New York Masonic Lodge membership demonstrated,²³ and wherein his religious eclecticism embraced other belief systems tinged with the esoteric, the spiritual, and what might today be called the “New Age.” In essence, DeMille was a spiritual seeker who rejected the twin evils of churchianity and priestcraft claiming: “I am not a regular church-goer. I do not boast of that: I state it as a fact. I might be a better man if I were.”²⁴ DeMille disliked churchianity in particular because: “There’s a danger in worshipping the Church and forgetting that your worship should go to God. You should worship God. People forget that and the priests sometimes permit them to forget it so that they worship the Church, the forms, the rituals, and they lose sight of the Great Divine Mind which is in all of us, and which we can call.”²⁵ Furthermore, as DeMille lectured his costume designer, Arnold Friberg:

...the truth is put upon the world and the priesthood and that thing becomes subverted. The thing that once was priesthood now becomes priestcraft. The physical power and the glory of the church—the building and so forth...starts to become more important than the core of the thing itself and pretty soon the real thing is lost and it becomes a church of men instead of a church of God.²⁶

That is, DeMille was more interested in divinity than dogma, essence rather than form. As Robert S. Birchard reported: “For DeMille...God could be known only on the most personal level. In later years he would go out of his way to avoid outwardly offending organized religion, but the fact remains that one almost never finds a sympathetic

clergyman of any belief as a major character in DeMille's work."²⁷ In fact, some DeMille-an clergymen were downright scary, notably the villainous Inquisitors seeking to destroy Joan of Arc within his religious biopic *Joan the Woman* (1917). "The pictorial treatment of these clerics makes them seem as implacable as they are inhumane. Their posturings make the cassock and cowl the very image of cruelty, vanity, self-indulgence, and inscrutability."²⁸

DeMille's dislike of priestcraft was particularly self-evident in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), his last but "long-lasting pop-culture artefact,"²⁹ wherein the Egyptian high priest Jannes (Douglas Dumbrille) pleaded to Pharaoh Rameses (Yul Brynner) before the Hebrew Moses (Charlton Heston) and said: "The people desert the temple. They turn from the gods," but to both of them Rameses bitterly retorted: "What gods? You prophets [Hebrew] and priests [Egyptian] made the gods that you may prey upon the fears of men!" Nor was DeMille's anti-organized religion stance just an aberration at the end of his long directorial career; it was also evident at the start of his career within *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), notably its flashback to the Spanish conquest of Montezuma and the pagan Aztecs of Ancient Mexico. As Robert S. Birchard noted: "Both civilizations in the film distort religious values to their own ends: the Aztecs use the appeasement of their gods as pretext for human sacrifice; the Christians conquer in the name of the Cross. For DeMille, the institutions of men are corrupt. He may revel in the glory of pageantry and ceremony, but he always sees through the hypocrisy of invoking the name of God to conquer or subjugate an enemy."³⁰

DeMille also believed that "Man, every man has divinity in him,"³¹ which his Moses (Charlton Heston) had mouthed twice within *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Firstly, in full view of the forbidden slopes of Sinai, Moses philosophically mused to Sephora (Yvonne De Carlo) saying: "If this God is God—He would live on every mountain—in every valley. He would not be only the God of Israel or Ishmael alone, but of all men. It

is said He created all men in His image—then He would dwell in every heart—in every mind—in every soul." Secondly, after Moses met God upon the holy high place and returned home full of spiritual awe, he sagely said of God to an inquiring Joshua (John Derek) and before Sephora: "He is not flesh but spirit...the light of Eternal Mind—and I know that His light is in every man."

DeMille was also a strong advocate of personal prayer. He claimed that: "Prayer is the most powerful force in the world, if we can use it. It's more powerful than the atomic bomb, more powerful than electricity."³² Prior to releasing *The Ten Commandments* (1956), he publicly said: "we cannot remain close to God unless we set aside periods of time as God's time—periods of rest from the affairs of the world and the body to seek true communion with the Spirit of Truth, in meditation, in prayer, and vital contact of our minds with the Divine Mind."³³ Journalist Bela Kornitzer once asked if he was a religious man and DeMille answered:

I am one if faith in God and belief in Divinity is religion...But I must say that I don't believe the practice of forms is necessary in religion. In many instances it is apt to deprive the thought of its religious value, if it is presented in a definite form that is repeated day after day over and over. I think the importance of contact with a Supreme Being, or a Supreme Mind, is basic...Religion, to me, is the contact of the human being with the Divinity.³⁴

When asked by an unnamed journalism student: "It may sound a little foolish, but do you believe in God?" DeMille thoughtfully replied: "It's much more than that. It isn't just a belief. It's a knowledge. I *know* there is a God. I know that a God answers prayer. I know that prayer is the most powerful force in the world."³⁵ Actor Donald Curtis, who played the Hebrew Mered in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and was a real-world minister-in-training, brought the Science of Mind minister Ernest Holmes to work, and "DeMille was so taken with Holmes that he

spent two hours—on the set, with the clock ticking—two hours discussing God and the Bible and metaphysics with him.”³⁶ Similarly, Mormon artist and DeMille’s costumer Arnold Friberg reported: “I was surprised at his [CB’s] grasp of the spiritual things. Many times I was called in on what they called the-ological consultation.”³⁷

DeMille also displayed a strong nature-mysticism streak; especially concerning his animal sanctuary-cum-ranch-cum-private retreat appropriately named “Paradise.” He particularly liked to be in “communion with the Spirit of all things, who seems somehow closer when one is close to the elements of earth and wood and water and to the creatures whose lives pulse with nature’s own rhythm of the seasons and the sun and the dark.”³⁸ DeMille also liked Buddha, statues of which featured in *The Cheat*, the modern portion of *The Ten Commandments* (1923), and were located within his Culver City Studio. This pleasant surprise prompted journalist Alice Williamson to muse: “he wouldn’t surround himself with these as mere ornaments or curiosities. She guesses (and she guesses right) that Buddha means something to the man who has brought together these... emblems of a great teacher... A conceited man has no reverence. Cecil de Mille has it as one of his most intimate, if least recognized qualities.”³⁹ Indeed, DeMille financially supported the translator of Buddhist sacred Scriptures to enable him to finish his project.⁴⁰ Overall, as actor Lisa Mitchell succinctly summed up Cecil: “He was a metaphysician who passionately loved the Bible, was not a regular churchgoer, and referred to God as the Divine Mind.”⁴¹

The Esoteric DeMille and Selected Reincarnation Reminiscences

Throughout his life, DeMille explored numerous religious phenomena beyond the traditional mainstream faiths, as his New York Masonic Lodge membership demonstrated, and wherein his religious eclecticism embraced other belief systems tinged with the esoteric, the spiritual, and what might today be called the “New Age.”

In particular, the metaphysician “De Mille was deeply interested in the philosophy of survival after death and in psychical research,”⁴² as was Geraldine Farrar, DeMille’s opera star of *Joan the Woman* (1917), and her mother who claimed to be a life-long “sensitive.”⁴³ In fact, DeMille acknowledged

the theme of reincarnation within the flashback of this silent Joan of Arc film by tentatively claiming: “It was an interesting idea, with its hint of reincarnation which appealed particularly to Jeanie Macpherson [DeMille’s script-writer]. I have used historical flashbacks in a number of other pictures.”⁴⁴ Further indications of Cecil’s esoteric inclinations are evident within a 1936 research equipment list that included an *Abridgement of the Secret Doctrine* by

H.P. Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society, and a book on Atlantis, another favorite arcane topic.⁴⁵ As Robert S. Birchard reported: “DeMille had long been attracted to the themes of mysticism and reincarnation...but he attributed these elements to Christianity rather than occult forces.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Cecil was especially interested in the arcane concept of reincarnation,⁴⁷ which was advocated by his employee-cum-paramour Jeanie Macpherson,⁴⁸ and was very well-known amongst his other close employees. For example, Cecil’s protégé actor Gloria Swanson reported that DeMille “believed in reincarnation and tried to demonstrate it in these pageants, these switches in time, these presentations of people living in different ages simultaneously on the screen. He actually believed that people had to come back to earth and suffer for the sins of their past lives.”⁴⁹ Henry Wilcoxon, actor and Cecil’s right-hand man similarly claimed: “it’s no secret that Mr. DeMille very firmly believed in reincarnation (and made a movie on the

subject as a matter of fact—*The Road to Yesterday* [1925]) and believed that his affinity for various historical periods was due to his actually having *been* there.⁵⁰ As such, the writer argues that DeMille's filmic flashbacks were not just dramatic storytelling devices (and sometimes viewed unfavorably because of it),⁵¹ but that they were *also* succinct cinematic statements of Cecil's reincarnation beliefs that buttressed and overlapped his Christian convictions, esoteric preoccupations, and dramatic needs as an avowed pop culture professional.⁵²

Further hints of DeMille's belief in reincarnation and rebirth are also buried throughout his many personal statements, but which might otherwise be automatically interpreted as soothing words by DeMille-the-caring-Christian rather than DeMille-the-esotericist (possibly both roles considering his trademark penchant for multi-layering and subtextual engineering). For example, regarding the demise of actor Rudolph Valentino, he said: "In Mr. Valentino's death we have lost a great artist. But fortunately we can look on *death as progress and not as the finish*" [my emphasis].⁵³ DeMille's adopted son Richard provided another hint of Cecil's esotericism when he reported: "In 1946 I went with him to the hospital to visit Jeanie Macpherson a few days before she died. He held her hand and told her *they would surely meet in the next world*. She murmured that they would" [my emphasis].⁵⁴

Although there are no profound declarations of his reincarnation or rebirth beliefs within his posthumously published autobiography (whether due to self-censorship or the Editor's redaction is uncertain), nevertheless, subtle hints therein point in that esoteric direction. For example, when his brother William was dying, Cecil said: "In our more than seventy years we had watched together many times the infinitely varied splendor of the setting sun; and one day, together, *we shall see it rise again*" [my emphasis].⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Cecil said: "With my family and Bill's settled close enough together for frequent going back and forth, our wives good friends, our daughters going to the same

school, with Gladys Rosson and her brothers, Jeanie Macpherson, Neil McCarthy, Anne Bauchens and others forging the bonds that only death can break (*if death can, which I do not believe*), the good pattern of life was taking shape" [my emphasis].⁵⁶

Actor Clint Walker overheard DeMille dictate a letter that said: "'Thank you for your very kind letter of condolence on the recent death of my brother [William]," he began. "I do not grieve for my brother, however, for *I have always looked upon death as the changing of an old garment for a new one*" [my emphasis],⁵⁷ that is, a Western formulation of the reincarnation doctrine, and which is also a garment-related metaphor used in the East (Bhagavad Gita 2:22). Further hints exist within Cecil's favorite poem entitled "Evolution,"⁵⁸ which was "full of splendid images of a love affair that spanned eternity—from the caves of Neolithic man to Del Monico's in 1890s New York."⁵⁹ According to publicist David Freeman, "DeMille believed in Darwinian evolution, and had no trouble reconciling it with the basic teachings of Genesis,"⁶⁰ thus revealing Cecil's postmodernist religious stance well ahead of today's science-faith, evolution-Bible, Darwin-Genesis discourses.⁶¹

However, DeMille was not deeply into brute biological evolution, but rather, spiritual evolution of the incarnation kind that had worthwhile practical consequences (i.e., the eternal spirit inhabits a series of physical bodies for soul growth reasons). As he once mystically advised his actors: "There is something very important that you cannot neglect—the *development of your own soul or essence*—because that is the thing that will make you valuable. It's as you develop from within that you gain power" [my emphasis].⁶² DeMille also viewed humanity as a conduit for the Divine and claimed: "Man has not invented anything. He has only discovered the possibilities of what already exists. He is *a channel through which Divine Wisdom flows*" [my emphasis].⁶³ This Divine transmission idea was also reflected within *The Ten Commandments* (1956) when Moses (Charlton Heston) said to Sephora (Yvonne

De Carlo): “By myself I am nothing. It is the power of God which uses me to work His will.”

Further hints of spirit-based reincarnation and rebirth wrapped inside overt religious references (in the tradition of Luke 20:27-38 KJV) is clearly detectable within DeMille’s story of the grub turning into a dragonfly, which is thematically akin to the caterpillar turning into a butterfly that is itself a symbolic motif for spiritual transformation, resurrection, immortality, rebirth, new life, and the awesome powers of regeneration.⁶⁴ Yet, DeMille recounted his insect-based reincarnation story with a decidedly Christian flavor; presumably not to offend his fundamentalist followers and/or to subtly re-educate them about Jesus’ incarnation (John 1:14 KJV), which itself could be seen as a type of reincarnation (i.e., from heavenly form to earthly form then back to heavenly form again at death).⁶⁵ As Cecil dramatically recounted:

One day while I was there [Maine woods], sitting in a rowboat on a lake, I saw enacted on the gunwale of the boat a little grub turning into a brilliant dragonfly. It was *the drama of eternal resurrection*: when it was completed, the dragonfly darted off, shimmering in the sunlight, to a new life, leaving behind only the drab little husk from which it had emerged. I suppose that half-elusive fragments from the Gospels drifted into my mind: Our Lord’s sayings about the lilies of the field and the single sparrow that falls [Matt. 6:26, 28 KJV]. *Here I had seen life come from death*. If Our Father does this for a dragonfly, what must He do for us? [my emphasis].⁶⁶

DeMille’s Gospel quote about the lilies of the field and sparrow could be seen as a biblical affirmation of faith by DeMille-the-Christian, but *also* as a redirection tactic to placate those potential fundamentalist followers who may have suspected that he was dangerously drifting towards reincarnation; which he *was* doing as DeMille-the-esotericist before de-

liberately interrupting himself with that well-known Gospel reference.

DeMille and the Karma Concept

DeMille’s belief in reincarnation and rebirth with its attendant connotation of karmic consequences was strongly detectable within Moses’ (Charlton Heston’s) throne room prayer to God in *The Ten Commandments* (1956). After Pharaoh Rameses (Yul Brynner) agreed to let his people go, Moses responded with the line: “where every man shall reap what he has sown.” He did this in the context of freedom, and it had strong biblical resonances (e.g., Jer. 12:13; Hos. 8:7; 1 Cor. 9:11 KJV),⁶⁷ but subtextually speaking, it was *also* a common Western formulation of the belief in karma, that “Oriental doctrine related to reincarnation which teaches essentially that every thought and deed must eventually create its own effects, which must then be endured or enjoyed by the individual concerned.”⁶⁸ DeMille had earlier reiterated the karma concept when Prince Moses interrupted Baka (Vincent Price) in the process of killing Joshua (John Derek) with a whip and said: “Death will bring death, Baka” before he promptly killed the Egyptian master builder and made himself a murderous outlaw-cum-Egyptian outcast. Indeed, Robert Klepper used the non-Christian concept and language of reincarnation without mentioning the “R” word to describe DeMille’s two-part silent version of *The Ten Commandments* (1923). He called it “a classic story of *the effects of karma* in two different eras of history, demonstrating that the [ten] commandments are just as valid now as they were in the time of Moses” [my emphasis].⁶⁹

However, it was the tenth plague, the death of all the Egyptian firstborn within *The Ten Commandments* (1956) that DeMille’s concept of karma reached a theological and dramatic highpoint. According to the biblical account:

And Pharaoh said unto him [Moses],
Get thee from me, take heed to thyself,
see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die.

And Moses said, Thou hast spoken well, I will see thy face again no more. And the Lord said unto Moses, Yet will I bring one more plague upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence: when he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence forth...And Moses said, Thus saith the Lord, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: And all the first born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even, unto the

firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more (Exod. 10:28-11:6 KJV).

But it was DeMille's esoteric spin to have Pharaoh Rameses (not God) dictate the terms of his own demise to Moses, which boomeranged devastatingly upon himself in classic karmic law-and-effect fashion:

- Rameses:** If you bring another plague upon us, it is not your God but I who will turn the Nile red with blood.
- Moses:** As your father's father turned the streets of Goshen red with the blood of our male children! If there is one more plague on Egypt, it is by your word that God will bring it—and there shall be so great a cry throughout the land, that you will surely let the people go.
- Rameses:** Come to me no more Moses! For on the day you see my face again, you will surely die!
- Moses:** So let it be written.
[Moses leaves Pharaoh with Aaron {John Carradine} in tow. Rameses says to his high priest Jannes {Douglas Dumbrille}, his Commander and the court councilors]
- Rameses:** I will give this spawn of slaves and his God an answer the world will not forget! Commander of the Host—call in the chariots from Tanis. There shall be one more plague! Only it will come upon the slaves of Goshen. The firstborn of each house shall die—beginning with the son of Moses!

DeMille dramatically reinforced this scene when Nefretiri (Anne Baxter) had Moses' wife Sephora (Yvonne De Carlo) and son Gershom (Tommy Duran) escorted to Midian to avoid the forthcoming Egyptian slaughter

(plus remove Sephora so that she could try and woo back Moses). Once Moses' wife and child had departed, Nefretiri had a private moment with Moses and discovered the shocking truth:

- Nefretiri:** Rameses is massing the Lybian axemen—the chariots—the Sardinian swordsmen...
- Moses:** Why? Tell me why!
- Nefretiri:** To destroy the firstborn of Israel.
- Moses:** Oh God, my God—out of his own mouth comes Thy judgment.
- Nefretiri:** But I have saved your son Moses!
- Moses:** It is not my son who will die. It is...it is the firstborn of Egypt. It is your son Nefretiri.
- Nefretiri:** No! You would dare strike Pharaoh's son!
- Moses:** In the hardness of his heart Pharaoh has mocked God and brings death to his own son!
- Nefretiri:** But it is my son Moses. You would not harm my son.

- Moses:** By myself I am nothing. It is the power of God which uses me to work His will.
- Nefretiri:** You would not let Him do this to me. I saved your son!
- Moses:** I cannot save yours.
- Nefretiri:** Your God listens to you Moses!
- Moses:** About midnight, the Destroyer will come into the midst of Egypt, and all the firstborn shall die from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of his servants.
- Nefretiri:** When you were Prince of Egypt, you held me in your arms. When you were a condemned slave, I threw myself at your feet before the Court of Pharaoh... because I loved you Moses.
- Moses:** It is the Lord who executes judgment Nefretiri... Go back to your son.

Rameses' deadly words-cum-deeds had back-fired upon himself in devastating karmic fashion, which also satisfied DeMille-the-dramatist because one of the best forms of revenge that audiences can vicariously indulge in (engineered by DeMille-the-people's-director) is to have one's enemies hoisted upon their own petards. This act morally balances out the effects of the "bad" deed (i.e., moral equilibrium as a form of natural justice), which itself is another Western formulation of the karma doctrine.

Further hints of DeMille's belief in karma, but this time of the instantaneous variety, are easily detectable within his silent melodrama *Something to Think About* (1920). Ruth Anderson (Gloria Swanson) and Jim Dirk (Monte Blue) run away together on the eve of Ruth's unwanted marriage to David Markley (Elliott Dexter). Consequently, Ruth's angry father, Luke Anderson (Theodore Roberts) cried out in rage: "I pray God I may never see her ungrateful face again." Sparks fly up, and he is instantly blinded, or as a tart card title reminds the audience, "If we ask a curse—we got a curse!"⁷⁰ This common folk belief is the equivalent of "What goes around comes around," and is another Western formulation of the karma doctrine.

DeMille's Other Unorthodox Religious Beliefs and Esoteric Associates

Additional hints of DeMille's unorthodox views are detectable when Berengaria (Loretta Young) said to Saladin (Ian Keith)

within *The Crusades* (1935): "Oh what if we call him Allah or God, shall men fight because they travel different roads to him? There's only one God."⁷¹ This DeMilleian belief via onscreen dialogue was the equivalent of "All rivers run to the sea" (for Hindus), "All spokes lead to the hub of the wheel" (for Buddhists), and an earlier equivalent of Moses' (Charlton Heston's) interreligious claim within *The Ten Commandments* (1956): "He would not be only the God of Israel or Ishmael alone, but of all men." Indeed, Cecil's Crusader adventure was outstanding for portraying the Moors and Saladin as decent human beings and not the Muslim monsters some Christians may have wanted depicted.⁷² When DeMille "wasn't promoting one of his current releases he would sometimes refer to it as his favorite film. He believed in the message of religious tolerance he felt he had injected into the story,"⁷³ and he also believed that God's word was recycled to counteract the evils of priesthood and churchianity, his pet religious hates.⁷⁴

Furthermore, DeMille's unorthodox side also encompassed having his astrological chart cast,⁷⁵ receiving psychic communications from Irish medium, Eileen Garrett, who in 1933 worked for the Californian branch of the American Society for Psychical Research,⁷⁶ the willing acceptance of a lucky rabbit's foot⁷⁷ and a lucky theatre cat,⁷⁸ in addition to contemplating an actor's astrological sign as part of his decision-making processes.⁷⁹ Cecil even used the same camera from his 1914 *Squaw Man* on the first take

on all his subsequent silent films for good luck.⁸⁰ Within his Americana railway film, *Union Pacific* (1939), DeMille had Mollie Monahan (Barbara Stanwyck) read tea-leaves as part of her mysterious charm, and in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Rameses I's high priest (uncredited) referred to astrologers' prognostications about an "evil star," all of which indicated DeMille's comfort concerning divinatory and other esoteric practices. As actor Mary Pickford said of Cecil: "He's one of the finest *metaphysicians* I've ever met. He knows the Bible from cover to cover. I'm sure that he's just as conversant with all of the great philosophical and metaphysical works" [my emphasis].⁸¹

In typically complex fashion, DeMille displayed his own mystical inclinations when he claimed: "I do not much believe in "luck." *I think there is something deeper at work in the ordering of human events.* I could not be Henry DeMille's son without *believing in a Divine Providence, and I have had too many experiences of it in my own life to let me doubt it*" [my emphasis].⁸² According to publicist Ann Del Valle: "Mr. DeMille believed firmly that the people he needed in *The Ten Commandments* [1956] were sent to him."⁸³ His firm belief in Divine destiny and heavenly help were dramatically indicated following his massive heart attack whilst filming his second Moses movie. Despite Dr. Max Jacobson's orders to rest, DeMille ignored him claiming: "I'm seventy-three years old. I've lived long enough to know that if this project is going to be my last, *so be it.* But this is not a normal film. You know that. This is special. This is about the power of God. And *if it is meant to be, I will have the strength to finish it*" [my emphasis].⁸⁴ DeMille promptly returned to work and finished filming helped by prayer and a bit of pharmaceutical assistance.⁸⁵ It was as if DeMille was Heston's Moses claiming: "my feet are set upon a road I must follow."

Further indications of Cecil's esoteric inclinations are evident within a 1936 research equipment list that included an *Abridgement of the Secret Doctrine* by H.P. Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society, and a book on Atlantis, another favorite arcane topic.

Another side of DeMille's unorthodox beliefs was revealed when actor Charles Laughton asked DeMille if he was religious, and Cecil answered: "I like to believe there's a little bit of God in DeMille and a little bit of DeMille in God."⁸⁶ The idea that God and man are intimate reflections of each other is a common biblical belief (Gen. 1:26), but *also* a common esoteric belief,⁸⁷ which was touchingly hinted at within the epilogue of DeMille's posthumously published autobiography:

Among the papers in her father's room, Cecilia Harper found these notes, penciled in his handwriting: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be

the name of the Lord. It can only be a short time...until these words, the first in the Episcopal funeral service, are spoken over me...After those words are spoken, what am I?...I am only what I have accomplished. How much good have I spread? How much evil have I spread? *For whatever I am a moment after death--a spirit, a soul, a bodiless mind--I shall have to look back and forward, for I have to take both with me*" [my emphasis].⁸⁸

Indeed, interest in religion and esotericism ran throughout the DeMille family, neighbors, and business partners. For example, Mary Moon was the biological half-sister of Richard de Mille; Cecil's adopted son and the biological son of Cecil's brother, William (resulting from an affair with Lorna Moon). Mary was employed at Paramount in the steno pool and worked for Cecil in the DeMille bungalow before DeMille Productions closed down. According to Richard de Mille, Mary was so interested in esoteric matters: "She took up psychical research. A photograph of a soul leaving a dying body taught her that death is not the end."⁸⁹ Cecil

also had neighbors interested in the psychic world: “Just across DeMille Drive lived Hamlin Garland, author of *A Son of the Middle Border* and *Forty Years of Psychic Research*. Next door to him lived his daughter Connie, Mrs. Joseph Harper, a lush, blond, pretty young matron who read fortunes in lucky palms and pulsed with psychic power.”⁹⁰ Later, when Connie and her husband divorced, Joseph Harper married Cecil’s biological daughter, Cecilia.

Richard de Mille was an early convert to Scientology and became an editorial/personal assistant to its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, before they eventually parted company.⁹¹ DeMille’s adopted daughter Katherine Lester DeMille had a fanatical devotion to religion and the afterlife following the accidental drowning of her young son, Christopher.⁹² Even her husband, Anthony Quinn (DeMille’s son-in-law) had an interesting religious pedigree. As he claimed: “I was born a Catholic, and I studied for the priesthood and then suddenly – then I became a preacher for Amiee Semple MacPherson [sic; Californian evangelist and founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel] when I was 15 years old, and then I became a Theosophist, and then I became all sorts of things.”⁹³ DeMille even met and was photographed with the philosopher and sometimes perceived messianic mystic, Jiddu Krishnamurti, whilst on the set of Cecil’s 1927 Jesus movie, *The King of Kings*. Jiddu left soon after a publicity shot with DeMille, H.B. Warner (playing Christ) and himself because as he humorously put it: “I thought three Saviors on the same lot was perhaps a little too much.”⁹⁴

Thus it is eminently easy to imagine that DeMille was influenced by such visitors, relatives, and neighbors in his private life; in addition to his repeated exposure to various religionists in his professional life, including those clerics invited on set during filming.⁹⁵ For example, *The Ten Commandments* (1956) scriptwriter, Jesse L. Lasky Jr., reported that: “The Bible, the Koran, the Midrash and the Talmud were our bed-side read

ing. Our conversations became peppered with such esoteric verbosity as the Logos Doctrine, Memphite Theology and the concept of ma’at (an expression of ideas, which, although inexpressible, were morally good, and with which God-king were endowed).”⁹⁶

DeMille’s Overt Reincarnation Narratives: Theatre and Film

DeMille’s interest in esoteric topics was no passing fancy and had predated his illustrious film career when the theme of reincarnation featured within his theatrical play suggestively entitled *The Return of Peter Grimm*. As he reported:

I would write my play, I decided, on the theme of survival after death. I set to work. If a man survives the death of his body, I asked myself, why in the world would he want to return to the world? The strongest motive I could think of for wanting to return would be to undo, if possible, the wrong a man had done in this lifetime. So I made my principal character a manufacturer, a hard businessman of the old school, used to having his way in everything, so driven by the love of power that even his love of his ward, a young girl, was subordinated to his desire to dominate her life. Then he died, and saw how wrong he had been. The play was the story of his efforts to return and acknowledge his wrong and set the girl free to follow her own heart rather than the dictates of his ruthless will. I had a séance in the play, which I still think was something more than a good comedy scene. I had the returned spirit of the old manufacturer on the stage, invisible to the other players, vainly trying to get someone to pay attention to the urgent message and plea he had for them, while the medium babbled inconsequential nothings about how lovely everything was on the other side. Eventually the message and the

plea came through—not through the medium—and everything was straightened out.⁹⁷

This theatrical scenario was the prototypical plot of numerous spirit movies.⁹⁸ Despite working for roughly two years (1910-1911) on *The Return of Peter Grimm* as DeMille-the-playwright, David Belasco, his theatrical employer, claimed it as his own property and denied him author credit, much to DeMille's chagrin.⁹⁹

His first major excursion into reincarnation as DeMille-the-filmmaker was *The Road to Yesterday* (1925) with its highly suggestive past-life title. In addition to its central reincarnation theme, it depicted a protagonist's aunt who was "a believer in the occult and in reincarnation, in which she tries to interest them."¹⁰⁰ As biographer Charles Higham explained:

DeMille was attracted to *The Road to Yesterday* [1925] because it involved the theme of reincarnation, then enjoying a vogue as extreme as the fashion for spiritualism which had inspired *Feet of Clay* [1924]. His use of scenes present and past, interwoven into the narrative, has, if truth be told, always reflected a deep private interest in the subject. What was implied could now be clearly stated. The picture of past life would not simply be triggered off by an ingenious Macpherson plot device. It would be part of the warp and woof of the drama [my emphasis].¹⁰¹

Decades later, the story was perceived by a commentator to be in the mold of "Bridey Murphy,"¹⁰² that classic 1950s past-life claim. Nor is it surprising that the spiritualist plot for DeMille's *Feet of Clay* (1924) was "resolved by a sequence in which Rod La Rocque and Vera Reynolds are shown being turned back from the shadowy borderland of Eternity to finish and rectify their prematurely ended lives on earth."¹⁰³ Indeed, one anonymous reviewer suggested that the film be more accurately retitled "*Lost Souls*."¹⁰⁴

DeMille's fascination with reincarnation continued until Project X, his last Bible film about Daniel and Revelation, the end of the world, and the Second Coming [reincarnation?] of Christ, but which was not realized due to his death and the dissolution of his production company. As DeMille's friend and associate producer Henry Wilcoxon mused:

Was DeMille thinking about the end of the world because he was contemplating the end of his world? Probably. Thousands face Judgment Day in the process of dying. Few face it with as strong a belief in Divine Retribution as Cecil B. DeMille. The scales of justice from Moses' pavilion sat in DeMille's office after the picture [*The Ten Commandments* (1956)], and I know he was forever tinkering with them. Let's not be silly about this; you know *he believed in reincarnation and believed a soul has as many chances to atone and grow as it needs*. But he also believed in the swift and sure wrath of God; and experiencing God's displeasure, no matter how briefly, was no happy thought [my emphasis].¹⁰⁵

Given CB's life-long interest in religion, it is very surprising that few scholars have mentioned, let alone explored, DeMille's beliefs regarding reincarnation, rebirth, karma, spiritualism, occultism or Eastern esoterica; possibly due to his Jewish heritage, Episcopalian faith, and biblical epic credentials that automatically deflected consideration away from his religious eclecticism. Besides, the simplistic stereotyping of DeMille avoided the considerable analytical effort needed to untangle his complex personality, convoluted history, and numerous professional accomplishments in theatre, film, and radio.

Conclusion

DeMille's religious beliefs were profound, complex, and with various reincarnation and karma incidents deftly engineered throughout his filmic fare; many still

to be revealed. All of which are vitally important aspects of his auteur signature, but which are still not very well known, mapped out, or appreciated today. Not only does DeMille's entire cinematic *oeuvre* need to be critically reappraised and his reputation revitalized, but a more nuanced understanding of the religion-and-film field mandates it given his international reputation as the "high priest of the religious genre"¹⁰⁶ and "the screen's master of the historical epic and religious spectacle."¹⁰⁷ Further research into DeMille studies, sacred cinema, and the hidden metaphysical teachings therein is highly warranted, warmly recommended, and already a long overdue aspect of Hollywood history; and especially pertinent considering the power of motion pictures to significantly shape the mass consciousness of humanity.

¹ DeMille was so complex and multi-faceted that to describe, let alone justify, each aspect would be prohibitive; therefore, concise, hyphenated compound terms will be used throughout to disentangle his complexity and avoid needless explanation, justification, or reader boredom.

² Many commentators have spelled Cecil's surname as "De Mille" or "de Mille" or "deMille" however, the correct professional spelling is "DeMille" (see Cecil B. DeMille and Donald Hayne, ed., *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille* (London: W. H. Allen, 1960), 6), which will be used herein (unless quoting) alongside "Cecil" and "CB" as appropriate.

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⁵ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Iconography," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden, 440-464 (London: Routledge, 2010), 450.

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¹² Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film* (New York: Longman, 1989), chpt. 2.

¹³ Agnes de Mille, *Portrait Gallery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 161.

¹⁴ DeMille and Hayne, *Autobiography*, 12-13.

¹⁵ Edwards, *The DeMilles*, 14.

¹⁶ de Mille, *Portrait Gallery*, 161.

¹⁷ Felicia Herman, "'The Most Dangerous Anti-Semitic Photoplay in Filmdom': American Jews and *The King of Kings* (DeMille, 1927)," *The Velvet Light Trap* 46, Fall (2000): 12-25; 18.

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