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Twilight: The 'Eclipse of God'

Jamie Manson | Jul. 1, 2010

Is it just a strange coincidence that on the date of the release of ?Twilight: Eclipse?, the pope announced the creation of a new pontifical council to address what he calls the ?eclipse of God??

The pontiff is so concerned about the crisis of secularization that he has created a new office dedicated to re-evangelizing the Christian West.

Obviously, he wasn?t in attendance at the premiere of ?Twilight: Eclipse? in downtown Rome a week ago when screaming fans were reduced to tears and hysteria at the very sight of Kristen Stewart and Taylor Lautner, two stars from the series.

Yet, the sweeping, global success of the ?Twilight? series is hardly evidence of the triumph of secularization. It is more a sign of a new generation?s intense hunger for something both beyond the secular and beyond the institutional.

On the surface, ?The Twilight Saga? seems little more than another tale of adolescent love and angst. But the fact that this romance involves a human girl and an immortal vampire escalates the story to a metaphysical level. The films are based on a series of novels by Stephanie Meyer, a devout Mormon. Meyer?s faith is interlaced through the story, making for themes that even a pope might approve. Though the main characters, vampire Edward and human Bella, are so desperately in love, they remain scrupulously committed to maintaining their chastity until marriage.

The symbol of the vampire has deep religious roots. Jungian scholar Robert A. Johnson explains, ?the medieval Church used folk beliefs about vampires to explain the Eucharist in a straightforward way. The Church explained that just as the vampire drinks the sinner?s blood and possesses and devours his spirit, so the righteous Christian could drink Christ?s blood, be filled with his holiness, and be incorporated into his mystical body.?

In many ways, Edward fits the archetype of the Christ far better than that of the vampire. Edward comes from a family of more enlightened vampires that sublimate their desire for human blood by settling for animal blood. Rather than life-sucking, Edward?s love for Bella is chaste, constant and immortal. With his superhuman ability to know when Bella is in danger, Edward always arrives just in time to use his superhuman powers to protect her. Fearing that his innate thirst might lead him to hurt Bella, Edward at one point even sacrifices his desire for her to ensure her safety.

Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential scholars of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, wrote that popular art forms such as film and literature served a critical religious purpose in secular culture. In a world where human spiritual sensibilities are under-stimulated, people will reach out to drama and entertainment to satisfy their intrinsic spiritual yearnings.

For those coming of age in a time where religion holds little influence over their formation and imagination, the

idea of someone offering love that is all-powerful, all-protecting, sacrificial and eternal is not only foreign, it?s irresistible. (Of course, it doesn?t hurt that all this goodness is wrapped up in a package as handsome and intense as Robert Pattinson.)

?Twilight: Eclipse? demonstrates vividly that an eclipse of God is not imminent in the spiritual imaginations and longings of those living in the West. And ?Twilight? isn?t operating in a vacuum. Most of pop culture?s biggest successes -- from ?The Lord of the Rings? to ?Avatar? to ?Oprah? -- deal rather explicitly with themes of morality and the spiritual path. For a good while now, secular culture has been compensating for the deprivation created by corrupt or out-of-touch institutional religions.

The pope is correct: there is a great clash of cultures taking place in the West. But it isn?t the sacred that is pitted against the secular. Rather, there is a clash between a church that still sees fit to operate like an absolute monarchy and a laity that takes an active interest in developing and exercising their consciences and spiritualities. As Donald Cozzens has aptly explained, the Catholic Church is the last feudal system in the West. Its authoritarian, hierarchical model of leadership is medieval in its founding and, even to this day, in its functioning. Absolute loyalty is required for such a system to work.

This weekend, the United States celebrates Independence Day. This holiday marks our nation?s separation from a monarchical rule that had repeatedly abused its power by not making itself accountable to its own established laws. After much struggle to humbly petition the English monarchy, the leaders of the 13 Colonies found the monarchy to be deaf to the voice of justice. So, they asserted their truth that all are created equal and entitled to inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As the church?s injustices have grown and its attempts at absolute control have swelled, Catholics in the West have realized that their founding democratic principles are as essential to their spiritual health as they are to their social and civil well-being. Until the Church ceases to function like an absolute monarchy, its attempts at evangelizing the West are a set up for failure. Those in the West do not wish to be controlled and dominated with re-Christianization. What they seek and respond to is presence: presence to their deepest pains and daily struggles; presence to their longings, their questions and their need for healing; presence to their joy and their flourishing. What they seek is the communal practice of the teachings that Jesus offered in the Gospels.

And like those on the brink of starvation, they will go wherever necessary to be fed by something or someone life-giving, and run as far away from whatever and whoever is perceived as life-sucking.

As the gods of the institutional church begin to face their own twilight in the West, the new pontifical council would do well not to confuse an ?eclipse of God? with the eclipse of the power of the Catholic Church.

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