

## Agora: A Disturbing Movie (Fr. Michael Gillis)

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Several people in Holy Nativity have seen the movie **Agora** and have been disturbed by it and asked me to see the movie so that they can talk to me about it. So last night I watched it. Let me begin by saying that I cannot recommend this movie, not because of its themes, but because of the graphic violence.



Agora is set in Alexandria during the fourth and fifth centuries, a time in which a power struggle was taking place among Jews, Pagans, various Christian groups and the Roman government. The story centers around the life of Hypatia, an influential woman philosopher—who is portrayed in the film as a woman with the face and body a movie star and the moral outlook of 21st century independent woman. And of course, this is why the audience sympathizes most with her. Hypatia is so wise, so tolerant and so light skinned and beautiful. Cyril the Patriarch, on the other hand, is portrayed as a bigoted fundamentalist with the appearance of a dark-

skinned Arab who uses his thug-like «monks» to terrorize any who oppose him.

Knowing this much about the movie, you can already tell where it goes. According to the film, Cyril-St. Cyril to the Church-preaches fundamentalism and uses his thugs to murder or expel from the city all who oppose him, burning the books of the great library in Alexandria and eventually having the virtuous and beautiful Hypatia murdered. No wonder Christians watching such a movie are disturbed.

It seems the most urgent question that those who have seen this movie ask me is, «Is it true?» My answer now, having seen the film, is yes and no.

Yes it is true that there was a power struggle in Alexandria in the fourth and fifth centuries among the Christians, Jews, Pagans and the Roman Government. Yes, atrocities were committed by all parties. Yes, there were many riots-some led by monks. However, it is pure conjecture that St. Cyril instigated this violence.

It is somewhat like someone making a movie fifteen hundred years from now about the Stanley Cup riot in Vancouver last Spring and portraying Mike Gillis as the secret instigator of the violence. Just because he is the general manager of the Canucks, doesn't mean that he is responsible for or even knows about everything his players or the fans do.

A lot was going on in Alexandria. The Christian movement was largely a movement among the slaves, and in a culture that was about 90% slave, there were a lot of angry new Christians with grudges and scores to settle against the wealthy, ruling, Pagan elite. And to the credit of the movie, *Agora* does somewhat portray this friction between the classes. If this same story were being retold by a Soviet film maker in the 1950s, much more would be made of this class warfare. However, the film was made by people with 21st century sensibilities; consequently, the tension is created by the conflict between a scowling fundamentalist (and Arab looking) male, religious leader and an urbane, tolerant, gorgeous, white, well-educated woman.

David Bentley Hart, in his book *Atheist Delusions*, does the world a great service by unpacking some of the currently popular Christian bashing based on contemporary interpretations of history. I strongly recommend this book to anyone who has been disturbed by watching *Agora*. If you don't do well reading, you can get a summary of some of his ideas on youtube.

Let me end by saying that I do not suppose that Christians have not (and are not) responsible for atrocities throughout history. Christians seldom live up to the moral teachings of their faith because human beings seldom live up to what they believe.

However, it is very important to distinguish what terrible things some Christians have done and why they have done them, from the broader faith they hold. We cannot blame atheism generally for Stalin's reign of terror, nor Socialism for the actions of the National Socialists (Nazis), nor republican democracy for the aggression of the United States around the world for the past seventy years. There are lots of reasons why people do things; and more often than not, the ugly things that they do have very little to do with the noble ideals or religious teachings they espouse. People often use ideals and religion to justify their atrocities; however, you generally do not have to look too deeply to see that these ideals or religious teachings are not the cause of the atrocities. Pride, greed, revenge, anger, envy and fear, lots of fear – these are the causes.

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