

Passionate disbelief: An ex-fundamentalist lashes out

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

Brian Flemming is that most dangerous of religious creatures: the former fundamentalist. He is also a gifted satirical filmmaker. The two elements collide and create sparks in *The God Who Wasn't There: A Film Beyond Belief*, which is playing at selected venues (see thegodmovie.com) and banking on Internet buzz and word of mouth to gain publicity. The movie claims to do to religion what Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* did to the gun culture and what Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* did to the fast food industry—expose it as a dangerous fraud, while setting the audience to grinning.

Flemming's mockumentary mostly falls flat. It aims only at that form of Christianity by which he was wounded: nondenominational fundamentalism. While there are not a few fundamentalists around, the vast number of Christians across the globe and throughout history would be puzzled by his description of the faith and his criticisms of it.

The best laughs are at the beginning of the hour-long film, in which Flemming uses footage from wonderfully cheesy Jesus films to tell the story of Jesus in what he takes to be its conventional form. He alternately speeds up or slows down footage from *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus Christ* (1905) and *The Living Bible* (1952) to show us the manger, the miracles, and the resurrection all done with hilariously poor special effects. Later he shows scenes from Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* to demonstrate that Christianity has never abandoned a savage lust for blood. In the last 109 minutes of that film, Flemming counts only six minutes that have no form of violence or suffering. He reports: "For many Christians *The Passion of the Christ* was the single most powerful experience of their lives." Really? How many?

The point of all this seems to be that Christianity has led to bad films. Flemming virtually equates Christianity with the films Hollywood has produced about it.

Then Flemming moves to a historical critique: Jesus Christ never walked the earth. To make this point he turns to the far left wing of the Jesus Seminar, where Robert Price argues that the earliest writer of the New Testament, Paul, had neither knowledge of nor interest in a man named Jesus. He was interested only in a dying-and-rising-god mythology that was not unlike countless others in the ancient Mediterranean. The Gospels, written much later, pull the wool over our eyes with their claims to historicity—they are largely mythological too, Flemming contends.

Flemming then calls on folklore professor Alan Dundes, who shows the many parallels between the Jesus story and other myths about divinities of mysterious birth, rejected royalty, and final vindication. This is meant to show that Christianity is no more historically reliable than the story of Hercules. Ancient Christians had an explanation for these cultic parodies of their genuine article: they were planted by Satan to detour the faithful. That remains Christian teaching “to this day,” Flemming assures us—though you would rarely find such teaching in a seminary.

For Flemming, the ignorance of Christians is invincible. He interviews several people in the crowd that streams into a Billy Graham crusade and comments, “Look how happy Christians are when they talk about Jesus. I want to be this happy. Why am I not this happy?” He asks the crusadegoers about the early spread of Christianity, and mocks them (in the film, not to their faces) for not knowing about the parallels between Christianity and other cults involving dying and rising gods. When the Christians smile and insist all you need to know is that you have Jesus in your heart, you are meant to laugh at their discomfiture and their anti-intellectualism. But how many secular folks, if stopped by a cameraman in a parking lot, could give a cogent description of the myth of Dionysius ?

Flemming then gets to the heart of his complaint: Christianity makes for dreadful politics. Millions of people believe they will be spirited from the world in a “rapture” while others are annihilated by God. These same people elect members of Congress and presidents whose policies are disastrous. Further, Christians are responsible for horrendous violence against various “others,” like Jews and homosexuals. He shows clips of Southern Baptist minister Bailey Smith announcing that “my friend the Lord does not hear the prayer of the Jew” and images of book burnings, the tortures of Abu Ghraib, and “Christian soldiers” in military fatigues responding to Jerry Falwell’s summons to raise a “Christian army.”

Most readers of this magazine, and indeed most Christians, do not endorse those views. But Flemming has no interest in such “moderate” versions of the faith. Indeed, he thinks moderate Christians are as bad as the fundamentalists if not worse. They are ignoring what their own faith teaches. “What the hell is moderate Christianity? Jesus is only *sort of* the Son of God? He only *sort of* rose from the dead? . . . Moderate Christianity makes no sense. Is it any wonder so many today choose leaders that actually have the courage of their convictions?”

As Flemming sees it, Christianity does teach that “God hates fags”—just look at Leviticus. And he believes that “the Inquisition is not a perversion of Christian doctrine but an expression of Christian doctrine.”

Flemming’s attack on nonfundamentalist Christianity reveals his own persistent fundamentalism. That mainline Christians only “sort of” believe is a stock claim of fundamentalist preachers, here spun out to give secularists their jollies.

This fundamentalism extends to his reading of history. He has latched on to a fringe claim about Jesus’ nonexistence and about Paul’s gnosticism and clings to it not in the face of counterevidence but in ignorance of it. It is another stock fundamentalist move to ignore responsible scholarship on a subject while still claiming to be thinking historically or scientifically. The fundamentalist claim that creation science is “better science” than evolutionary biology is here paralleled in Flemming’s claims to offer a better history of the origins of Christianity.

The final portion of the film reveals some of the personal history that drives Flemming. He “accepted Jesus as Lord” several times as a youth, but still suffered doubts, which he took to be the cardinal sin of denying the Holy Spirit. “As luck would have it the Holy Spirit is the easiest thing in the entire doctrine to doubt. God is out of reach, Jesus is 2000 years ago, but the Holy Spirit is right here, right now.” If you start to think there’s no more evidence for the existence of the Spirit “than there is for unicorns,” you’re damned, case closed. So Flemming was taught. It is hard not to feel for him as he describes this distortion of the gospel that was presented to him as the real thing.

Echoing the confrontational style of Michael Moore, Flemming marches into the office of the principal of a Christian school, demanding to know how he could teach empirically unverifiable things to innocent kindergartners. The principal remains surprisingly unfazed by Flemming’s increasingly vehement tone, until he asks him to

stop the camera, accuses him of dishonesty in setting up the interview, and walks away. Flemming takes his trophy interview clip and retreats to the chapel for what he takes to be a final act of desecration.

It is painful to watch Flemming strew his personal baggage on the screen. The film is the strange fruit of outrageously poor religious instruction and of an incredibly brittle worldview.