

Elmer Gantry

October 13, 2012

On the in-seat entertainment system of a long-distance flight I recently found, listed as a “classic,” a film I could remember from having watched it some 50 years ago – the film version made in 1960 of Sinclair Lewis’ novel, *Elmer Gantry*. I remembered the film because two remarks from the dialogue have stayed with me ever since. One is of an old man comparing religious conversion to getting drunk. The other is of a young woman begging to be lied to. I watched the film again . . .

Elmer Gantry is an American con-man of the 1920’s who falls for a revivalist woman preacher, Sister Falconer, while she is conducting a cross-country crusade for conversions in a big travelling tent. Lacking any real religion, the film is somewhat confused, but it does portray both the genuine need that souls have of some religion, and the falsehood of the fundamentalist Protestant “religion.” The true need and the false satisfaction are highlighted together when Elmer puts questions to an old man cleaning up in the tent: “Mister,” he replies, leaning on his broom, “I’ve been converted five times. Billy Sunday, Reverend Biederwolf, Gypsy Smith and twice by Sister Falconer. I get terrible drunk, and then I get good and saved. Both of them done me a powerful lot of good – gettin’ drunk and gettin’ saved.”

Of course the remark has its comic side, but it is tragic when one thinks of all the souls for whom it has become a kind of common sense to put religious conversion on a level with drink. That is survivalism replacing revivalism, well on the way to religion being ridiculed altogether. How many souls there must be for whom the Holy Name of “Jesus” has been virtually burnt out by its association with the emotionalism of fundamentalist preachers! Read “Wise Blood” and other stories by Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964), a Catholic writer who shocks but is not confused, and who portrays just how far

man's religious instinct can be bent out of shape by the Protestantism of America's Deep South. God can make roses grow out of a sewer, but heresy does terrible damage!

The second remark that I remembered from the film arises in a private context, but its potential application is far wider. While pursuing Sister Falconer, Elmer runs by chance into a woman that he mistreated and abandoned years earlier. When this woman learns of his affair with Sister, she wants her revenge, but even whilst laying a honey-trap for Elmer to discredit him utterly in the media, she cannot help herself wanting him to tell her that he loves her. She says: "Tell me a good, strong lie I can believe, but hold me tight." Loving him still as she does, all she wants is to be deceived.

Such is the world around us. All it asks is to be deceived. That is why we are living in a world of Satan's lies. We do not want God. Now, life without him cannot work – see Ps. 126, v.1, and just look around you – but we desperately want to believe that life works best of all without him. In effect we say to our leaders, "We elected you to tell us good, strong lies, and to hold us tight in our godlessness. Please do a 9/11, a 7/7 (U.K.'s 9/11), or anything you like, just so long as we can go on believing in you as a substitute for God to look after us. The bigger the lie, the more we will believe it, but you must hold us tight. Tighten up our police states as much as you like, but you must keep out God."

Is it any wonder we have the satanic world we have?

Kyrie eleison.