



PROJECT MUSE[®]

"A Remarkable Adventure": *Martin Luther* and the 1950s Religious Marketplace

by DAN CHYUTIN

Abstract: Theatrically released in 1953, the church-funded biopic *Martin Luther* (Irving Pichel) was designed to exceed the narrow confines of the Christian film market and successfully compete with Hollywood products. This article positions the film's unique accomplishments in relation to postwar America's spiritual turn and reveals how the case of *Martin Luther* may illuminate our general understanding of the uneasy relationship between organized religion and mass media.



© 2013 by the University of Texas Press

Figure 1. Niall MacGinnis plays the eponymous protagonist in Irving Pichel's *Martin Luther* (Lutheran Church Productions, 1953). Image courtesy of the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Dan Chyutin is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His doctoral work focuses on film and religion, and specifically on contemporary Israeli cinema's articulations of Judaism. A section from his dissertation was published in the anthology Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion (University of Texas Press, 2011).

In 1950, Mary Ann Van Hoof, a forty-one-year-old farmer residing in the small Wisconsin town of Necedah, gained national recognition after allegedly encountering the Virgin Mary. First as a shadowy figure, then as a heavenly voice, and finally as a “beautiful lady” enveloped by blue mist, the Blessed Virgin made several visits to Mrs. Van Hoof that year, each time carrying sacred messages. As word of these apparitions began to spread, people from all over came to Necedah in hopes of beholding a miracle. Religious authorities attempted to cast doubt on the veracity of these Marian sightings, but to no avail. In anticipation of Mother Mary’s appearance on the Feast of the Assumption (August 15, 1950), an estimated one hundred thousand people made the pilgrimage to the Van Hoof farm. Those in attendance did not ultimately witness a divine presence, but they were nevertheless appeased by another message Mrs. Van Hoof claimed to have received from Mary herself. “The black clouds are coming over, not to Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, but to America,” she said ominously. Russia was gaining strength and threatening to rob Americans of their right to religious expression. In the face of such danger, God-fearing citizens were left with only one resort: they had to “pray, and pray hard.”¹

Spectacular in its mixture of piety and politics, the cult phenomenon that developed around the Necedah visions is in many ways a unique instance of Christian worship, yet it may also be considered symptomatic of a period of heightened religiosity. The 1950s, as has been widely argued, marked a spiritual turn in America.² Various factors may have facilitated this shift. Surviving the cataclysmic events of World War II, many Americans strived to make sense of their recent traumatic past through divine truths. Moreover, with the threat of nuclear apocalypse looming on the horizon, many also found their only possible refuge and source of comfort in the idea of godly protection. Changes in demographics and the economy—for example, the rise of suburbia—fragmented older forms of community, thereby encouraging citizens to look toward religious institutions as the last vestige of traditional socialization. In addition, religion offered itself as a parameter of distinction from atheist communism, and therefore as a means of exhibiting patriotism and American citizenship, with their obvious connotations of moral superiority and manifest destiny.

The consequences of the postwar spiritual hunger were also varied. The 1950s saw a sharp growth in religious institutions: in the dominant Christian constituency, for example, the membership figures for all denominations rose by nearly 25 percent from 1950 to 1955, and by 1958, 47 percent of the US population attended church on an average Sunday.³ Concurrently, references to religion in popular culture became abundant. There was a surge of public interest in spiritual writings, from the homespun bestsellers of Norman Vincent Peale, Dale Evans Rogers, and Fulton Oursler to the

1 Thomas A. Kselman and Steven Avella, “Marian Piety and the Cold War in the United States,” *Catholic Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (July 1986): 403–404.

2 See, for example, Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Randall Balmer, *Religion in Twentieth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert S. Elwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

3 Elwood, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 10, 1.

highbrow contributions of theologians Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Jacques Maritain. Religiously minded songs and albums such as Tennessee Ernie Ford's *Hymns* (1956) topped the music charts, and magazines regularly published items on notable religious personalities and pressing issues of faith. More pertinent to this discussion, Hollywood experienced during the period a "second 'golden age'"⁴ of the religious spectacular (the first having occurred in the silent era), which culminated with *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1954), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), and *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959)—three of the highest-grossing films of the 1950s. This success, Gerald Forshey explains, was due in part to the genre's ability to address, through the evocative terms of religious history, those pressing political concerns of "power in an international community, power's moral uses, and what constitutes the righteous citizen in the righteous nation." As such, these epic films effectively became "metaphor[s] for contemporary America's struggle to define its role in the vast international arena."⁵

The realities of an increased demand for religion on the one hand and a plurality of religious outlets on the other hand allowed for the emergence of, in the words of historian Robert Elwood, "a potent spiritual marketplace in which the traditional denominations were highly competitive."⁶ Protestants, the predominant religious body in America, sought to avoid rampant competition by moving toward unity within their fissiparous spiritual world. Crystallized in the formation of the National Council of Churches in 1950 (and in participation in the World Council of Churches), this ecumenical tendency contributed greatly to cooperation among denominations, yet it was not enough to fully suppress dissension. Thus, the key fault line within Protestantism, which separated mainline from evangelical, came under strain during the 1950s, when the rising popularity of noted evangelical ministers threatened to undermine "from below" liberal Protestants' standing as "an elite class with a special role as power brokers and ultimate custodians of the US heritage."⁷

While Protestantism's inner tensions certainly influenced the contemporaneous denominational map, they were nevertheless eclipsed by the main religious conflict of the decade—that between Protestants and Catholics. As a social force, American Catholicism held some advantages over American Protestantism. First, it had cohesion: as historian Randall Balmer reminds us, "American Catholicism went from an 'immigrant church' in the nineteenth century to one that had made a place for itself in America by the latter half of the twentieth century. Catholics managed to forge a unified church out of culturally and ethnically diverse elements, so that an Irish parish would not compete with an Italian parish or a German parish or a Hispanic parish."⁸ Second, Catholicism was outgrowing all other denominations during the period.⁹ Finally, having been the Christian underdog in the United States for so many years,

4 Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), 5.

5 Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 28–29.

6 Elwood, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 6.

7 *Ibid.*, 47.

8 Balmer, *Religion in Twentieth-Century America*, 47.

9 Elwood, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 10.

Catholicism had developed an appetite for social and political power. Recognizing the threat these advantages posed, Protestants became more self-conscious of their schisms and insecure in their increasingly unstable hegemony. In compensation, they turned toward further entrenchment in their resentments, regressing to, as Elwood puts it, “the attitudes of anti-Catholic nativism.”¹⁰

Visual media was a major site in which these tensions among denominations (and between organized religion and secular culture) were played out. Varied Christian organizations had experimented with filmmaking as early as the 1910s; yet, because of the clergy’s concern regarding the possible moral pitfalls of cinema, the fledgling religious film industry failed to garner popular support and eventually dissipated with the arrival of the Great Depression.¹¹ During the 1940s, the development of affordable 16mm cameras and projectors and the emergence of television technology, as well as the growing public demand for religiously themed cultural products, served to revitalize church interest in the moving image. In this period it seemed as if Catholics were setting the agenda for the American screen: for example, by shaping the content of mainstream films through the advisory and censorship efforts of the Legion of Decency and Joseph I. Breen, the Production Code Administration’s Catholic chief,¹² and by creating church-based missionary texts, such as Bishop Fulton Sheen’s nationally syndicated television show *Life Is Worth Living* (DuMont, 1952–1955; ABC, 1955–1957). Partly in response to Catholicism’s apparent dominance, Protestants increased their investment in media making—a shift manifested in the formation of a small but vibrant church-oriented studio system (whose prominent members included Cathedral Films, the Moody Institute of Science, Broadman Films, Family Films, Gospel Films, and World Wide Pictures), as well as in the ascent of pioneer televangelists Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Rex Humbard, who opened up a new front in the fight over the hearts and minds of the American people.¹³

Of the various screen projects initiated by religious groups during the immediate postwar era, none was more spectacular in planning and execution than the 1953 feature film *Martin Luther* (Figure 1). Essentially an educational church movie about the life of the father of the Reformation, funded and coproduced by an assembly of Lutheran bodies, *Martin Luther* was released in theaters across the United States and achieved astounding box-office success; accordingly, it marks an anomaly in the history of American cinema, where church-based filmmaking and the Hollywood distribution

10 Ibid., 54.

11 Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 203–219.

12 On religious censorship in postwar Hollywood, see Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies, 1940–1975* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures 1933–1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

13 On postwar Protestant filmmaking, see Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930–1986* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 145–175. On postwar Protestant television, see Michelle Rosenthal, *American Protestants and TV in the 1950s: Responses to a New Medium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

market have typically remained distinct. While this exceptional accomplishment may be explained on the basis of the film's artistic merits, it should also be regarded as a mark of the era: thus, as much as it was a singular occurrence, the case of *Martin Luther*—like the Necedah cult and other similar phenomena—was also representative of the spiritual revival that swept the nation during the 1950s.

Martin Luther has received scant critical attention within academic film literature. This may be partially understood in light of the discipline's persistent tendency to undervalue the religious dimensions of cinema, which has made it lose sight, in the words of Terry Lindvall, of "the richness possible in cross-fertilized studies of film and church history."¹⁴ This article attempts to redress this scholarly neglect by providing a detailed analysis of *Martin Luther's* production and distribution, based predominantly on materials from the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. My account foregrounds the film's participation in the postwar religious zeitgeist, especially in relation to the volatile conflicts among Christian American denominations. Moreover, I use *Martin Luther* to engage broader questions that shape our understanding of church-funded filmmaking and television making, namely, what role does the moving image play in denominational politics? What concessions do religious producers make in relating their church stewardship to the secular-capitalist business practices of mass communication? How are religious messages affected by a paradoxical appeal to both drama and authentic reality in the context of filmed fiction? Who does the religious media industry imagine its audience to be? And how do audiences respond to films and television shows made by the institutions of organized religion? In exploring these related concerns, *Martin Luther* emerges as a text that speaks meaningfully, not only to the period of its creation but also to the present moment of religious visual media. Consequently, its importance as an exceptional case—a "remarkable adventure," as its producers referred to it—will hopefully be revealed.¹⁵

Postwar American Lutheranism and *Martin Luther*. The postwar religious revival had as profound an impact on American Lutheranism as it had on other denominations. Lutherans, the third-largest Protestant community in America during this period (after Baptists and Methodists), experienced a vast expansion in the size of their membership and an increase in church attendance.¹⁶ This growth facilitated other changes as well. Lutheran groups became more involved in social activism, most notably surrounding the crises of inner-city poverty and the resettlement of World War II refugees. Greater funds were allocated in support of the activities of churches and missions inside and outside of the United States and in revitalizing Lutheran colleges and universities. The community assumed a bigger role within the ecumenical

14 Terry Lindvall, "Hollywood Chronicles: Toward an Intersection of Church History and Film History," *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 127.

15 Robert Lee, report of Lutheran Church Productions, early 1955, LFA 3/2, box 1, Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago (hereafter AELCA).

16 E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914–1970* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 1.

movement; at the same time, it also placed more emphasis on achieving unity within its notoriously conflict-ridden ranks.

The invigoration of American Lutheranism also led to an increase in development of church-based visual media. Lutheran uses of visual technology date back to the silent era, with the production of amateur church films like *Little Jimmy's Prayer* and *After the Fall* (both made in the early 1920s by Reverend O. Hagedorn of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod).¹⁷ The availability of cheap sound film equipment in the late 1940s allowed Lutheran bodies to experiment with educational, documentary, and fiction filmmaking for church use and limited public distribution, the result of which were such works as *Reaching from Heaven* (Frank Strayer, 1948) and *All That I Have* (William Claxton, 1953). At the same time, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, a powerful conservative group with an impressive track record in radio and cinema, entered the TV market with its syndicated show *This Is the Life* (DuMont, 1952–1953). The result of this flurry of activity, according to Richard Dyer MacCann, was that Lutherans emerged as “the most active workers” in the field of religious audiovisual production.¹⁸

Martin Luther may be best understood as part of this activity and, simultaneously, as a distinct departure from it. A fruitful starting point from which to construct an understanding of the place and function of this film within contemporary American denominational dynamics is a letter, sent in 1950 by National Lutheran Council Executive Director Paul C. Empie for the purpose of soliciting initial production funds. After a short introductory paragraph, Empie gets straight to the heart of the matter:

This project [*Martin Luther*] has been before us for the last two years. It is extremely important for two reasons: (1) the aggressiveness and arrogance of Roman Catholicism is steadily growing and the smearing of Martin Luther and the Reformers gets more subtle and vicious all the time. (2) There is a new recognition of and appreciation for the mission and work of the Lutheran Church on the part of other denominations in America today. This is partly due to our outstanding Christian reconstruction and relief program, which has been by far the largest scale and most effective in all Protestantism. It is also partly due to the fact that in fighting both Catholic totalitarianism on the one hand and political atheism on the other, the strength of the Lutheran Church's confessional position stands out as being the back-bone of the Evangelical defense around the world. This is why other Protestant groups are observing Reformation Day for the first time in their history.

Obviously such a film must be good, worthy of our Church and of its tradition. It should be used for the next generation and as such [it] must contain all the essentials for a powerful positive interpretation. . . . It is to be a Luther film, produced by the Lutheran Church, representing the Lutheran point of view.¹⁹

17 Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema*, 164–165.

18 Richard Dyer MacCann, “‘Here I Stand . . .,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 1953.

19 Paul Empie to William G. Fisher, December 15, 1950, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

A remarkably candid document, Empie's letter figured *Martin Luther* as a response to "a most urgent and critical need" for a Lutheran revolution in America, serving as "a milestone in a process whereby [Lutherans] change from the defense to the attack."²⁰ Thus envisaged, the film was set to achieve several mutually dependent objectives. First, it was to educate Lutherans about their spiritual heritage and consolidate Lutheranism around "a positive interpretation"—that is, a single message and identity. Much like Reformation Day, it would offer itself as a rallying point for the Protestant body while raising the profile of Lutheranism within this community and the public at large. Moreover, it could function as a missionary tool by teaching the unchurched about "the Lutheran point of view" (formerly unrepresented in mainstream media) while also challenging the supposed insidious attempt by the Catholic minority to undermine the privileged standing of Protestantism in American society.

To fulfill these objectives, *Martin Luther* needed to be, as one Lutheran executive defined it retrospectively, "something new in religious communication."²¹ The film would be a prestige product that would exceed the confines of church distribution and obtain the wide market share of a major Hollywood film. This daring initiative was not undertaken without a measure of hesitation, and in fact, archival records indicate that a formal approval of theatrical release arrived only shortly before the film's 1953 premiere.²² Nevertheless, it seems evident that church officials, if only implicitly, were giving serious consideration to national distribution from the project's earliest stages. This mind-set consequently informed most, if not all, of the major decisions made in the context of *Martin Luther*'s production.

Production. The idea for making a biopic about Martin Luther first emerged in 1947, and over the following several years Paul Empie forcefully lobbied for its realization within various Lutheran circles. Eventually, in early 1951, representatives of six Lutheran groups (the American Lutheran Church, the Augustana Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the United Lutheran Church in America, and the National Lutheran Council) formed Lutheran Church Productions (LCP), an organization whose purpose was "to collect, publish, and disseminate information in the form of a motion picture in reference to the life and work of Martin Luther for the purpose of bringing information on this subject to the attention of the public."²³ Each group, in a display of postwar ecumenical spirit, agreed at the outset to contribute part of the overall production budget (\$400,000). Empie was elected chairman of the corporation, Dr. Oswald Hoffman (public relations director for the Missouri Synod) became secretary, and Henry Endress and Marvin Schalke (both church officials with a filmmaking background) were named

20 Ibid.

21 Robert Lee, "Luther on the Marquee," publicity file, 1957/8, LFA 0/8/5, box 2, AELCA.

22 See, for example, Henry Endress to LCP Board, memorandum, February 24, 1953, LFA 3/2, box 1, AELCA; Borden Mace to Irving Pichel, March 31, 1953, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA. Before this final approval, Lutheran officials occasionally talked about *Martin Luther* as being designated for the "church-basement" circuits. See, for example, Paul Empie to Rev. Dr. J. A. Aasgaard, November 8, 1950, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

23 "Certificate of Incorporation of Lutheran Church Productions, Inc.," April 10, 1951, LFA 3/2, box 8, AELCA.

associate executive secretaries.²⁴ Following that, the LCP executive board decided to solicit a script from Allan Sloane—a seasoned writer responsible, among other things, for the Lutheran film *Answer for Anne* (1949).

In light of the project's aforementioned goals, a few, occasionally contradictory, script strategies were outlined. First, there was the need for authenticity. The *Luther* script had to “be historically and confessionally accurate. While the author must draw upon his imagination for much of the dialogue, sufficient documentary evidence must exist to indicate that the lines of the script are in accord with the accepted results of Lutheran research.” As part of this quest for authenticity, the image of Luther would “not be glamorized,” nor would “his human failings be ignored or whitewashed.” The result of such a strategy was meant to allow supportive (or indifferent) audiences to learn the true facts of the Reformation (as they were conceived by LCP) while thwarting accusations (Catholic or otherwise) “of slanting the facts for propaganda purposes.”²⁵ Second, to turn it into a viable catalyst for ecumenism, *Martin Luther* had “to appeal to all Protestantism.”²⁶ As a result, the film was to preserve the Lutheran perspective while downplaying those divisive elements within Luther's teaching that were acceptable to Lutherans but not to other Protestant denominations. Third, the purpose of *Martin Luther* was not to simulate “something dim, obscure, and veiled in the language of the scholar, whose writings are well preserved in libraries but seldom encountered,” but rather to permit audiences “to ‘experience’ the drama of history in an intimate sense.”²⁷ To achieve this goal, “scholarly detail” occasionally had to “give way to dramatic necessity.”²⁸ At the same time, it was also important to avoid creating a pure entertainment film of dubious religious value that would alienate LCP's core Christian audience. And finally, the film would have contemporary meaning. *Martin Luther* was not only to “give the important biographical facts of Luther's life” but also to “stress the significance for this day, too, of Luther and what he did.”²⁹ The contemporary relevance of the script relied on interpreting Luther's story as a celebration of an individual's struggle against tyranny—whether that tyranny be, in the postwar context, that of mass society, of domestic and global communism, or of the Catholic Church (which many Protestants thought of as an intolerant pressure group preoccupied with censorship).

After a few months of writing and research, Sloane submitted his first draft on May 4, 1951. The script was then passed on for evaluation to a host of theologians, ministers, church executives, and film professionals. In this and subsequent stages of review, several issues and comments were put forward, which represented attempts

24 Endress, United Lutheran Church's stewardship secretary, wrote and produced five religious films, including *Like a Mighty Army* (John Coyle, 1950). Schalke served as executive director of audiovisual aids for the Missouri Synod and produced several Lutheran films, including *Reaching from Heaven* (Frank R. Strayer, 1948).

25 Paul Empie, introduction to “Martin Luther: A Film Biography (First Draft),” May 4, 1951, LFA 0/8/4, box 1, AELCA.

26 Ibid.

27 Robert Lee, “A Presentation Guide for Use with Martin Luther,” publicity file, 1955/6, LFA 3/2, box 5, AELCA.

28 Empie, introduction to “Martin Luther.”

29 Henry Endress to Allan Sloane, January 17, 1951, LFA 3/2, box 5, AELCA.

to negotiate between the conflicting concerns of history and drama, politics, and education. A few reviewers voiced their fear that *Martin Luther* might be seen as too “anti-Catholic,” especially when it came to the description of church activity around indulgences and relics (in an apparent attempt to make the script less offensive to Catholics, MGM executive Dore Schary even suggested that there should be a clear indication in the film that “the Vatican of today, and the papacy, are a far cry from the ones depicted”).³⁰ Many commentators were perturbed by the glib treatment of the more controversial aspects of Luther’s history—most prominently his contribution to the violent quelling of the 1524–1525 Peasants’ War, which the original *Luther* script had related only in passing. Luther’s negative character traits were also the subject of debate: for some readers, his foul temper and use of vulgar language were not highlighted enough to provide a semblance of objectivity, whereas for others these traits were overemphasized in a fashion counterproductive to Lutheran educational aims. Other recurring comments were that the film was too long (the first draft covered most of Luther’s life), too static, and too inclined to utilize dialogue and voice-over excessively (especially in terms of overquoting from Luther’s writings).

The *Martin Luther* script went through nine revisions before finally being approved by the LCP script committee. This rewriting process (as well as subsequent postproduction tweaking) led to an excision of several plotlines and a narrowing of historical time frame. Many of the monologues, dialogues, and voice-overs were also omitted, giving way to scenes of a more dramatic nature. The final film makes no reference to Luther’s dubious character traits or to the Peasants’ War; in addition, it presents a more negative image of the Catholic Church, especially in its grotesque characterization of Pope Leo X. As a result of these modifications, *Martin Luther* emerged as more anti-Catholic than initially intended, reflecting a conscious decision to favor the film’s political function over a strict adherence to historical faithfulness. Furthermore, it revealed a willingness to compromise religious content and sermon-like attitudes for the sake of creating a product more in tune with popular tastes (conceived as largely aligned with Hollywood-type entertainment).

While work was being finalized on the script, LCP secretaries Endress and Schalke were busy looking for suitable production partners; their choices, in turn, testify to LCP’s intention to establish itself as part of the mainstream entertainment industry and to create a quality picture which would be a cut above the normal church production fare. Accordingly, in the summer of 1951, they talked to executives from Universal, MGM, and 20th Century Fox, and to the maestro of biblical epics, Cecil B. DeMille, but they did not receive favorable responses. Traveling abroad, they also sat down with representatives of the British Rank Organization, the French Le Monde en Images, and the Svensk Filmindustri. Finally, in late July 1951, Endress met with Louis and Richard de Rochemont, the New York-based producers responsible for the *March of Time* series (1935–1951) and such fiction features as *Boomerang!* (Elia Kazan, 1947). In this and subsequent talks, Louis de Rochemont, the head of the company, showed

30 “Answers to Questionnaires on Luther Film Script, Sent Out March 24, 1952,” April 9, 1952, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

great interest in the Martin Luther project. He offered to make LCP “a film comparable in every way to the best ‘Hollywood’ standards yet well below the cost of the same picture if it were made in a West Coast studio,” and he strongly recommended that the movie be released theatrically.³¹ Clearly impressed by de Rochemont’s enthusiastic attitude, LCP proceeded to hire his services.

In retrospect, de Rochemont was a likely choice for LCP. Hollywood executives, at least judging by LCP evaluations, were sympathetic toward the *Luther* project, but they were nevertheless unwilling to pursue it for fear of alienating Catholic audiences. De Rochemont, in contrast, was the head of a minor independent company that catered to a relatively small audience and therefore enjoyed greater flexibility than studio producers, who had to answer to their East Coast backers, not to mention the American public at large. This flexibility allowed him to take risks and make production decisions based primarily on his own particular tastes and beliefs. A conscientious filmmaker, de Rochemont made a name for himself by producing progressive “social problem” movies, which dealt with such topics as racism and labor struggles. The *Luther* project, in turn, attracted the New York producer because it offered a similar platform for social critique: in this case, against what he defined as major ailments of contemporary society—communist totalitarianism and Catholic oppression.³² This ideological position, and the desire to pursue it at the price of controversy, aligned de Rochemont with LCP objectives and facilitated a measure of intimacy that defies facile definitions of church and film industry as antithetical.³³

In addition to his political activism, de Rochemont was known in the movie business for the hyperrealist style of his fiction films (which *Time* referred to as “the Louis de Rochemont type of realism, shot on location”).³⁴ This artistic inclination clearly worked well with LCP’s desire that *Martin Luther* appear to be historically faithful. Their mutual objective was that the film would resemble a Hollywood-type “A picture,” yet without stumbling into the moral pitfalls of the era’s ostentatious religious epics. *Martin Luther* was intended to be a new kind of historical epic—a devout and authentic one that, in Empie’s words, “would appeal to the general public, without sacrificing some of the religious content and the spiritual impact which Luther made in his time and which the Lutheran Church should relay to this generation.”³⁵

31 Louis de Rochemont to Paul Empie, October 10, 1951, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

32 De Rochemont, himself a Protestant, rejected the Catholic Church as “an all-powerful religious body . . . [whose] influence in motion picture production and distribution is frightening.” In terms of Cold War political ideology, the producer also espoused, according to Daniel J. Leab, “a vigorous knee-jerk anti-Communism” (30). Louis de Rochemont to Lothar Wolff, December 10, 1952, box 21, folder 7, Louis de Rochemont Papers, 1899–2004, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming (hereafter LDRP); Leab, *Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

33 This intimacy, however, did not fully eradicate a sense of separation. As Borden Mace, an employee of de Rochemont, reported: “It’s hard to explain but tears came to my eyes as I was deeply touched by the devotion and humility of the entire Lutheran group. While they were meeting on a matter which in one sense was purely commercial and many of the decisions had to be made on a commercial basis, it was inspiring that they never lost sight of what was really important. It’s difficult for me to describe my true feeling as I feel self-conscious when I attempt to reduce my thoughts to words.” Letter to Lothar Wolff, February 4, 1953, box 21, folder 7, LDRP.

34 “Panic in Paradise,” *Time*, September 22, 1947.

35 Paul Empie, “The Martin Luther Film,” *National Lutheran*, April 14, 1952.

It would be a film, then, that pleased the fans of Hollywood while drawing in the conservative religious crowd, which was generally underserved by mainstream American cinema.

The commitment to authenticity informed the creative strategies employed by the two key members of the *Martin Luther* production team: director Irving Pichel and cinematographer Joseph Brun. Pichel, a veteran Hollywood director with experience in religious filmmaking, saw his role in directing *Martin Luther* as that of a visual historian.³⁶ In an essay titled “*Martin Luther: The Problem of Documentation*,” Pichel discussed the Luther film as belonging to “an intermediate category.”³⁷ It could not be a “true documentary,” since “the film’s events antedate our century.”³⁸ Nor could it be an entertainment film “which utilize[d] its events and persons for the ends of the story as fiction does,” since its historical narrative would be judged for accuracy by both supporters of and detractors from Protestantism.³⁹ This ontological middle ground, which Pichel names “the documented film,” is founded on a respect toward the historical record, yet paradoxically, it also capitalizes on the filmic tendency to take certain dramatic liberties in order to make an audience “share emotionally in the meaning of lives and events.”⁴⁰ It was therefore his task, as the director, to produce authenticity by immersing himself in the documents of the past, choosing “those which have a residue of religious significance for an audience of today,” and then transporting the contents of those documents onto the screen through a convincing cinematic form.⁴¹

Brun imagined his role on *Martin Luther* in much the same way. In an initial discussion, Lothar Wolff, executive producer in charge of the film for de Rochemont, gave Brun the following instruction: “You know de Rochemont’s approach. He wants realism. It is to be photographed in your usual manner.”⁴² The cinematographer was concerned at the beginning that this “usual manner,” formed through his experiences shooting de Rochemont’s low-budget realist dramas, would not work with *Martin Luther*’s subject matter. Nevertheless, after reviewing literature and art from the Reformation period, he came to the following conclusion: “I was going to picture the life of Martin Luther with brutal realism. I would definitely avoid all the veneer of artificiality and convention, the cellophane wrapping, the sweetness and fiction too often applied to contemporary films. Here was to be a photographic treatment that would enable audiences to transpose themselves back into centuries of the past and become

36 Pichel, who began his career as an actor, helmed a host of Hollywood feature films, as well as two productions—*The Great Commandment* (1939) and *Day of Triumph* (1954)—for the Christian studio Cathedral Films. He also served on the faculty of the Theatre Arts Department at the University of California, Los Angeles, and as a contributing editor for *Hollywood Quarterly*.

37 Irving Pichel, “*Martin Luther: The Problem of Documentation*,” *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* 8 (Winter 1953): 174.

38 *Ibid.*, 176.

39 *Ibid.*, 175.

40 *Ibid.*, 177.

41 *Ibid.*, 179.

42 Joseph Brun, “Assignment in Germany,” *American Cinematographer* 33, December 1952, 526.



Figure 2. Irving Pichel (in costume) and Joseph Brun (right of camera) here pose on the set of *Martin Luther*. Pichel played a brief cameo role as Chancellor Brueck (Lutheran Church Productions, 1953). Image courtesy of the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

a part of the drama of that day” (Figure 2).⁴³ This rule of realism propelled Brun to demand that careful attention be given to the faithfulness of the sets and objects filmed. They were not, as he put it, “just background stuff; they were an inherent part of the photographic texture itself; they remain ever-present in the close-ups, and in the moving and long shots.”⁴⁴ Consequently, historical detail became, for him, a significant player within the film’s narrative, embodying a powerful (yet perplexing) authenticity that combined document and drama.

The production process further solidified this impulse for authentication while simultaneously foregrounding the fluidity inherent to authenticity. Partly for reasons of authenticity, and partly because of “the opportunities to take advantage of lower production costs and a favorable exchange rate,” LCP and de Rochemont decided that the film would be shot in Martin Luther’s home country of Germany.⁴⁵ Most of the actual places where Luther lived and worked were at the time either destroyed or under Soviet occupation, so alternative “authentic” locations corresponding with these sites were chosen; when suitable locations were unavailable, historically accurate sets were constructed, using the help of knowledgeable advisers. Casting was also well under way at that point. It was the initial intent of the producers that the cast would not include any known stars, so as to avoid both overburdening the project’s budget and compromising the film’s perceived authenticity. The producers found it important to have actors look like the actual historical figures, so reproductions of portraits by Reformation-era artists such as Holbein, Dürer, and Cranach the Elder were used as visual references. (The plump and stern face of Niall MacGinnis, the actor chosen for the lead role, does bear a striking resemblance to the countenance of the actual Luther, as several reviewers later remarked.) Conversely, so that the dialogue would ring true to American ears, a special coach was hired to train the predominantly British cast in speaking in a more Americanized accent—even though the characters they played were obviously German. Costume designers used contemporaneous paintings and etchings to prepare the outfits for the main characters; nevertheless, the designs were ultimately simplified so as to “help make the actors and scenes realistic to a twentieth-century audience.”⁴⁶

43 Ibid., 527.

44 Ibid., 553.

45 Paul Empie, “Martin Luther Film,” memorandum, January–February 1953, LFA 3/2, box 1, AELCA.

46 Oswald Hoffman and Henry Endress, “Re: Production of the Luther Films,” memorandum, October 27–28, 1952, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

The film's producers sought to downplay the instability of claims to the "authentic." Thus, for example, when later asked about his experience working on *Martin Luther*, Pichel made an unequivocal distinction between LCP and the Hollywood studio system: "When I had my first meeting with the men who had most to do with making the film," he reminisced, "I was told something I do not recall, as a Hollywood director, ever having been told before by a producer. . . . I was instructed that this picture was to tell *the truth*."⁴⁷ This statement clearly serves to mask the complex negotiations of historical and confessional authenticity undertaken in the context of this film. Yet it also profoundly misrepresents Hollywood's position on "the truth." The studios' investment in history, to be sure, was noticeably present in the operation of their research departments, which by the 1950s, according to David Eldridge, "were an established part of the industry's culture of production."⁴⁸ These departments worked tirelessly to produce "research bibles," expansive compendiums of historical data that drew on a variety of authoritative sources—as many as 1,644, which was the number of publications used in research consultant Henry Noerdlinger's "bible" for *The Ten Commandments* (1956)—and attempted to lend credibility to film producers' historiographical ambitions. As products of intensive research, these bibles were more often concerned with confirming visual details than with engendering a meaningful interpretation, and as such, they may hold questionable scholarly value; nevertheless, they do establish that "no matter how inadequately conceived," historical authenticity was "a highly valued commodity in Hollywood's history films."⁴⁹ At the same time, "spiritual authenticity" was also not anathema to Hollywood filmmakers. DeMille, for one, imagined *The Ten Commandments* "to be a history film as well as an inspirational biblical story" that would demonstrate the power of faith.⁵⁰ As a result, according to Tony Shaw, the director chose to include in the film's narrative "most of the key insignia of evangelical convictions."⁵¹ Taking *The Ten Commandments* as a representative example, then, it becomes difficult to differentiate between Hollywood religious epics and *Martin Luther* on the grounds of authenticity: all strive on some level for historical faithfulness and spiritual instruction while subordinating both to the demands of filmic drama.

Where *Martin Luther* and Hollywood religious epics do seem strikingly dissimilar, however, is in the way they look. In the 1950s, Hollywood studios underwent a period of decline as a result of the loss of their theater chains, fierce competition with television, and a decrease in overseas income as a result of European protectionist policies. In response to this crisis, the industry asserted its relevance by capitalizing on cinema's capacity for spectacle, mainly through an increased investment in widescreen color cinematography. Nowhere was this investment more apparent than in the era's religious blockbusters. *The Ten Commandments*, for example, made particularly strong use of Paramount's VistaVision process. In Moses's sentencing sequence, to note but one stunning instance, the widescreen format allowed Seti's palace hall to be registered

47 "Luther Film Is Record-Breaker," *Lutheran*, October 14, 1953 (my emphasis).

48 David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 130–131.

49 *Ibid.*, 128.

50 *Ibid.*, 147.

51 Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 122.

in its full splendor, providing ample space for action by a horde of extras (including several scantily dressed dancers). Technicolor's dye-transfer printing, in turn, made the rich mosaic of bright colors utilized in the scene's costumes and decor seem even more vibrant. At times, it feels as if this visual extravagance exists separately from the narrative, conveying "the constant sense of DeMille showing off his ability to fill the screen with excessive production values."⁵² In comparison to this exuberance, *Martin Luther's* style appears quite reserved. The black-and-white, Academy-ratio cinematography undercuts the biopic's spectacular appeal, as does the avoidance of high-contrast lighting schemes, dynamic camera movements, ornate sets, and complex mise-en-scène. Even in a climactic moment such as Luther's defense at Worms, the visual drama is quite subdued: *pace* the sentencing sequence in DeMille's film, the power of this trial scene lies not in abundant detail, grand scale, or elaborate crowd activity but in the visual emphasis given to MacGinnis's expressive acting style (culminating in an uncomfortably narrow close-up) and in repeated cutaways registering audience reactions. Thus, while conforming to the Hollywood standards of meticulousness, *Martin Luther* distinguishes itself as being aesthetically puritanical. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the film would later be read as catering "more to the mind than to the eye."⁵³

Theatrical Distribution and Reception. Principal photography on *Martin Luther* began on August 4, 1952, and wrapped on October 11, 1952, with the editing stage lasting until January 1953. Before the end of postproduction, the LCP board changed its official position on the film's distribution, deciding that it "should go far beyond ecclesiastical circles."⁵⁴ This decision was not made lightly, as there were interested parties who were still concerned that the film would not interest wide audiences or, alternatively, that the film's controversial content would evoke a public backlash. To test the waters regarding some of these concerns, the corporation's executive committee was subsequently authorized to arrange several "showcase" screenings. The declared objective of these engagements was to ascertain whether distributors would be interested in acquiring the film; should they show no interest, the committee was instructed to arrange under its own auspices a traveling exhibition of the film in rented theaters, sponsored whenever possible by local Protestant bodies.⁵⁵ Paul Empie announced this plan in early February 1953 during the National Lutheran Council's annual meeting.⁵⁶ The presentation provoked a vigorous discussion on the state of religious visual media and its use within denominational politics. Empie stated that *Martin Luther* "pulls no punches" and would likely upset many Catholics. He argued (much in the spirit of his 1950 letter quoted earlier) that the film should be used as a Protestant countermeasure

52 Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films*, 150.

53 Manny Farber, review of *Martin Luther*, *The Nation*, September 26, 1953, 259.

54 Paul Empie, "Martin Luther Film" (memorandum).

55 *Martin Luther's* showcasing conforms to the distribution practice of four-walling, whereby theaters were rented for special screenings of non-Hollywood products. However, LCP executives described the film's exhibition as "road showing," in reference to the industry term for booking major blockbusters for heavily promoted multiday runs. The appropriation of this term seems geared toward adding prestige to the film's release.

56 William R. Bechtel, "Luther Movie Reaction Seen," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 4, 1953.

against a perceived Catholic domination of the media; to this, several council members added that there was a need for an intensified Lutheran drive to influence public opinion, especially in the realm of television.

During the following months, LCP and de Rochemont attempted to persuade theatrical distributors and exhibitors to release *Martin Luther*, but with little success.⁵⁷ In the meantime, they were also busy setting up the film's premiere, scheduled for early May in the predominantly Protestant city of Minneapolis. This showcase held great importance for LCP since, as one Lutheran executive explained it, *Martin Luther's* "distribution throughout the rest of the US depend[ed] directly on the success in this area."⁵⁸ In recognition of this, an elaborate promotion plan was devised, one that was based on a wide-ranging enlistment of clergy, religious institutions, and congregations. In initiating this plan, LCP not only showed sound business acumen—utilizing preexisting church infrastructure, with its experience in grassroots mobilization for the purposes of evangelism and social relief, to promote *Luther*—but also used the promotional process itself as a means of consolidating Protestantism and as a spectacular display of Protestant social strength vis-à-vis American Catholics and other adversaries.

The responsibility of developing and implementing this plan fell on the shoulders of Robert Lee of the Minneapolis Evangelical Lutheran Church. In the first stage, Lee organized a special preview screening of the film at the city's Lyceum Theater, to which 1,500 representatives of Minneapolis's clergy and laity were invited. Immediately following this screening, a pep meeting was held to encourage the audience to publicize the upcoming premiere in their congregations, as well as to enlist volunteers for the premiere's production office. This office comprised a general committee, headed by Lee, which oversaw subcommittees on ticketing, advertising, accounting, publicity, speakers, and "special effects" (i.e., special promotional gimmicks); a grand total of forty-four volunteers worked on these committees in the months before the premiere. Using his newly acquired manpower, Lee organized the distribution of special discounted ticket vouchers to the congregations through a designated "food chain": first vouchers went to an elected denominational chair, then to a district chair in charge of five congregations, then to a congregational chair, and finally to a "worker" responsible for ten families. Concurrently, the production office performed a variety of advertising activities: promotional heralds were sent to two thousand churches in Minnesota; church bulletins and daily newspapers carried pictures from and stories about the film; billboard posters were placed along all main highways; one-sheets and window cards were dispersed around town; radio and TV interviews were coordinated; and speaking engagements in church services, society meetings, colleges, seminaries, and civic organizations were arranged.⁵⁹

The May 4 premiere was held in the best of Hollywood tradition. Two arc lights were set up in front of the Lyceum to welcome the 1,800 invitees. The mayor of

57 Lothar Wolff to Louis de Rochemont, February 15, 1953, box 21, folder 7, LDRP.

58 Robert Lee to Henry Endress, March 10, 1953, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

59 Robert Lee, "World Premiere," publicity file, April 21, 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA; Robert Lee, "Prologue to a World Premiere," publicity file, March–April 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA; "They Said It Couldn't Be Done," publicity file, 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA; Henry Endress to LCP Board, May 1, 1953, LFA 3/2, box 1, AELCA.



Figure 3. A large crowd assembles to see *Martin Luther* at the Minneapolis Lyceum Theater (Lutheran Church Productions, 1953). Image courtesy of the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Minneapolis spoke before the screening, as did Pichel, Endress, and de Rochemont. Reporters interviewed the audience members who packed the theater lobby. By all accounts, the event was a success. In the following week, lines formed around the block to get into the theater (Figure 3). Subsequently, the run was extended to four weeks, and during this period of time ninety-eight thousand people from Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wisconsin, and Iowa attended screenings. The film broke the Lyceum's previous attendance records, outdrawing all other films in town with total earnings of almost \$76,000.⁶⁰ Individuals who, by reason of religious bias, were not usually inclined to attend films, came to see *Martin Luther* in droves, thereby proving LCP's claim that an untapped market for church-sanctioned religious films existed.

In the aftermath of this and subsequent showcase triumphs, LCP finally authorized a wide release for *Martin Luther* through commercial outlets, hiring de Rochemont Associates to organize the distribution efforts. This decision led to changes in the initial promotional plan, including a transfer of promotional responsibilities from church personnel to local theater managers, who had to make initial contact with various Protestant bodies, form film committees, and mobilize church facilities for marketing purposes. The empowerment of managers signified a greater desire on the part of the producers to have *Martin Luther* partake in the common practices of Hollywood studio distribution, and thus to assert the potential of church-based filmmaking to adjust to

60 "‘Martin Luther’ Biopic Biggest B.O. in Minneapolis in Many Years," *Variety*, May 21, 1953; "‘Martin Luther’: Report of Income from Minneapolis Engagement at Lyceum Theater," June 16, 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA.

the requirements of the mainstream market. Such grand aspirations, however, were tempered by LCP's fears that church and film distribution infrastructures might not be easily fused. To enable stronger integration, the promotional plan dossier sent to theaters included a clause on the "do's and don'ts of theater-church relations," instructing managers, among other things, not to favor one denomination over another, not to take any benefits in the name of the church that are prohibited by its stewardship policies, and not to publicize the film in a way deemed distasteful by the church.⁶¹ This measure, though lauded as productive in certain professional circles, seemed also to underscore the strain involved in departing from the ghetto of religious filmmaking.⁶²

The film's official release, which began in early September 1953, was accompanied by generally positive critical response from mainstream sectors—a testament both to the effectiveness of LCP strategies in making *Luther* an unproblematic commercial product for wide public consumption and to the desire of critics to see church-funded entertainment appear theatrically (as long as it was not overly controversial and didactic). Many commentators applauded *Martin Luther's* dramatic achievements, which they saw as a positive complement to the film's spiritual content and message: Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, for one, called the film "a brilliant demonstration of strongly disciplined emotions and intellects," and Sam Lesner of the *Chicago Daily News* exclaimed, "The feeling of 'participation' in this historic religious schism is inescapable, so powerfully, lucidly and vividly is this drama set forth."⁶³ The film's alleged avoidance of religious propaganda was also favorably noted, as when Mary M. Hobbs of the *Kansas City Times* called *Martin Luther* "a thoughtful, thought-provoking picture . . . which has partisan aspects but presents no bigoted view."⁶⁴ In several reviews *Martin Luther's* style, combining the aesthetics of Cranach and Dürer etchings with the realist mannerisms of postwar docudramas, was described as a restrained and tasteful alternative to the decadent lavishness of Hollywood epics of the era; coupled with strong religious content, the film seemed, at least in the mind of *Houston Post* writer Hubert Roussel, to be the appropriate entertainment product for a period of spiritual longing, "a sober and searching drama for sober and searching times."⁶⁵ Its ambivalent status—as blockbuster, art movie, and spiritual piece—marked *Martin Luther* as a unique phenomenon, and it was consequently given a pictorial spread in *Life* magazine, included in the "Ten Best Films List" of the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and celebrated in professional circles with two Academy Award nominations (Best Art Direction and

61 "Promotion Campaign for Martin Luther," late 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA.

62 Addressing the film's promotional plan, *Motion Picture Herald* informed managers that they might "learn something in the handling of 'Martin Luther' that will serve [them] well with other church groups and film subjects of semi-documentary nature, in public and community relations. In fact, we suggest that every manager who gets a copy of [the Luther] pressbook should carefully file the promotional suggestions for his future use." "Selling Approach," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 3, 1953.

63 Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Niall MacGinnis Is Starred in the Presentation of 'Martin Luther' at Guild Theater," *New York Times*, September 10, 1953; Sam Lesner, "Following the Trail with Martin Luther," *Chicago Daily News*, September 28, 1953.

64 Mary M. Hobbs, "At the Movies: 'Martin Luther'—Esquire," *Kansas City Times*, August 21, 1953.

65 Hubert Roussel, "Salvation for Movies Could Lie in Return to a Very Old Subject," *Houston Post*, June 26, 1953.

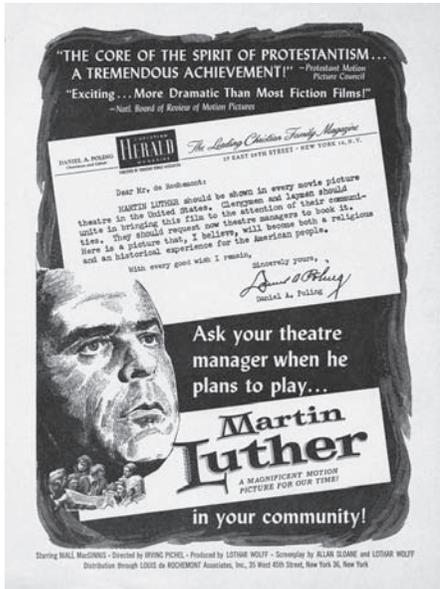


Figure 4. One ad for *Martin Luther* emphasizes the film’s endorsement by the *Christian Herald* (Lutheran Church Productions, 1953). Image courtesy of the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Best Cinematography)—honors never previously bestowed on a film made by the church.⁶⁶

Reactions to *Martin Luther* among Protestant laypeople and clergy were equally enthusiastic, at least judging by the impressive attendance records, the glowing endorsements given by various Protestant luminaries, and the fact that it was awarded the title of “Picture of the Year” by the popular Protestant publication the *Christian Herald* (Figure 4).⁶⁷ A more detailed and intricate understanding of Protestant reception may be achieved through looking at one audience study, conducted by LCP in early February 1954. The study’s sample audience was predominantly Protestant and was “more representative of the better educated folk than those with less schooling.”⁶⁸ In their responses, the spectators agreed that the film made Luther’s courage and sincerity

emotionally compelling, elucidated the history of the Reformation, clarified the difference between Catholic and Protestant doctrines, and carried a moral message about the necessity to stand for one’s beliefs in the face of great adversity. Accordingly, the study confirmed that the film’s constructive goals—educating Protestants and facilitating Protestant unity—were attained. Protestant critiques of the film were not registered here and, indeed, can rarely be found anywhere else in contemporaneous Protestant media reports and LCP corporate documents. The only known Protestant complaint about the film pertained to high ticket prices, the charge being that the ticketing policy prevented many people from attending screenings while “Lutheran Productions . . . [were] sharing in the profits and standing by, apparently, without a word.”⁶⁹ In response to these allegations, the LCP board members stated that they

66 “A Fine Movie about Martin Luther,” *Life*, July 13, 1953, 101–104; Mildred Martin, “Camera Angles: ‘From Here to Eternity’ Tops Best Ten Poll; ‘Luther’ Takes Second,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 6, 1953; Bosley Crowther, “Picking the Best Films of 1953,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1953.

67 “Christian Herald Readers Choose the Picture of the Year! ‘Martin Luther,’” *Christian Herald*, May 1953. The *Christian Herald* embodied positions, according to Greg Linnell, “most representative of Protestant laity during the 1950s.” The “Picture of the Year” award was particularly representative since it was based on a nationwide readers’ poll. Greg Linnell, “‘Applauding the Good and Condemning the Bad’: The *Christian Herald* and Varieties of Protestant Response to Hollywood in the 1950s,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 12 (Spring 2006), <http://www.usask.ca/relist/jrpc/art12-goodandbad.html>.

68 “Audience Reaction to the Film: Martin Luther,” February 1954, LFA 0/8/2, AELCA.

69 Dean A. Myers to Dr. Edward Schramm, September 10, 1953, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

thought “Martin Luther [was] a better picture than ‘Quo Vadis’ or ‘The Robe’” and that they didn’t “want to sell it cheaply, buy it cheaply or promote it cheaply.”⁷⁰ This reply seemed to have put a stop to any further objections, yet the tensions surrounding LCP’s complex position as a capitalist business and a platform for church stewardship would reemerge at the 16mm distribution stage, when prints were sold to churches at prices many congregations felt were outlandish.

Major criticism of *Martin Luther* came, understandably enough, not from Protestants but from Catholics, although the American Catholic Church did not officially condemn the film. Its formal position, as expressed through the National Legion of Decency, sidestepped accusations of sectarianism by giving *Martin Luther* a “separate classification,” which suggested that this text was not necessarily offensive to Catholics but did require “specialized training” for its “proper” interpretation.⁷¹ Outright Catholic resistance appeared almost exclusively in the ground-level actions of concerned laypeople and priests. Most common apparently were print attacks, either in the form of newspaper articles and letters to the editor or in the form of pamphlets such as Rev. Dr. Robert J. Welch’s *The Film Martin Luther: Distorted, Deceptive, Defamatory*, Lon Francis’s *The Martin Luther Motion Picture: Unhistorical, Unbiblical, Unfair*, and Abbot Richard Felix’s *Why? The Luther Movie*. Testifying to the high spiritual and social stakes involved in forming a position on *Martin Luther*, printed critiques did not limit themselves to an analysis of the film but used the occasion to discuss the broader issues of religious difference and denominational politics; hence, although many of the detractors drew attention to *Martin Luther*’s various historical omissions and supposed distortions, these discussions of accuracy usually shifted into attacks on the validity of Luther’s doctrines or on the film’s supposed condemnation of the modern Catholic Church (a claim which perhaps has no foundation in the text yet may well resonate with LCP’s demand that the film have present-day relevance). These critics subsequently described the message of *Martin Luther* as an attempt to preserve religious tensions in American society, an objective which they defined as thoroughly reprehensible.⁷²

Another strand of Catholic criticism was aimed not at the film itself so much as at its makers and their putative affiliation with communism. Catholics were among the most fervent anticommunists of all American denominations in the postwar era, partly because of the Vatican’s long-standing animosity toward socialism’s antireligious stance and partly because this position enabled them to emphasize their Americanism over their ethnic affiliation with America’s foes Germany and Italy. Their commitment to fighting global communism was evinced in the Catholic press and books (Tom Dooley’s *Deliver Us from Evil* [1956] is a good example), as well as in emphatic shows of support for Senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunt, unsurpassed by

70 Henry Endress, memorandum to fellow Lutherans, late 1953, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

71 “Legion Raps ‘Luther’ Dogma,” *Variety*, September 16, 1953.

72 Robert Welch, *The Film Martin Luther: Distorted, Deceptive, Defamatory* (Columbus, OH: Publication Bureau); Lon Francis, *The Martin Luther Motion Picture: Unhistorical, Unbiblical, Unfair* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, December 21, 1953); Richard Felix, *Why? The Luther Movie* (Benet Lake, WI: Our Faith Press). See also Black, *Catholic Crusade*, 128–131.

those of other religious communities.⁷³ In the spirit of the anticommunist obsession of American Catholicism, William Mooring, syndicated film and TV critic for more than forty Catholic magazines, published a series of articles in 1953 and 1954 in which he attacked LCP for employing Allan Sloane and Irving Pichel, both alleged communists. (Pichel, a vocal advocate of communist causes during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 but ultimately—because of his cooperation—was not called to testify; Sloane, who was named in *Red Channels* [1950], appeared in front of the committee as a voluntary witness and informed on other supposed communists.) Denunciations of communist affiliations made through public platforms (Sloane) and private meetings (Pichel) notwithstanding, Mooring was undeterred in declaring that *Martin Luther* presented a propagandistic attack on the Catholic church and that this attack was a direct result of the anti-Catholic bias of the film's pro-communist creators. He subsequently proclaimed that by leaving the task of making *Martin Luther* at the hands of communist sympathizers, the Lutheran church had deliberately aligned itself with the Antichrist.⁷⁴

Executives at LCP were ill at ease with Pichel and Sloane's communist past, and they required that both attest in writing that they were no longer "fellow travelers"; yet outwardly, the board affirmed its choice of filmmakers and countered Mooring's attacks on Lutherans by emphasizing that "few churches have suffered as much from communism as the Lutheran Church."⁷⁵ This type of direct rebuttal was uncharacteristic of LCP practices at the time, as it was the organization's official policy with regard to Catholic attacks "to remain silent and let Martin Luther himself do all the talking—via the screen."⁷⁶ Indirectly, however, the producers addressed Catholic criticism by initiating pro-*Martin Luther* articles in the press and by distributing pamphlets such as Henry Endress's *Answers to Criticisms of the Luther Film* and Dr. Roland Bainton's *Roland Bainton Speaks on the Martin Luther Motion Picture: Authentic, Historical, Biblical, Fair, Informative, Inspiring*.⁷⁷ The goal of these informational tracts, as Empie explained to Bainton, was to make clear the following points: "(1) that the film had to be limited in its material to fulfill its purpose of outlining the religious issues involved; (2) that the other matters raised with respect to Luther, even though they are somewhat unflattering to him, are irrelevant to the issues which led him to break with Rome; and (3) that much Catholic criticism reads into the film implications which are not there, thus setting up

73 Allitt, *Religion in America*, 22–23; Elwood, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 27–35.

74 William H. Mooring, "Pictures in Passing," source unknown (late 1954); Willmar Thorkelson, "The Week in Religion," *Minneapolis Star*, May 1953; "Allen [*sic*] Sloane Confesses Red Past; Says He Ghosted Henry Wallace Speeches," *Variety*, May 11, 1954. See also William H. Mooring to Henry Endress, June 7, 1954, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA; Irving Pichel to William H. Mooring, June 12, 1953, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA; Allan Sloane to Henry Endress, late 1954, LFA 3/2, box 1, AELCA; Martin Gang to Louis de Rochemont, July 15, 1952, box 21, folder 6, LDRP.

75 "Statement on Allan Sloane," 1954, LFA 3/2, box 5, AELCA.

76 Henry Endress to LCP Board, September 24, 1953, LFA 0/8/5, box 1, AELCA.

77 Roland Bainton, *Roland Bainton Speaks on the Martin Luther Motion Picture: Authentic, Historical, Biblical, Fair, Informative, Inspiring* (New York: Lutheran Church Productions, 1954); Henry Endress, *Answers to Criticisms of the Luther Film* (New York: Lutheran Church Productions, 1954).

strawmen only to knock them down again.”⁷⁸ These assertions, framed as defensive, cannily masked the extent to which the organization relished conflict. As in previous stages of the *Martin Luther* project, LCP executives defined denominational politics as a battlefield and their film as a weapon. Thus, they encouraged controversy, knowing that it brought attention and commercial success to their product, consequently raising Lutheranism’s stature within America’s religious landscape.

Martin Luther’s first run was finally completed on July 31, 1954, and by then the film had played in more than 2,600 US theaters and had grossed approximately \$2 million.⁷⁹ Although not measuring up to those of contemporary Hollywood religious spectaculars, these box-office results were remarkable by any previous standard of religious filmmaking. Rightfully encouraged, LCP soon began *Martin Luther*’s “popular price” second run in the United States. The promotion plan, so effective during the film’s first run, was retained in the same form, with the only major difference being that in light of the reduced ticket prices, discount vouchers were no longer issued. It was expected that a second run covering a wider area would continue the momentum of the first run; these expectations were soon dispelled, however, as the popular price release progressed with disappointing slowness. The LCP blamed this relative failure on several factors: the novelty of *Martin Luther* had worn off, and with it press interest and Catholic opposition; church groups became gradually apathetic toward the film and did not promote it as vigorously; the “popular price” did not prove as appealing as the discount vouchers; and a sense of overconfidence that “further success might come somewhat automatically” had undermined the producers’ ability to respond to distribution problems in a timely manner.⁸⁰ In addition to these factors, one might consider another potential reason for the failure of the second run. De Rochemont and LCP, as previously noted, conceived their target audience as primarily comprising Protestants and the unchurched. Yet it stands to reason that the most substantial support for *Martin Luther* came from those Protestants to whom the church had direct access and not from audiences that were not under its influence. The LCP seemed to partially acknowledge this through its emphasis on mobilizing the churchgoing audience; however, also present was a desire to give this film crossover value, as manifested in the insistence on high production values and national advertising in the secular press. Thus, it may be postulated that the successful first run had exhausted the true target audience—the mobilized Protestants—and that the failure of the second-run was, in essence, a result of the failure of LCP to accept the film’s relative lack of missionary appeal.⁸¹

Be that as it may, LCP took measures to spark new interest in the second run: for example, it reintroduced church discount coupons, actively courted churches, and

78 Paul Empie to Dr. Roland Bainton, February 17, 1954, LFA O/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

79 Joseph Gould, “‘Martin Luther’ to Be Withdrawn from Distribution on July 31,” press release, May 3, 1954, LFA O/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

80 Robert Lee, “Analysis and Possibilities Domestic Distribution Martin Luther,” report, November 22, 1954, LFA O/8/5, box 1, AELCA.

81 This confusion, according to Heather Hendershot, also characterizes much current evangelical filmmaking, which “wants to convert outsiders, but ultimately only preaches to the choir.” Hendershot, *Shaking the World*, 214.

instated a new “Badge of Freedom” campaign, in which Protestant youths were invited to join Martin Luther committees and wear special Luther pins. It is unclear the measure by which these changes were implemented or the degree to which they made a positive impact. Regardless, the film’s general theatrical release finally ended on September 1, 1955. At the time, it was estimated that more than twenty million people had seen *Martin Luther* at least once in theaters all across America.⁸²

Conclusion: *Martin Luther* and Film History. In the aftermath of the *Martin Luther* project, LCP looked ambitiously toward the future. In 1957, a division within the corporation was set up under the name Lutheran Film Associates (LFA) for the specific purpose of developing new content for LCP. The first LFA project was *Question 7* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1961), a fiction feature about “the personal struggle of faith in Communist lands,” which was produced by Louis de Rochemont and scripted by Allan Sloane.⁸³ This film failed financially and was the last of LCP-LFA’s major cinematic productions. In 1965, LCP was incorporated into LFA, and over the following few decades the organization focused on short educational films, initiating only a few more wide-release projects, including the Academy Award–nominated documentary *A Time for Burning* (William Jersey, 1966).

From today’s vantage point, *Martin Luther* stands as LCP-LFA’s most popular product and most significant contribution to the field of religious filmmaking. Following its theatrical run, the film still sustained a noticeable presence within the American scene: first in 16mm release to the church-basement circuit and then in television distribution (which sparked nationwide controversy in 1957, when Chicago’s WGN canceled the film’s “world television premiere” as a result of local Catholic pressures).⁸⁴ By the early 1970s it was determined that an impressive 18.3 percent of the US population had seen *Martin Luther*.⁸⁵ In recent decades it has enjoyed a second life on VHS and DVD.

The film’s lasting popularity notwithstanding, it is *Martin Luther*’s role within the religious revival in 1950s America that makes it worthy of historical study. In the postwar spiritual marketplace, where denominations were aggressively competing for social dominance, this film marked one of the boldest attempts made by an American religious group to transcend its congregational boundaries and extend its influence to the public at large. Its phenomenal achievements at the box office, taking in close to \$3.5 million by 1960, certainly also made *Martin Luther* one of the most lucrative of these

82 Robert Lee, minutes for meeting of officers, June 3, 1955, LFA 3/2, box 1, AELCA; Robert Lee, “Facts about the Sale of 16mm Prints of ‘Martin Luther,’” report, September 1, 1955, LFA 3/2, box 5, AELCA.

83 Robert Lee to Melvin Hersh, February 18, 1957, LFA 0/8/2, box 1, AELCA.

84 For a comprehensive account of the Chicago ban, see Robert J. Pondillo, “The Chicago Television ‘Holy War’ of 1956–1957” (conference paper, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention, Baltimore, August 1998).

85 Ronald L. Johnstone, “The Images of Lutheranism: A Sociological Analysis of Survey Data from a Sample of the US Adult Population” (research project, Central Michigan University and Lutheran Council in the USA, 1971), 14.

attempts.⁸⁶ Yet it is important to qualify this success. *Martin Luther* was undoubtedly effective in providing a rallying point and unifying symbol for American Protestantism and in placing Lutheranism, if only briefly, at the center of national attention. It is entirely uncertain, however, to what extent the film actually achieved its missionary objective of indoctrinating the unchurched masses in Luther's teachings.

Also significant in this framework are the ways in which the *Martin Luther* affair intersects with the great postwar conflict between Catholics and Protestants. The film was conceived as a countermeasure against what Lutherans considered a Catholic attempt to use the media to propagate anti-Protestant lies. As such, *Martin Luther* was made to evoke controversial past events in order to provoke confrontation. The denominational clash caused by its release revealed what was really at stake here—not an attempt to debate the film's merits or lack thereof but a struggle to assert the truthfulness of one religious doctrine and the falsity of another, to advance in social standing and achieve political gain, and to obtain the right to interpret crucial history for the benefit of future generations. Consequently, the film and its surrounding discourse emerged as a site where boundaries between past and present, spiritual and historical, religious and political, were fundamentally blurred.

Finally, and in light of the foregoing, it is important to think of *Martin Luther* in relation to the "complicated osmosis" which has taken place between the postwar American church and secular entertainment industries.⁸⁷ Though inexperienced and underfunded, Lutheran Church Productions was not satisfied with only reaching the devout spectators of church films; rather, it sought to expand its proselytizing efforts by fighting Hollywood studios for their audiences. While never obtaining the market share of a Hollywood studio, LCP did manage, through an ambitious production agenda and bold national distribution plans, to score enviable fiscal and organizational accomplishments, subsequently proving the institutional strength of the church and the forceful desire of its followers to see *their* films presented on the screen. Yet this success came at a price: while arguing for historical and confessional authenticity, LCP had to compromise the integrity of its religious message by aligning *Martin Luther* with the dramatic standards of mainstream fiction filmmaking; it thereby opened itself up to criticism from those members of the Christian fold who felt that church stewardship was sullied by its association with the profit-based practices of American media. Standing at a crossroads in the history of the relationship between church and modernity, LCP's "remarkable adventure" represented both the benefits and the dangers of wielding the formidable weapon of mass communication in the name of God. In the present age, when Christian media, bound by a Gordian knot to evangelical impulses, has become a real force to be reckoned with—and specifically, when Christian films have gained a more substantial foothold in the theatrical exhibition market, as is evident from the unprecedented box-office achievements of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel

86 De Rochemont Associates, "Schedule of Costs and Grosses (Excluding TV) of Motion Pictures Produced by Louis de Rochemont," report, October 1960, box 6, folder 4, LDRP.

87 Hendershot, *Shaking the World*, 6.

Gibson, 2004)—it is hard not to regard *Martin Luther* as a telling precursor and not to see that the contradictions it exposed still remain largely unresolved.⁸⁸ *

This article was presented in abbreviated form at the 2010 Film & History Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Many thanks to all those who accompanied the long process of bringing it to print, and especially to Lucy Fischer, Mark Lynn Anderson, Ali Patterson, Mal Ahern, Joel Thoreson, Shannon Bowen, Kathryn G. Gritts, and the anonymous Cinema Journal reviewers.

88 The case of *Martin Luther* offers an exception to Hendershot's contention that for Christian filmmakers, "until video took over, church was unquestionably the ideal context for viewing [evangelical] films" (201, original emphasis). It is beyond the scope of this essay to compare *Martin Luther* and present-day Christian films; suffice to say that current research indicates that both have been marketed with the intention of achieving a wide theatrical release. For more on this, see Hendershot, *Shaking the World*, 176–209; Peter A. Maresco, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-melgibsonmarketing.html>; James Russell, "Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 59–76.