

The Movies Shoulda Been Snow White But They Drifted:  
THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC  
ALUMNAE RESPONDS TO THE MOVIE MENACE

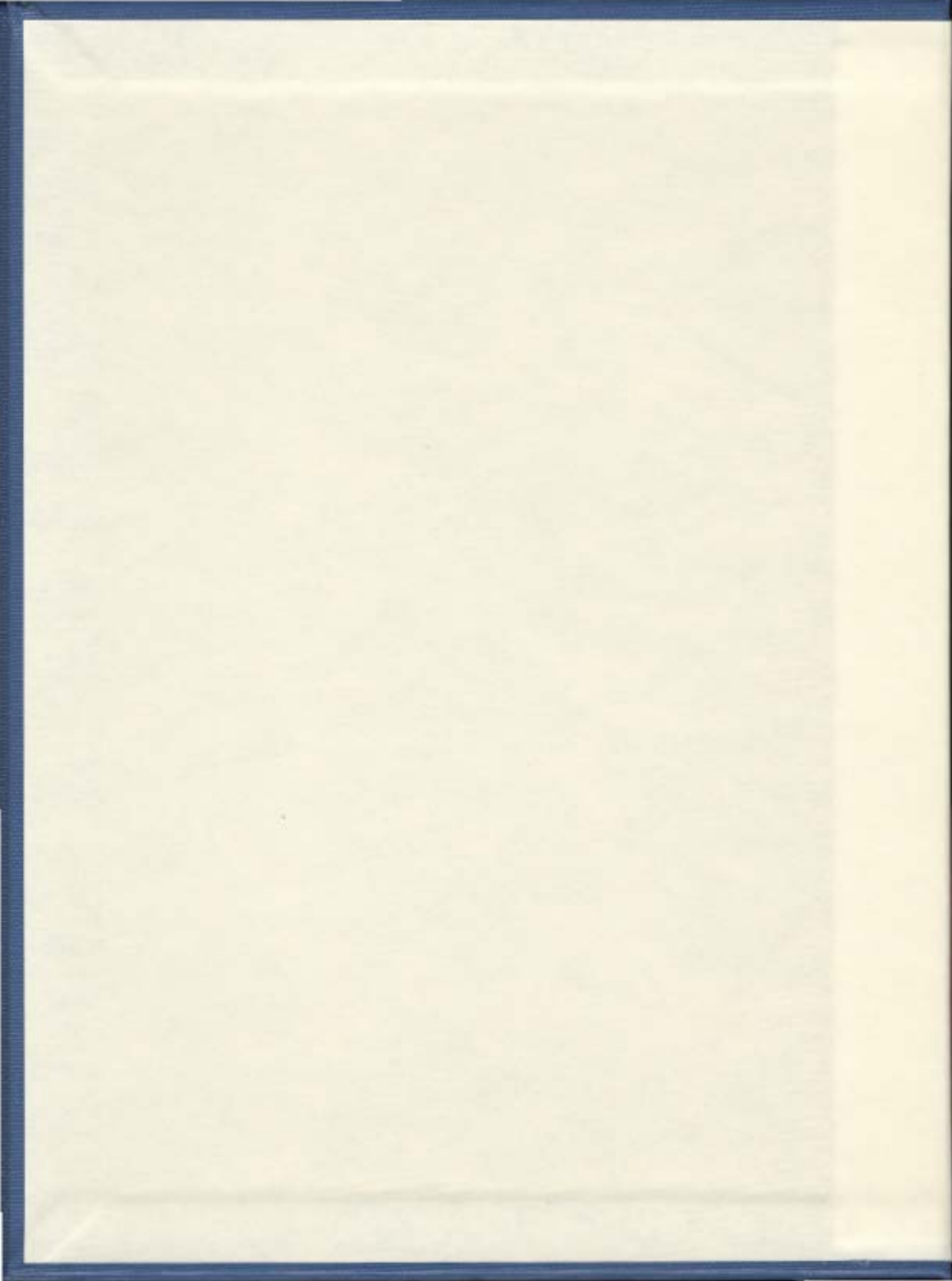
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EILEEN BROSNAN









*The Movies Shoulda Been Snow White But They Drifted:*  
The International Federation of Catholic Alumnae Responds to the Movie Menace

By

© Eileen Brosnan

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role played by the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (IFCA) in the American film industry throughout the 1920s and the early years of the Depression. The IFCA was an umbrella organization that united the many Catholic alumnae groups in the United States, as well as several in Canada and Europe. Convinced that salacious media were damaging American society, the IFCA sought to cleanse modern literature and theatre. They eventually turned their attention to the American cinema, which was one of the most popular pastimes in the nation. The IFCA established a Motion Picture Bureau, which worked with the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association in order to ensure that a Catholic sensibility was properly represented in the movie debate that was storming the United States. The Bureau was the most committed and prolific Catholic agency working to moralize the movies. Eventually, however, the American Catholic hierarchy decided a much stronger force was needed in order to battle film immorality, a decision that led to the establishment in 1933 of the National Legion of Decency. The Legion was the most powerful social pressure group that film industry had ever faced; the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau was relegated to join the Legion's review staff in order to remain relevant to the American film reform movement.

Very little has been written on the IFCA's film reform work, though it represents an important crossroads in the history of American women, American Catholicism, and Hollywood film. Utilizing the substantial primary sources from the Catholic University of America Archives documenting the history of the film bureau of the IFCA, this thesis

investigates the background, organization, aims, and dynamic of the IFCA in order to understand how it came to hold such an important position in American film reform.

### **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to thank my family for continuing support of many kinds; Gail Lush, for a crash course in Progressive women's movements; Dr. Michael Shute, Dr. Lee Rainey, and Mary Walsh of the Religious Studies department at Memorial University; and especially William John Shepherd and the helpful staff at the Catholic University of America archives.



## *Introduction*

“*All Quiet* is not a motion picture for schools or church halls; nor is its psychology of futility and despair suitable diet for adolescents. . . . But it is tremendous drama, unspoiled by conscious staging. It is primarily a picture for thoughtful men and women to suffer through and ponder over.” From Rita McGoldrick’s review of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, May 14, 1930.<sup>1</sup>

“This, you will recall, was in reference to anatomical displays in the drawing of animals, the incident which brought up your complaint being the showing too plainly of the udders of a goat.” Letter to Rita McGoldrick from Gordon S. White, February 19, 1931.<sup>2</sup>

In 1930, Rita McGoldrick, head of the Motion Picture Bureau of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (IFCA), praised the war drama *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The IFCA movie review service was mainly concerned with the suitability of movies for young people, believing that children could be irredeemably damaged by irresponsible and salacious media. Why then would an organization working to “clean up” the movies praise an intense, psychological drama about the cruelties of war? A year later, McGoldrick complained to a film production company about an animated picture that indulged in barnyard pornography, a clear shot of goat udders. It was within the contradictions of these two critiques that the IFCA’s Motion Picture Bureau operated: Women who were proud of their education and artistic judgment, who were certain that they were the ideal cultural leaders, who lauded the art of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, who worried about the effects animal nudity might have on innocent children.

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<sup>1</sup> American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, Catholic University of America (CUA), International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (IFCA) archives, collection 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 14, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, letter from Gordon S. White to Rita McGoldrick, February 19, 1931.

This thesis will examine the role played by the IFCA in the American film industry and the American Catholic film reform movement. This study will begin with the establishment of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau in the early 1920s and follow its activities until 1936, when it joined forces with the Legion of Decency.<sup>3</sup> It was during this fifteen year period that members of the Bureau created their own guidelines and goals, working with Hollywood in the hopes of influencing producers to purify the morals of the movies. The Bureau was part of the “better films” movement. Many clubs concerned about the influence of movies on society held the opinion that the film industry could be persuaded to make only “clean” movies if those were the movies that did well at the box office. The “better films” or “endorser” groups publicized wholesome movies by issuing lists of films that they endorsed as acceptable. The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau was one of the most prolific and influential endorser groups in the 1920s.

The IFCA was a women’s organization of alumnae from Catholic high schools and colleges, founded in 1914 with the objective of promoting Catholic education, literature, and social service.<sup>4</sup> These three areas were each designated as their own departments within the IFCA. All activities and work of IFCA members were directed by one of these departments. The Motion Picture Bureau was part of the Department of Literature, which emphasized not only “clean” cinema but books and theatre as well. Rita McGoldrick, head of the Department of Literature in the early 1920s, instituted measures to popularize Catholic authors and moral literature, and also established the

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<sup>3</sup> The Legion of Decency was an American social pressure group formed in 1933 by members of the Catholic hierarchy and laity. The earliest members of the Legion campaign are now commonly recognized as the major force behind the creation in 1930 of the Production Code, a moral framework adopted by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, who chose self-regulation in an attempt to avoid the threat of government-controlled censorship of movies. The Legion of Decency was the culmination of a Catholic movie reform campaign that developed throughout the 1920s.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Emily Robers, “History of the Cincinnati Circle of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae,” M.Ed thesis (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1945), 6.

Motion Picture Bureau, becoming its first head. The Bureau's aim was to create public demand for better movies. The members reviewed films and published a weekly list of endorsed pictures, stating whether the films in question were appropriate entertainment for schools and churches. The Bureau did not publicly condemn any movie for immorality, because to do so would advertise the movie in question. It was the Bureau's argument that even negative criticism in a public forum was publicity.

Though in her radio addresses McGoldrick complained not only of "screened vulgarity" but also of "innocuous entertainment," the Bureau's recommended pictures often seemed quite innocuous.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Bureau had responded to the popularity of gangster movies by refusing to review them.<sup>6</sup> Thus the alumnae, though they called for intelligent movies and smart moviegoers, preferred audiences to patronize the likes of the Barkies, movies in which trained dogs acted out the story, over movies like *Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. For the Bureau, intelligent meant moral. The Bureau's white list was a moral register of the movies. Though the reviewers apparently prized their culture and good taste, their review service was not artistically concerned, but morally so.

Interestingly the Bureau did exclude from its white list some movies with which it had no moral complaint, but which it had found artistically unsound.<sup>7</sup> On the whole, however, the reviewers seem to have endorsed the majority of movies they saw, as long as those films were not judged to be immoral. Endorsed movies were rated as "good," "very good," or "excellent," according to their artistic merits. Though the use of this method made the Bureau look rather simplistic in its judgments, it was probably adopted

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<sup>5</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, July 23, 1930.

<sup>6</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 7, 1931.

<sup>7</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcripts of radio addresses, Rita McGoldrick, May 28, 1931 & September 24, 1931.

in order to impress the film industry. By not using categories such as “poor” or “fair” to reflect the artistic worth of endorsed movies, the Bureau could be seen as enthusiastically promoting these movies, thus emphasizing the point that studios that took the initiative to produce good, clean fun were rewarded with free advertising.

Separating the moral from the immoral was not always an easy task; McGoldrick told her radio listeners that salaciousness might even be present in Mickey Mouse and the Barkies.<sup>8</sup> No matter how innocent the star might seem, obscenity was obscenity, whether it was George Raft or Rin-Tin-Tin, Mickey Mouse or Mae West. The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau essentially argued that the public really wanted clean entertainment; it just did not know it. An educated audience would not choose sexual or violent movies, which were dismissed as unintelligent by the Bureau. The most prominent head of the Bureau, Rita McGoldrick, used her weekly radio broadcast as an opportunity to share with her listeners the newest technological innovations in the movies, believing wholeheartedly that education would triumph over ignorance.

The Federation was most concerned with education; the Motion Picture Bureau was likewise concerned. McGoldrick considered the screen to have great potential as an educator and encouraged production companies to make movies specifically designed for school use. The Bureau also considered itself an educator, as its aim in reviewing and endorsing films was to encourage audiences to make better choices when it came to the movies they attended. Smarter audiences meant a demand for smarter movies, which producers would gladly provide if good box office returns were guaranteed. The Bureau’s cooperation with other reform-minded groups, most of whom were Protestant in origin or in inclination, might also be seen as part of its educational work, for

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<sup>8</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, April 16, 1931.

McGoldrick referred to such cooperation as “one of the strongest agencies for the breaking down of bigotry in this country.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike many other film reformers, both contemporaries of McGoldrick and those who worked decades in the future, McGoldrick did not claim that wholesome movies did better at the box office than racier fare, an assertion that placed the onus to clean up the movies squarely on the moviemakers, who were characterized as subversively forcing their unwanted smut on the public. Wholesome movies were not impervious to the perils of the box office. McGoldrick noted that “too often these finer things go down to financial failure.”<sup>10</sup> Producers were businessmen who were attracted to whatever earned them the most money, so it was up to the audiences to provide motivation for the film studios to focus exclusively on movies that did not feature sex, violence, or other objectionable elements. The Bureau’s famous slogan, “Praise the best and ignore the rest,” which described its movie review service, also revealed what it wanted its followers to do when it came to the movies: Patronize the best and avoid the rest. In this way immoral movies would eventually die off when studio moguls realized that they were no longer financially viable.

Ridding the movies of salaciousness was not the only task of the Bureau. Of even more importance to Bureau members was their work to ensure that anti-Catholicism was kept far from American screens. Rita McGoldrick worked as an advisor on a number of films that dealt with the Church, even if the script only touched on Catholicism in passing. Hollywood did not need more opposition, particularly from its friends, the endorsers, so the industry was willing to follow the advice of many such groups. The

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<sup>9</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Monsignor Edward Pace, June 26, 1930.

<sup>10</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 7, 1931.

novel *Show Boat*, for example, had elicited complaints from the Federation due to Edna Ferber's dreary description of a convent school.<sup>11</sup> When the film was made a few years later, McGoldrick oversaw the screen depiction of the school. Even as the Bureau worked with other endorser groups on improving the overall character of Hollywood movies, the reviewers were Catholic women who were, above all else, acting in the Catholic interest. The alumnae were important members of Catholic Action, a popular movement of cooperation between clergy and laity with the aim of directing the laity's public works. In the early part of the twentieth century, American Catholics were becoming more vocal in politics and society and the philosophy of Catholic Action was helping them to do so.

The Motion Picture Bureau of the IFCA is not only an example of the transformation of American Catholicism, but is also representative of many important changes in the social sphere of American women as well as the development of the film industry. Chapter One of my thesis will examine the background of the IFCA as well as the historical context in which the alumnae operated, in order that the reader might understand the Federation's agenda. The IFCA was influenced by Progressivism, a popular movement at the time of the Federation's creation. Progressive reform movements were not exclusively female but they did give women opportunities to voice their concerns about society, and often those concerns were about child welfare. The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau, like other women's reform organizations, was concerned about the images shown to children at the movies. The Federation wanted to control what young people were seeing.

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<sup>11</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Mary B. Finan to Doubleday, Page, and Company, October 16, 1926.



Progressivism shaped the IFCA's philosophy and goals and continued to do so even when the Progressive era had ended. The Motion Picture Bureau, for example, was concerned with the educational value of film, which was very much a Progressive era concept. After the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a consideration for the art of film displaced earlier emphasis on its educational qualities.<sup>12</sup> The Bureau, however, largely ignored film aesthetics and concentrated on its educational uses.

The Progressive era is also the era of the movie. Chapter Two of this paper details the struggles of many different social pressure groups and concerned individuals to control this infant medium. Intellectuals celebrated the new democratic art that could, in cultural historian Neal Gabler's phrase, "beat back the commissars of culture."<sup>13</sup> Others were not so thrilled. Everyone from educators to members of "uplift" societies to medical professionals voiced concerns about the risks the movies posed to social, moral, and physical well-being. The movies did not become any less controversial as time went on. At approximately the same time that the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau was established, the film industry was rocked by a number of scandals involving industry people. Hollywood accepted self-regulation in the form of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association, Inc. (MPPDA) in the hopes of holding off federal censorship, but no program this association instituted was successful in stopping the calls for cleaner movies by way of government intervention.

I will examine the relationship between the Bureau and the MPPDA in Chapter Three. Unlike many film reform groups that attempted to work through the municipal and state censorship boards and to rally the federal government into legislating control of

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<sup>12</sup> Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 97.

<sup>13</sup> Neal Gabler, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 47.

the cinema, the IFCA worked with the industry to produce cleaner movies and to fight government censorship. The MPPDA appreciated the Federation's refusal to call attention to contentious movies. Studio representatives and MPPDA officials often praised the Bureau for its willingness to cooperate with the industry. In return, the Bureau was often asked its opinion on source material, scripts, and unreleased movies that dealt with Catholic topics. This gave the IFCA a unique power position as a Catholic organization working with the film industry. Perhaps the Alumnae could relate to the MPPDA; after all, both had been formed to prevent government control, the former to defend Catholic schools, the latter the film industry.

The third chapter will also examine tensions within the Federation regarding the Bureau's chosen methods of operation as well as criticism from the larger American Catholic community. As the end of the 1920s approached, important Catholics were increasingly critical of the Bureau's cooperation with the film industry, as well as its policy of issuing only an endorsed or "white" list. By the Depression, the situation was positively hostile. The Bureau upheld the traditional Catholic position on government censorship, but many Catholics believed the alumnae could use stricter measures and be less friendly with Hollywood.

Eventually the IFCA's Motion Picture Bureau had to defer to its true authority, the Catholic Church. The American hierarchy decided stricter measures against the film industry were needed: Immoral movies had to be condemned, not ignored. Chapter Four will describe the changing attitudes of American Catholics who had initially been content to allow Hollywood to clean its own house. Individual parishes and dioceses instituted "legions of decency" that advocated boycotts and blacklisting of movies in order to

combat Hollywood salaciousness. These eventually led to the official establishment by the American hierarchy of the National Legion of Decency.

The Bureau became the movie-review department for the Legion of Decency, perhaps the most powerful social pressure group Hollywood has ever battled and one of the great successes of American Catholic Action. In order to join the Legion, the Bureau had to agree to condemn movies for immorality instead of simply ignoring the objectionable ones. The IFCA still had an impact on film content through its work with the Legion, and continued to publish its own list of endorsed movies. Times had changed, however, and the visibility that the Bureau had enjoyed during the 1920s and early 1930s ended.

My approach to this thesis is simple. I was allowed access to the IFCA archives, which are held by the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. While visiting the same institution I also researched the archives of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), which had an important role in the formation of the Legion of Decency, as well as the records of Bishop Thomas Shahan, Rector of the Catholic University, who served as director for the IFCA in its earliest years. I am primarily using letters, transcripts of radio broadcasts, and official Federation and NCWC documents in order to understand the Bureau's work. My aim is to illustrate the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau's role in the early Catholic film reform movement as well as its work with the film industry. The IFCA has rarely been the topic of academic analysis. Even its Motion Picture Bureau, which undertook the Federation's most successful and recognized work, is usually reduced to a few passages—if that—in works on the Legion of Decency. The IFCA Bureau is a chapter in both American Catholic history and the

story of the struggle to control a mass medium, but is largely ignored by historians of either subject. My thesis is fuelled by a desire to answer some basic questions: Who were these women? What were their aims? How successful were they in their dealings with Hollywood? How did they relate to the more [in]famous Legion of Decency? The questions may seem simple but their answers are not to be found in the few references to the Bureau in published works.

I must acknowledge that my story of the Federation's Motion Picture Bureau largely focuses on Rita McGoldrick, its creator and first head. The IFCA's archives are at times sparse, comprised for the most part of the correspondence of the heads of Federation departments and bureaus. As a result it is McGoldrick's thoughts and actions that have been recorded. She oversaw, as she described it, a "review committee of college women," but on the whole their experiences are not described in archival documents.<sup>14</sup> Researchers of the Federation's archives can catch glimpses of individual personalities in the occasional film review submitted to McGoldrick from one of her Bureau members, or in the minutes of a Bureau meeting. The Maryland chapter of the IFCA publicly denounced the Motion Picture Bureau because of the Bureau's Hollywood connections, an act that tells us that the Bureau was a contentious subject for some of its fellow alumnae. Even more telling is correspondence in the NCWC archives that reveals strife between McGoldrick and the West Coast committee of the Bureau.

The relationships between McGoldrick, Bureau reviewers, and the Federation as a whole is dealt with in this thesis, but not as deeply as it might be. My aim is to investigate the relationship of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau to the Catholic film

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<sup>14</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio broadcast, Rita McGoldrick, November 29, 1929.

reform campaign in general. As one Federation President described the IFCA's film work, it was a one-woman Bureau. McGoldrick was the voice of the Bureau for her radio audience, her supporters who wrote praising her work, the MPPDA, and the movie producers for whom she served as advisor. No doubt the inner dynamic of the Bureau would make an interesting story, but it is a job for a writer with more time, resources, and funding than I.

The story of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau is significant in that it encompasses important American historical, cultural, and religious movements. Histories of Progressive era women's organizations frequently miss Catholic women's activism because the most famous Progressive movements were the temperance and suffrage struggles, which were not often the domain of Catholic women's organizations. In fact American reform is often depicted as having its roots in Protestantism.<sup>15</sup> This is not an unfair generalization, but as a result Progressive Catholic women are not properly acknowledged. Catholic women had their own struggles, such as protecting Catholic education and battling misconceptions of Catholicism. Studies of American film censorship and regulation also often overlook the IFCA and other "better films" groups because the Legion of Decency and the Production Code are the preferred subjects.

The Legion of Decency is a well-known story to film historians and movie buffs. Many still remember the Legion's three decade reign. The Motion Picture Production Code, put in place at least partly due to the efforts of the American Catholic hierarchy, is also well known. There has been a great deal of work done on both topics, but short of a paragraph or two on 1920s film reformers who worked with the MPPDA, scholarship on

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The American as Reformer*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 12-15; David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1.

a decade of American film reform is lacking. As women working with Hollywood to diminish anti-Catholic bigotry and to promote better movie morals, they provided the link between the growing role of women in society, the changing film industry, and Catholic Action.

“Society today is in dire need of the uplifting influences of women who appreciate and diffuse throughout the land the social and moral contributions of Catholic education,” wrote Joseph J. Burns in his history of the IFCA.<sup>16</sup> The Bureau undoubtedly believed society was in need of saving, and though it regularly cooperated with other endorser groups not associated with the Church, apparently the alumnae specifically saw Catholic aid as the cure for what ailed America. In a confidential Motion Picture Bureau report, McGoldrick quoted a letter from a Bureau admirer:

I am convinced the motion picture is only in its infancy and its powers for good or evil are unlimited. It is up to us Catholics to help direct its tremendous powers into safe and sane channels and so to use it as God’s instrument for good.<sup>17</sup>

The movies certainly did not seem to concerned onlookers to be heading down a good path, but the potential was there. At the premiere of the Eucharistic Congress Film in 1926, MPPDA head Will Hays said the cinema was “probably the greatest agency ever given to the world to bring about better understanding between man and man and between nation and nation.”<sup>18</sup> It would take a great deal of work, however, for the Federation to save the cinema in order that it might fulfill its potential. A nun in the Phillipines wrote to Rita McGoldrick, lamenting the lack of “good, gay entertainment”

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph J. Burns, “The Educational Efforts and Influence of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae,” (M.A. thesis, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1937).

<sup>17</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, Motion Picture Bureau Confidential Report for week ending December 8, 1930.

<sup>18</sup> CUA, National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) archives, coll. 10, box 125, “Religion and the Motion Picture,” speech, Will H. Hays, December 8, 1926.



available for her young charges in a leper colony. "Good, gay entertainment!"

McGoldrick exclaimed during one of her weekly radio broadcasts. "It makes one's heart miss a beat with the tragedy of it!"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, November 24, 1931.

## ***Chapter One: Progressives and Catholic Action***

“Catholics buy a pistol for a baby soon as it’s born. Someday Catholics mean to start a war and kill everybody else.”

“Nuns give me a funny feeling,” Spareribs said. “It scares me when I see one on the street.”

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 1940.<sup>1</sup>

### ***His Church and His Schools: The IFCA Agenda***

The movie reform work of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau was shaped by the background and aims of the greater Federation. For this reason it is necessary to fully understand the IFCA’s history and structure. It is also necessary to examine the cultural forces at work during the formation and early years of the Federation. The IFCA’s agenda was very much influenced by two different social movements: Progressivism, a philosophy that inspired many social reform movements, and Catholic Action, which saw clergy and laypeople working together for Catholic interests. Federation members were at the very least high-school educated women, though many had graduated from colleges or universities as well. Like many educated American women, they were drawn to social reform as a vehicle to express their political beliefs. They were also Catholic laywomen working in society for distinctly Catholic interests. The federation at heart was an educational one, seeking to publicize, celebrate, and protect the institution of Catholic education. Though the IFCA had an Education Department through which it performed work for the benefit of parochial schools, its other departments stressed educational issues as well. “Mindful of the sacred heritage that is theirs they endeavour to bring the boon of Catholic education to others,” wrote Joseph Burns.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1953), 138.

<sup>2</sup> Burns, 62.

The IFCA was founded in New York City in 1914 by Mrs. James J. Sheeran and Miss Clare I. Cogan, alumnae of St. Joseph's College in Maryland.<sup>3</sup> The two women had been inspired by debate of the Catholic Alumni as to whether federation was a task the men wished to undertake. Ultimately it took a decade for the Alumni to bring their many associations together, but the women federated immediately.<sup>4</sup> The large number of alumnae from Catholic colleges across the United States and in other countries was now joined under a common name and common ideals: To further the aims of Catholic education and to uphold the standards of Catholic womanhood.<sup>5</sup> In the words of the original 1914 letter inviting different alumnae organizations to join the Federation:

Catholic women must stand together. The separate Alumnae of our schools can do very little to make an impression on the country at large. A well organized affiliation of Alumnae would be a power to uphold the dignity and standard of our institutions for the higher education of women.<sup>6</sup>

Alumnae groups had worked for their own aims for some time, but federation meant that these groups gained new influence simply by the benefit of size. The Federation offered the hope that alumnae could now work on an international scale to affect positive change in Catholic concerns.<sup>7</sup> The approval of the American hierarchy for the undertaking was enthusiastically given. One Cardinal said, "The idea of uniting our great body of educated Catholic ladies in an international federation is an admirable conception and should be encouraged in every way."<sup>8</sup> The encouragement paid off: By 1922, 318 associations had joined the Federation, which had a membership totalling

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, IFCA pamphlet, 1922.

<sup>6</sup> IFCA letter quoted in Burns, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

39,097 alumnae.<sup>9</sup> There were non-Catholic members of the Federation, some of whom wanted the name to be changed to the Federation of Alumnae of Catholic Schools. The name remained the same and stressed the very Catholic nature of the Federation's aims.

Women who joined the Federation were expected to at least have obtained a high school diploma.<sup>10</sup> Many were graduates of Catholic colleges and universities. As such they were rarities in American society; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries college women in the U.S. were usually Protestant.<sup>11</sup> The Alumnae specifically sought to honour and protect what made them stand out from other educated American women—the institution of Catholic education. Perhaps their attempt to publicize the benefits of Catholic higher education worked, for the 1920s saw a swell in the numbers of American Catholic college women.<sup>12</sup>

The emphasis on the education of its members demonstrates the issue most important to the IFCA: It was first and foremost an educational organization, seeking to give credit to the institution of Catholic education and to publicize the work of teacher-Sisters. At mass during the first Federation convention “all present consecrated the Federation to the honor and glory of God, for His Church and His schools.”<sup>13</sup> Catholic schools were held in almost as high regard as was the Church.

It was in order to protect the institution of Catholic education that the alumnae were driven to form the Federation. Two decades following the IFCA's conception, Sheeran explained:

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<sup>9</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, Membership of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, 1922.

<sup>10</sup> CUA, Records of the Rector of the CUA, box 8, Qualifications for Alumnae Associations.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Burns, 4.

In 1914, the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, had begun a series of inspections of Catholic colleges for women . . . . This subject was a distinct worry to the nuns who had not yet brought their schools up to standard. If the I.F.C.A. did not collect funds for scholarship during this transition period, it certainly left no stone unturned to advise Reverend Mothers and Deans of the modern trend in education. The very contacts opened up through the policy of having the Sisters attend the convention from the beginning helped to sow the seeds of ambition and every Catholic College recognized the need of advanced faculty standing.<sup>14</sup>

The lifeblood of the American Church was its schools, and the lifeblood of the schools was the teaching nuns. The Catholic journal *The Commonweal* even claimed for the teaching Sisterhoods “the apostleship of Catholic culture.”<sup>15</sup> Eventually the IFCA collected money in order to establish scholarships for the Sister-teachers.<sup>16</sup> At every biennial convention members were reminded that the Federation honoured the work of the teaching Sisterhoods within the field of Catholic education.<sup>17</sup>

The Federation was composed of three departments that represented its aims: Education, Social Service, and Literature. In his 1937 history of the IFCA, Fr. Joseph Burns writes that the latter two departments were in fact secondary, that education was the main drive of the IFCA and the Social Service and Literature Departments fulfilled the aim of upholding Catholic womanhood.<sup>18</sup> Burns’ supposition that only the Education Department dealt with educational matters is incorrect. The Federation was defined by its work toward and celebration of Catholic education. Two members of the clergy who worked in the Catholic University of America administration, Bishop Thomas J. Shahan and Monsignor Edward A. Pace, were chosen to direct the Federation in order to

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<sup>14</sup> Sheeran quoted in Burns, 16.

<sup>15</sup> “The Nun in Education,” George Johnson, *The Commonweal*, vol. IV, no. 8, June 30, 1926, 203.

<sup>16</sup> Burns, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

emphasize “the basic educational character of the organization.”<sup>19</sup> To further highlight the importance of education to the IFCA, its main headquarters were located at the Catholic University. “As long as the Federation exists, it hopes to claim its affiliation with this great Catholic educational center,” Burns explained in his thesis.<sup>20</sup> All departments of the Federation emphasized education. For example, the Bureau of the Blind, which operated within the Social Service Department, maintained “the only sight conservation class for parochial school children in America.”<sup>21</sup>

Even when the work of a department or bureau was not specifically aimed toward the benefit of parochial schools or Catholic colleges, the overwhelming philosophy was one of education. Education did not end with graduation but was a lifelong undertaking, and the Federation served as a “post graduate service for the educational program of Holy Mother Church.”<sup>22</sup> The Bureau of the Blind worked toward providing Braille books for blind Catholics.<sup>23</sup> The goal of the Department of Literature was to encourage the consumption of Catholic books, as well as to moralize modern fiction, the stage, and the screen. The work of the Motion Picture Bureau of the Department of Literature was also heavily influenced by the educational aims of the IFCA.

The Department of Literature, under the leadership of Rita McGoldrick, began a campaign to popularize Catholic writers and literature. The department asked alumnae to make a pledge that once a month for a year they would request from a public library a work by a Catholic author.<sup>24</sup> This was done with the hope that public libraries would

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Robers, 9.

<sup>21</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, IFCA pamphlet, undated.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, 3.

<sup>23</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, IFCA pamphlet, undated. See also CUA: IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, March 15, 1922.

<sup>24</sup> CUA, Records of the Rector of the Catholic University, box 8, IFCA Department of Literature pamphlet.



provide more Catholic books. The department also compiled a list of the best available Catholic books in order to foster an interest in Catholics to read Catholic authors.

The Department of Literature was also concerned about the salaciousness of modern fiction, theatre, and cinema:

Early in its career the Federation sensed the unwholesome character of much of the entertainment indulged in during leisure time by people in general throughout the nation. To the neglect of good substantial reading, popular fiction of a demoralizing influence was a fetish with many people. Motion picture productions fell far short of the ideals of an educated Catholic woman. Moral pitfalls endangered the life of society.<sup>25</sup>

Alumnae saw the work as a necessary crusade to protect their children and fellow Catholics from moral harm: “Work of this kind is good—more, it is holy, for it is leading God’s children unto the road of Eternal Life.”<sup>26</sup> In 1921 the department also began to deal with the problems presented by the movies. Historians have not agreed on the date of the establishment of the Motion Picture Bureau. Many give the date as 1922, while one scholar gives it as late as 1924. IFCA archive records, however, show that work was in place to clean the movies as early as March 1921, and the Bureau was firmly in place by 1922.<sup>27</sup> In 1922 members of the Bureau were asked to sit on the National Board of Review.<sup>28</sup> This honour allowed the Bureau to become “nation-wide in its influence and activity.”<sup>29</sup> The Motion Picture Bureau was arguably the most high-profile and successful division of the IFCA. This Bureau was testament to the power these Catholic women acquired when they federated their alumnae associations and became active on a

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<sup>25</sup> Burns, 63.

<sup>26</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, IFCA Bulletin, July 1917, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Charles Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Powerful Church* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, Inc., 1997); CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, March 19, 1921; letter from Clara Sheeran to Mrs. Rowland Patterson, March 22, 1921.

<sup>28</sup> Burns, 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

national scale, power that they attributed to the Catholic teaching they had received in their youth:

The motion picture activity carried on by the Federation has been recognized by the entire country. When a group of women organized for the promotion of Catholic education can effect a change in the productions of one of the nation's leading industries, that group must possess a motivating force that will not be satisfied with half measures. The alumnae state that this force was acquired in the days of their convent training. Such acknowledgement is a tribute to the effectiveness of Catholic education.<sup>30</sup>

American Catholicism relied on its education system: "Without Catholic education it would be well nigh impossible to have any other form of Catholic activity."<sup>31</sup> *The Commonweal* went so far as to editorialize that all important Catholic movements could be seen as "an appendix to the history of the sisters' schools."<sup>32</sup>

The IFCA glorified Catholic education in all Federation work because they believed their work as Catholic women in society was innately linked to their convent school days. Their Catholic education was not the only factor that shaped the alumnae, however. Equally important contributions to their agenda were their status as women and Catholics in a society that was beginning to accept the involvement of both. To understand the IFCA's work, it is necessary for us to understand the cultural forces that shaped Federation members.

First and foremost, the alumnae were Catholics in America and were influenced by Catholic dogma and traditions as well as non-Catholic perceptions of the Church. Catholics were gradually becoming more acceptable to the American mainstream. In addition to their religion, the alumnae were also women attempting to mould a society

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> "Shall Women Think?" Unidentified author. *The Commonweal*, vol. VII, no. 4, November 30, 1927, 744.

that was not always in favour of women involving themselves in anything outside the home. American Catholics and American women were finding their public voices in the time period in which the IFCA first began to operate.

***Rome and America: The Loyalties of the American Catholic***

Catholic American society was traditionally a battleground between liberal and conservative. The former were so-called “Americanizers” who wanted to assimilate into American culture, while the latter wanted to keep their own culture distinct from the mainstream.<sup>33</sup> American Catholics were originally outsiders in American society and were thus marginalized. At the very worst times Roman Catholics were subject to nativist hostilities along the lines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Know-Nothing Party and the Ku Klux Klan. Ultimately, however, the Americanizer Catholics won the struggle between liberal and conservative and through a process of assimilation the Church became more acceptable to other Americans.

Catholic immigrants who arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century congregated to a large degree in big cities, forming what one historian called “ghetto Catholicism.”<sup>34</sup> Catholics were defined by their faith, both by outsiders and by themselves. Their culture was different, the result of “parish-centered spirituality and sociability, expressed through devotional practices, and mediated by priests, nuns, and sisters.”<sup>35</sup> Many non-Catholic Americans were suspicious of Catholic dogma. Catholicism was criticized for being an effeminate church, a sensual religion with men in

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<sup>33</sup> *American Catholic Women: An Historical Exploration*, Ed. Karen Kennelly. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 159.

<sup>34</sup> *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, Ed. Peter W. Williams. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 390.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 391.

“skirts” worshipping the Virgin Mary,<sup>36</sup> “its piety a feminine sort.”<sup>37</sup> McCullers’

Spareribs was not alone in his fear of nuns, as Protestant Americans regarded this alien icon suspiciously and often imbued the image of the nun with apprehensions of a sexual or gendered sort.<sup>38</sup>

The virulently anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan believed the Catholic Church was conspiring to take over the United States. Klan members alleged that every time a Catholic boy was born, the Knights of Columbus buried a gun under a Catholic church.<sup>39</sup> In 1854 work on the Washington Monument was halted when a stone block that the Vatican had donated was dragged by anti-Catholics from the construction site and in all likelihood today sits at the bottom of the Potomac River.<sup>40</sup> Non-believers were disconcerted by the Catholic doctrine of Papal infallibility.<sup>41</sup> Americans in the mainstream worried that Catholic Americans felt more loyalty to Rome than to Washington. Catholicism was by its nature a foreign religion. Sociologist Andrew M. Greeley explained, “Anti-Catholicism is as American as blueberry pie.”<sup>42</sup>

It is unfair to assume that the exclusion of American Catholics from American society at large was entirely the fault of non-Catholics. Catholics kept to themselves. They created communities that had little to do with the rest of America. American Protestants were suspicious of Catholics, but the feeling was mutual. In a letter IFCA

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<sup>36</sup> Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 43.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Wills, quoted in James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Coburn and Smith, 42-43.

<sup>39</sup> Goldberg, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, 62-63.

<sup>41</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 277.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *An Ugly Little Secret: Anti-Catholicism in North America* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), 17.

founder Clara Sheeran referred to “the Holy Father’s direct request that Catholic organizations shall not affiliate with interdenominational or Protestant societies.”<sup>43</sup>

As proof of Catholic distrust of Protestants, the American hierarchy encouraged the formation of parochial schools, where “they could nurture the faith and keep out influences from beyond the church.”<sup>44</sup> As a result parishes frequently ran their own schools.<sup>45</sup> Catholics could be described as “touchy” about their education. The IFCA was prompted to federate because Alumnae feared a government investigation of Catholic colleges would find them severely lacking. Even Catholics’ traditional stance against government censorship of movies was somewhat rooted in their educational system. American Catholics worried that federal regulation of the movies could snowball into a control mania and might eventually lead to federal regulation of all schools.<sup>46</sup> In addition, if Catholics were to maintain that government censorship was needed in order to protect their children from the movies, it would imply that the parochial school system was not capable of properly educating its students.<sup>47</sup>

Catholic stress on an educational system separate from the standard American system was indicative of their feelings toward American society in general. Catholics tended not to be involved in larger political or social movements such as temperance. In fact they were wary of government intervention, believing that an individual’s morality was worthless if that person was moral simply because he or she was observing the law. Morality could not be a consequence of legality. One Catholic

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<sup>43</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, March 1, 1929.

<sup>44</sup> Marty, 273.

<sup>45</sup> Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 95.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, 206.

<sup>47</sup> Walsh, 35.

writer described the outlawing of liquor as “this new attack upon the human will.”<sup>48</sup> The Catholic Total Abstinence Union’s goal of “reform by moral suasion, not legislation”<sup>49</sup> described the general Catholic sentiment toward government intervention in private life.

Perhaps this suspicion of their own country’s government only reiterated the seeming foreign nature of the Catholic religion to non-Catholics. As late as 1935 one angry writer accused the Catholic Church of hypocrisy because, he said, Catholics felt free to criticize the public schools and to insist on changes in public school curriculum but resented any attempt of the state to interfere with Catholic education.<sup>50</sup> The gulf between Catholics and non-Catholics looked as though it were unyielding. Non-Catholic Americans saw a very real danger in their Catholic neighbours. If Roman Catholics did not respect the American government, to what authority did they turn? Which would they support in a time of crisis, America or the Vatican?

Regardless of the suspicion with which Catholics and non-Catholics regarded each other, Catholics gradually moved into the mainstream. By the 1920s Catholics could stand with the majority and complain of “active organized minorities . . . advancing their own radical measures”<sup>51</sup> who “are bending every effort to gain control of government.”<sup>52</sup> Catholics themselves had once been depicted as fighting for control of America, but as time progressed that idea fell away.<sup>53</sup> In the twentieth century they saw improvement in their images and treatment.<sup>54</sup> In part this was because the Americanizers

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<sup>48</sup> “The Prohibition Issue,” Unidentified author. *The Commonweal*, vol. III, no. 15, February 27, 1926, 394.

<sup>49</sup> *American Catholic Women*, 163.

<sup>50</sup> E. Boyd Barrett, *Rome Stoops to Conquer* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1935), 21-22.

<sup>51</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from John J. Burke to IFCA, Oct. 31, 1922.

<sup>52</sup> “Woman in the Service of Society,” Elisabeth Randolph Shirley, *The Commonweal*, vol. IV, no. 11, July 21, 1926, 282.

<sup>53</sup> Barrett, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Just as American acceptance of Catholicism was not immediate, nor was it complete. The 1928 Presidential campaign of Al Smith can be viewed as the culmination of anti-Catholicism in America. See

won the battle between assimilation and separation. Catholics realized that Catholicism first had to become American in order for America to embrace their religion.<sup>55</sup> For example, the Knights of Columbus, the popular Catholic men's society, was so named in order to sound patriotic.<sup>56</sup> The Church shed its image as a foreign religion in order to grow roots in the United States. World War I transformed the American social climate. After World War I there was, as historian Peter McDonough described it, a "crumbling of subcultural boundaries" that allowed Catholics and other denominations to move closer together because the American view of the nation changed to the point that "homogeneity of custom and even of belief no longer seemed secure."<sup>57</sup>

Acknowledgement of this Americanism is important to our study of the IFCA, as the Federation is a good example of the patriotism proudly displayed by American Catholics, which proved to others that Catholics were good citizens. During World War I American Catholics proved they were loyal to their country as well as to their faith. The newly-formed IFCA cut its teeth on its work for the American troops.<sup>58</sup> The Federation changed its planned agenda in order to focus its resources entirely on the war effort,<sup>59</sup> in order "to hasten the work of intellegent [*sic*], systemized cooperation with our Nursing Sisters and War Suffers [*sic*]."<sup>60</sup>

Catholics as a whole were very supportive of their forces during the war, which was something of a surprise because the two sizeable cultural groups within American

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Greeley, 17. One historian wrote that as late as the 1950s Catholics were "stranded in America, out of place." See *From Paddy to Studs: Irish-American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880-1920*, Ed. Timothy J. Meagher (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 14.

<sup>55</sup> *From Paddy to Studs*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Goldberg, 122.

<sup>57</sup> Peter McDonough, *Men Astutely Trained: A History of Jesuits in the American Century* (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1992), 252.

<sup>58</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, "Catholic Women Voice Loyal Support of War," no date given.

<sup>59</sup> Burns, 17.

<sup>60</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from Clara Sheeran to Clare I. Cogan, March 23, 1917.

Catholicism were of Irish and German ancestry: That Irish-Americans supported military action in favour of Britain and German-Americans supported military action against Germany was unexpected.<sup>61</sup> Catholics were now American first, regardless of their cultural history. Following this sentiment, the Motion Picture Bureau of the IFCA asked its reviewers to determine whether a movie would promote Americanism to newly-arrived immigrants.<sup>62</sup> Catholics were no longer foreigners in their own country.

***“Woman’s Place is in the Home”: Women and Progressivism***

Catholics were not the only marginalized group that found itself moving into the American mainstream. Women, too, were becoming more vocal in the political and social arenas. It is necessary to understand the culture of change that brought about women’s social service organizations like the Federation. The IFCA was founded toward the end of the Progressive era,<sup>63</sup> an age of reform movements intended to cure the ills of society. America was changing as the twentieth century began. Their aims were diverse and there was no specific cause for which all Progressivists fought. One writer suggested that it was as easy to get only one answer from the query, “What is a Progressive?” as it was for the blind men who examined an elephant to agree on their conclusions.<sup>64</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, author of *The American as Reformer*, explained that from the first beginnings of American reform, reformers have always been characterized by their differences as well as their similarities: “It should not be surprising that isms breed

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<sup>61</sup> Marty, pp. 364-65.

<sup>62</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, IFCA Motion Picture Bureau review sheets, 1926/27.

<sup>63</sup> There are no definite dates for the Progressive era, but scholars generally identify this time as beginning between 1890 and 1900 and ending before World War I. See Diner, 5-6; Lewis J. Gould, *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 3; *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915*, ed. Richard Hofstadter (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 1; Neil A. Wynn, *From Progressivism to Prosperity: World War I and American Society* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 1.

<sup>64</sup> “The Progressives Arrive,” William C. Murphy, Jr., *The Commonweal*, vol. VII, no. 19, March 14, 1928, 1173.



schisms.”<sup>65</sup> Generally, though, Progressive reformers shared a belief in the power of political action to solve social problems.<sup>66</sup> They sought to heal American society while sustaining its traditional character.<sup>67</sup>

Women were among the major players of this reform era. Women reformers were often university graduates: “Denied the vote and thus unable to participate directly in politics, female college graduates found many professions closed to them as well,”<sup>68</sup> historian David J. Goldberg wrote. In the early years of the Progressive movement, college women turned to reform as a way to act in society.<sup>69</sup> Women were traditionally bound to the domestic sphere but changed their boundaries by changing the definition of domesticity. “Woman’s place is in the Home,” said one woman reformer in 1910, “but Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual home. Home is the community.”<sup>70</sup> Suffragists fought for the vote not only as a democratic right, but also by identifying a woman’s vote as the “Home Protection Ballot.”<sup>71</sup> Women were given the right to vote in 1920. Women reformers continued their work in what were considered to be feminine areas of interest.

The IFCA was no different from the other women’s organizations in this respect. A 1924 paper on Catholic women and the vote found in the IFCA archives identified the areas of female welfare, domesticity, religion and education as interests to the voting woman of any religious affiliation, while issues of economics and commerce were

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<sup>65</sup> Schlesinger, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Wynn, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Goldberg, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Diner, 202.

<sup>71</sup> Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 27.

assumed to be very minor concerns.<sup>72</sup> Women were chiefly involved with domesticity and as a result were the natural choice to protect their homes, and by extension their communities and the nation, against liquor, sex, and other vices: “The task of rescuing girls, of relieving the poor mother, of protecting children, and of welcoming the foreign-born to our shores makes a special appeal to the feminine heart,” maintained one woman writer in *The Commonweal*.<sup>73</sup>

Women’s entry into Progressive social reform may have been because child-rearing was the domain of the woman. The Progressive era was, in many ways, the era of the child. Child welfare was often the foundation for reform movements. Child labour laws, child psychology, children’s health and nutrition, and the juvenile court system were all matters that came to the fore during the Progressive era.<sup>74</sup> Many reformers held that children and family life were threatened by the corrupting influences of obscene novels, pictures, and movies. Progressive era women reformers engaged in “maternal activism,” believing that society was in dire need of mothering.<sup>75</sup> The traditional female role was that of wife and mother, and frequently women reformers fought to protect the home and were concerned with child welfare:

The concept of maternalism accepted, even idealized, women’s traditional role as wife and mother but at the same time insisted that women had a duty to extend their female skills and concerns beyond their own homes. The discourse of maternalism insisted on women’s role as universal mothers, making it the duty of all mothers to look after all children—not just their own. Maternalism thus provided both a motivation and a means by which

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<sup>72</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, “Catholic Women and the Ballot,” author unidentified, August 8, 1924.

<sup>73</sup> Shirley, 282.

<sup>74</sup> For child labour, see Wynn, 21; for psychology, see *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 57; for health and nutrition, see Wynn, pp. 120-121; for juvenile courts, see Elizabeth J. Clapp, *Mothers of All Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive Era America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>75</sup> Parker, 39.

many American women entered politics in the Progressive Era.<sup>76</sup>

Women became political on their own terms, forcing politicians to deal with domestic and “womanly” issues in order to win the female vote.<sup>77</sup>

The Progressive era is usually viewed as primarily a middle-class phenomenon.<sup>78</sup>

Women reformers of the day were frequently of the middle-class because this socioeconomic position afforded them time for volunteer causes. American Catholic women were similar in this regard as those involved in reform movements tended to be financially comfortable.<sup>79</sup> IFCA members were required at least to have graduated from high school and often were college graduates. This stress on higher education also points to their middle-class status, because middle-class women could better afford higher education than could their lower-class counterparts. One of the first IFCA Presidents, Clara Sheeran, boasted that the Alumnae “buried all class distinction for the love of Holy Mother Church.”<sup>80</sup> If the Alumnae were not entirely middle-class, their agenda can be seen as being very similar to the middle-class women’s movements of the time.

Previously we have read a definition of Progressivism that characterized the movement as political action for social change. Catholics, with their distrust of big government, were unlikely to be proponents of this philosophy. Catholic reformers, however, were attracted to the idea of working in society to better social conditions, a system integral to Progressivism. The IFCA shared a concern with other Progressive

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<sup>76</sup> Clapp, 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> Parker, 33.

<sup>78</sup> Gordon, 2.

<sup>79</sup> “Shall Women Think?”, 744.

<sup>80</sup> CUA, Records of the Rector of the Catholic University, box 8, letter from Clara Sheeran to Mrs. Rowland Patterson, March 28, 1921.

women's groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, for education, social service, and purity in literature and other media.

Ultimately the volunteer status of many women's reform groups may have hurt them. The 1920s were increasingly a time of professionalization for social work, sociology, child psychology, and so on. Though still a young organization, the IFCA was a throwback to Progressivism in this new era of professionalism. Professionals were now the authorities in the areas in which the IFCA worked. Women's reform organizations like the IFCA were gradually being displaced in their crusades to better society and protect children. It must be noted that the IFCA was comprised of laywomen in two senses. They were laywomen in the fields of education, social service, and child welfare. They were also laywomen within the Catholic Church, and as such they bowed to the authority of the Catholic hierarchy. Eventually the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau would be displaced by its own spiritual authorities in the crusade to better the movies.

### ***Urban Philosophy Meets Urban Technology***

The Progressive era and the motion picture were born at the same time and both initially found followers in large urban centres. Certainly it seemed to Progressives that the cinema was a competitor to schools, churches, and parents when it came to social influence and power. The movie was a favourite target for many reformers. At the turn of the century, changes in working conditions provided the working class with a newfound leisure time. Increasingly workers chose to spend their free time at the movies. Children were also often to be found in movie audiences. Reformers were worried. The educational power of the cinema was great, but the screen was regarded with anxiety as it was believed the worldly ideas of modern novels and plays, which normally would not

have reached anyone but urban sophisticates, had found a far larger audience. The impact the movies had on children was what specifically troubled reformers.<sup>81</sup> Many reformers feared that good parenting, education, and church could all be undone by what was coming out of Hollywood.

Like many Progressive women's organizations, the IFCA was concerned with what it considered the indecency of many movies, particularly as movies affected children. Film historian Garth Jowett explained, "The interest of women's groups in the moral standards of the movies was a natural extension of their concern for the effects the medium was having upon their children."<sup>82</sup> In addition some reformers were very uneasy about the tendency of the working class to spend their free time at the movies.<sup>83</sup> The IFCA was concerned about the spare time of lax Catholics. An IFCA newsletter from 1917 worried that there were some lackadaisical Catholics who wasted their leisure time "in attending a theater or motion picture show, or a dance hall."<sup>84</sup> With true Progressive spirit the IFCA felt it had a calling to rescue these wanderers:

[Y]et with a shrug of our shoulders, which means "Am I my brother's keeper," many of us with smug satisfaction proceed to our clean, pure recreations without an effort to lead the others into safer ways. Of course it is good to draw oneself away from the defiling touch of these terrible vice propaganda being waged, but it is better to draw away at the same time, another soul.<sup>85</sup>

The IFCA shared many traits with women reformers of the time, but it also differed in important ways. The suffrage movement does not appear to have been a

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<sup>81</sup> Garth Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control" (Ph.D thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 79.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>83</sup> Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>84</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, IFCA Bulletin, 1917.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

major focus of the IFCA.<sup>86</sup> Many Progressive women reformers were passionate supporters of the temperance movement, but not the IFCA. As mentioned previously, American Catholics were generally not supporters of temperance and other movements that involved federal interference due to their suspicion and dislike of government intervention in matters that they believed were best left to the individual. A 1925 article in *The Commonwealth* argued that first modern reform had to reform itself in order to have any real success.<sup>87</sup> This was a common attitude amongst Catholics toward non-Catholic reform: Society was not built of institutions and businesses, but of human beings. Reform humanity and society would likewise be reformed. Laws could not make a person moral.

Because they felt uncomfortable with government intervention in everyday life, Catholics were also opposed to federal censorship. The IFCA upheld this popular Catholic position with its insistence that Hollywood would be convinced to regulate its own product if only audiences were to demand clean entertainment. Though at the surface this appears to be quite opposite to basic Progressive philosophy that social change could be affected through legislation, many Progressive societies belonged to the “Better Films Movement,” maintaining that the film industry ran on the economical law of supply and demand. When audiences demanded moral movies the studios would supply them.

As an organized group of Catholics, the IFCA was in the position to pressure the film industry for more positive portrayals of Catholicism. It used Catholic media to present itself as a strong Catholic presence in movie reform; likewise the Bureau used its

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<sup>86</sup> This is not to say that IFCA members were apolitical or numbered among the Catholic anti-suffragists, but simply that there is no record of an organized movement of the alumnae to campaign for the vote.

<sup>87</sup> “The Reform of Reform,” D.W. Fisher, *The Commonwealth*, vol. I, no. 11, January 21, 1925, 291.

influence in Hollywood to improve the popular image of Catholicism. These methods underline what is perhaps the most important aspect of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau. The IFCA was shaped by Catholic education, Catholic distrust of government action, the changing status of women in society, and Progressivism. Most importantly, however, the IFCA was an important player in the new movement of Catholic Action, an increasingly popular campaign that saw Catholic laity become more and more involved in Church work.

### ***Born to the Crusade: The IFCA and Catholic Action***

American Catholics traditionally shied away from political action, but IFCA members were urged to use their newly-awarded right to vote in order to affect change in matters of Catholic concern.<sup>88</sup> Though one might interpret this as the influence of Progressivism or the changing status of women in society, IFCA members credited the Catholic Action movement as the driving force behind their accomplishments. Catholicism was an even stronger influence than Progressivism on the Federation's agenda. Its attempts to better society were all directed towards Catholics. Clara Sheeran, co-founder of the IFCA, later said, "I am sure that the movement was an early manifestation of the spirit behind what we call Catholic Action."<sup>89</sup>

Catholic Action represented the changing status of the laity in Roman Catholicism. The clergy and sisterhoods had always worked for Catholic aims but now the role of laypeople was reconsidered. Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, called for the Church to work in society.<sup>90</sup> As a result Catholic charities

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<sup>88</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, "Catholic Women and the Ballot," illegible signature, August 27, 1924.

<sup>89</sup> Sheeran quoted in Burns, 3.

<sup>90</sup> *American Catholic Women*, 160.

boomed in the 1900s.<sup>91</sup> In his 1922 encyclical, *Ubi Arcano*, Pope Pius XI encouraged the same Church charity work and officially termed it Catholic Action.<sup>92</sup> Just as Progressives were attracted to social work because they saw a society in need of progress, so Catholics saw a society in need of moral guidance. “[T]he layman is called upon to become more than a vicarious guest in the kingdom of Christ, who is stuffed with doctrine and consolation and is then suffered to sleep tranquilly,” said *The Commonweal*. “He must take his share in the fishing, and do his part to stem the flood.”<sup>93</sup> Catholics were called to the Crusade of bettering society. In 1922 a priest of the National Catholic Welfare Conference wrote to the IFCA, “We are not simply defenders. Our very birth right makes us crusaders.”<sup>94</sup>

Though Catholic women were encouraged to work only in the home—in fact they had little choice—some clergy also encouraged their participation in Catholic charities.<sup>95</sup> The American hierarchy ultimately recognized that Catholic laywomen wanted to do charitable work in society as other women were doing, and they created the means by which laywomen could do such work with the guidance of the Church.<sup>96</sup> Sheeran credited the Church for the IFCA’s success, later writing, “The growth of the I.F.C.A. is due primarily to the hierarchy, who realizing the need of concentrated Catholic effort, have given the organization every encouragement.”<sup>97</sup> The encouragement the IFCA received from the American hierarchy enabled these laywomen to affect change in society, because as Catholics they were beholden to the clergy, their spiritual authorities.

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

<sup>92</sup> “Recruiting the Layman,” author unidentified, *The Commonweal*, vol. IX, no. 5, December 5, 1928, 118.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>94</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from John J. Burke to IFCA, October 31, 1922.

<sup>95</sup> *American Catholic Women*, 154.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

<sup>97</sup> CUA, Records of the Rector of the Catholic University, box 8, letter from Clara Sheeran to Mrs. Rowland Patterson, March 28, 1921.



Pope Benedict XV wrote to the IFCA in its infancy: "How important it is for the common weal that all pious women, uniting in holy fellowship should strive together to restore the spirit and further the aims of Catholic life . . . ." <sup>98</sup>

The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau is a prime example of Catholic Action. Its agenda was to change the moral tone of the movies but also to improve the popular image of Catholicism. The latter was a general theme within the larger Federation. In 1930 its director, Edward Pace, asked in an article written for the IFCA, "How far in what way is the Federation affecting the thought of our non-Catholic neighbours and their attitude toward the Church?" <sup>99</sup> The Bureau worked industriously to stop offensive or incorrect depictions of Catholicism. Mary Looram, Bureau head following McGoldrick's resignation, believed the Bureau's most significant work was its diligence in keeping American screens free from anti-Catholicism. <sup>100</sup>

The Bureau also used Catholic media to spread its message, "Let your theatre ticket be your ballot for better pictures!" <sup>101</sup> The 1928-1930 Motion Picture Bureau Biennial Report stated that McGoldrick's radio addresses were carried by eight stations from New York to Wisconsin and were in negotiations with five other stations. <sup>102</sup> It also listed over 100 Catholic and secular newspapers that had mentioned in a complimentary way the work of the Bureau; many of these papers also published the Bureau's white list as well as the transcripts of McGoldrick's radio broadcasts. <sup>103</sup> The Catholic press was an

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<sup>98</sup> Benedict XV quoted in Burns, 64.

<sup>99</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, "The Convention," Edward Pace, article, attached to letter from Edward Pace to Clara Sheeran, April 3, 1930.

<sup>100</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Mary Looram to Elizabeth Brennan, February 13, 1934.

<sup>101</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, August 6, 1930.

<sup>102</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, IFCA Motion Picture Bureau Biennial Report 1928-1930, 10.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 11-15.

influential one. As of 1933 there were 310 Catholic news services in the United States.<sup>104</sup>

In fact Looram credited the Catholic press with publicizing the white list.<sup>105</sup> The support the movie reviewers received from the Catholic press worked: The Bureau sent out over 100,000 copies of their endorsed lists annually<sup>106</sup> and was the largest Catholic movie-reviewing agency, far surpassing the Motion Picture Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), which had first raised the movie question in a Catholic context.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the support these women received, however, they were pushed aside by their once-encouraging authorities when the stakes were higher. The hierarchy made obsolete the IFCA's motion picture work because this particular case of Catholic Action had gotten out of hand. Laity needed the guidance of the clergy if their work were to be truly Catholic Action, but the IFCA's Motion Picture Bureau was working in a way that much of the clergy thought ineffectual and even damaging. Many in the Catholic hierarchy wanted a harsher approach to Hollywood. The women who had always credited the clergy and Catholic education with their successful work were now perceived as the "Voice of the Roman Catholic Church in America"<sup>108</sup> on the controversial issue of motion pictures. The actual voice of Catholicism in America, the American hierarchy, was not pleased.

The Federation's Motion Picture Bureau was an object of condescension for many in the Catholic film campaign. Women reformers had long been labelled as frustrated or

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<sup>104</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," p. 410.

<sup>105</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Mary Looram to Elizabeth Brennan, February 13, 1934.

<sup>106</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, IFCA Motion Picture Bureau Minutes of January 27, 1930 meeting.

<sup>107</sup> Walsh, 13-19, 33.

<sup>108</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, "An Epistle from a Layman to the American Hierarchy (the Modern Apostles) on the Movie Question," Arthur D. Maguire, pamphlet.

hysterical. “When women cease to attract men they often turn to Reform as a second choice,” explained an intertitle in D.W. Griffith’s 1916 film, *Intolerance*.<sup>109</sup> Catholic women reformers did not escape such characterization. When one thinks of Catholic laywomen doing charitable work, it is easy to rely on the picture Andrew Greeley paints of “perennial parish busybodies”<sup>110</sup> who want to take over the priest’s job and “who more recently lump their activities under the slogans of ‘Catholic Action’ and ‘Lay Participation.’”<sup>111</sup> It is telling that Greeley, a Catholic priest and sociologist, dismisses these laywomen so completely. The American hierarchy took a similar attitude when they decided to become involved in battling the so-called movie menace. They essentially patted the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau on the head and sent it out to play.

History has not been kind to the Legion of Decency regarding the way the Legion treated the IFCA. The Motion Picture Bureau tackled the movie question in exactly the way it said it would. The ladies of the Motion Picture Bureau sought to educate their audience, which they did through McGoldrick’s informative radio addresses. They publicized only good movies in order not to promote the controversial ones. “Within their own terms of reference, the ratings were consistent and reliable,” wrote American Catholic historian Charles Morris. “The priests laughing up their sleeves look merely sexist.”<sup>112</sup> In fact the hierarchy may have been justified in some of their displeasure with the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau. It became apparent to many other Catholics involved in film reform work that the Bureau was faithful not only to the Church but also to the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association.

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<sup>109</sup> *Intolerance*, dir. D.W. Griffith, 163 min., Wark Producing Corporation, 1916.

<sup>110</sup> Greeley, 87.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Morris, 205n.

It took a long time for the American hierarchy to become involved in the movie debate, however. Protestants were far more likely to enter the battle for film content in the early years of the cinema. The beginnings of the American film reform movement were characterized by the heavy representation of Protestant church groups and women's societies. Nonetheless, the American Church would prove to be the most appealing partner for Hollywood when it came to holding off the threat of government censorship. Even before the hierarchy officially became involved, the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau worked with Hollywood in order that Catholic concerns might be voiced to the film industry. In order to fully understand the developments which allowed concerned women's clubs and church groups to work directly with the film industry's official organization, it is necessary to examine the evolution of the motion picture and the struggles to control the young medium.

## ***Chapter Two: The American Cinema***

We're off for Hollywood, where dear Mr. Hays will protect me.  
Clare Booth Luce, *The Women*, 1936.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Movies Arrive: Novelty, Entertainment, Weapon***

The motion picture has never been free of controversy; from its inception it inspired cries of opposition and accusations of obscenity. Though there were many attempts to have the movie outlawed or at the very least controlled, the movie craze went on relatively uninhibited. It was one more change in a very changed society. The end of the nineteenth century had brought many cultural revolutions. The urban centres in the United States grew, and as a result, American society was no longer overwhelmingly rural. Impersonal technology revolutionized American life. Industry was transformed with the introduction of machinery and mass-production techniques. Many new inventions were introduced and eventually came to dominate society: for example, the telephone, the automobile, and the cinema. America grew larger when immigrants flooded the country. The United States in the early years of the film was, as cultural historian Neal Gabler described, "the America of rapid industrialization, urbanization and immigration."<sup>2</sup> All three meant a loss of identity, individual and cultural. The country was in a state of flux.

Many Americans viewed these changes with wariness and even fear. It was commonly assumed that the city was a danger to the nation and its people that would inevitably lead to a "hardening process" of traditional American morality.<sup>3</sup> The cinema was a new technology found most often in large cities. It had the double misfortune of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Leff and Simmons, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Gabler, 51

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, 2.

being linked in the popular mind with both urbanization and industrialization, which made many Americans feel as though they were losing control of their lives. With the movie so popular an activity for children, they were anxious that they were losing control of their children's lives as well.<sup>4</sup>

The main problem with the mass media was that society had not been ready for it. Though there had long been controversy over the arts, the mass media was a completely different entity capable of displacing major social institutions like religion, politics and family.<sup>5</sup> According to the commonly accepted theory of the day, the mass media stimulated urges and impulses that normally lay dormant.<sup>6</sup> The movies undermined all the civilizing influences that society had worked so long to put into place. "The movies threatened to gain control," wrote film historian Francis G. Couvares, "over the representation of crime and punishment, of class and ethnicity, and especially of familial and sexual relations."<sup>7</sup> As a result of their potential to affect change in society, the first people to dismiss the argument that movies were simple-minded diversion and to regard the movie as a medium of power and potential were not artists or art critics, but reformers.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately supporters of reform movements understood the situation in this way: The movies could control the minds of their audiences or legislation could be put in place to control the movies. It was not a hard decision. Reformers scrambled to defend the population while movie audiences grew bigger. This proved difficult. There were no

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<sup>4</sup> Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code," Francis G. Couvares, *American Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4 (December 1992), 585.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1990), 198.

social controls in place to take on such a power.<sup>9</sup> Cultural and political leaders watched in horror as the movie monster tore through their country.

Or so critics of the motion picture depicted the situation. In reality it is hard to know if the movie had as much power as was attributed to it, because it is equally plausible to argue that movies simply magnified what was already going on in society. The distinction mattered little to reformers. If the movie was not responsible for major cultural changes, then it at the very least further popularized already-existing trends.<sup>10</sup> Either way the cinema unleashed on plain, simple American folk a worldliness better left to urban hedonists. Reformers had to control the beast.

It did not help that the middle-class often saw its values being lampooned in this new medium: “Not for nothing were these people being chased, kicked, sprayed, smacked, thwacked and poked,” wrote Neal Gabler.<sup>11</sup> Middle-class culture was being threatened by what is now identified by many historians as a cultural weapon of the lower classes. In Europe the movies were a novelty for mostly middle-class audiences, but in America they were largely patronized by the lower class.<sup>12</sup> No other art was so unpretentious. In his book *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Gabler made the very good point that a night at the movies always includes snacks; an opera aficionado would never munch popcorn during an evening at the Met.<sup>13</sup> Cinema promised to be an altogether democratic art. The lower class no longer had to tolerate middle-class culture, as they now had an entire art form to themselves. American

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<sup>9</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Gabler, 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

intellectuals were also pleased at the prospect of an art form that was uniquely American.<sup>14</sup>

While intellectuals and the lower class celebrated this art, conservatives and traditionalists feared it. Movies were the symbol of what was wrong with America—the death of traditional morality. Early film director Mack Sennett said, “I especially liked the reduction of authority to absurdity, the notion that sex could be funny, and the bold insults hurled at pretension.”<sup>15</sup> Traditionalists did not want their authority to be depicted as absurd; they did not think sex was funny; and they did not like being insulted.

Church groups and other traditionalists fought for controls to be placed on the young film industry. One popular method was to use the Sunday Blue Law, which outlawed Sunday presentations of entertainment such as movies and carnivals and sometimes even prohibited restaurants from operating. The Blue Law was destined to become obsolete when people involved in the affected businesses challenged its legality. In one case church groups in Pomona, California fought to keep Sunday free from business, but in 1921 a judge ruled that church collections were in effect the same as entertainments that charged admission. Churches were unlikely to stop doing business on Sunday—indeed without Sunday church services the Blue Law was pointless—and the Pomona Blue Law was ruled unconstitutional.<sup>16</sup> The Blue Laws elsewhere in the United States were as ineffective as the Pomona law.

Women reformers were unlike traditionalists in that they were trying to change much of society themselves instead of maintaining the status quo. In their attempts to

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<sup>14</sup> “‘Flashes of Lightning’: The Moving Picture in the Progressive Era,” Myron Lounsbury, *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Spring 1970), 787; Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 159.

<sup>15</sup> Sennett quoted in Gabler, 48.

<sup>16</sup> “Blue Law N.G.,” author unidentified, *Variety* (July 22, 1921), 39.



protect American homes and children, many women found themselves outside their homes, working in society, thus irrevocably changing the accepted notions of gender. On the movie question, however, they were united with traditionalists in fighting a common battle. Though women's organizations like the IFCA and the Women's Christian Temperance Union were redefining what it meant to be women in American society, they upheld traditional values such as the importance of the family, education, Americanism and clean, wholesome living. Movie audiences were chiefly comprised of children and the lower classes, which were often immigrants, and middle-class women reformers saw these two groups as needing a guiding hand.<sup>17</sup> Women reformers, casting themselves as the guardians of culture, were naturally concerned with the movie question. Women's clubs routinely included film reform in their agendas.

If the movie was a cultural weapon, so be it: Those who worried about its power would simply confiscate the weapon and wield it themselves. New York churches were advised by the state censor in 1921 that if they did not approve of the movies that were being exhibited locally, they could buy neighbourhood theatres and thereby control the movies shown in their communities.<sup>18</sup> Many churches began to sponsor film nights for their congregations and sought to produce their own pictures.<sup>19</sup> The different groups in favour of censorship or control were now playing catch-up. Many professions began to talk in the 1920s about the potential value of the movies. Movies, it seemed, were not such a bad thing—as long as the content reflected the right agenda.

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<sup>17</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 78.

<sup>18</sup> "Buy Your Theatre If You Don't Like It," unidentified author, *Variety*, vol. LXIV, no. 9 (October 21, 1921), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Maxwell, Macmillan International, 1990), 184-85.

### *The Changing Image of the Moving Image*

The IFCA was one of the organizations that involved itself not only in reforming the movies, but also in making use of their influence. It arranged regular screenings of both educational and recreational pictures for Sister-teachers in many cities across the United States.<sup>20</sup> The Federation also became involved in film production when it joined forces with other Catholic agencies to subsidize a series of movies on Catholic subjects.<sup>21</sup> McGoldrick identified the film program as “probably the most important single result that the Motion Picture Bureau has brought about during the eight years of its existence.”<sup>22</sup> It is significant that a society that worked to deter the production of objectionable movies would devote itself so wholeheartedly to the production of its own movies. No one could deny the young cinema’s importance to the world or its great potential as educator and entertainer.

Intellectuals had celebrated the advent of the screen because it meant that America could create its own artistic traditions instead of simply holding to European aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> The cinema did indeed become the entertainment of the people, but the hopes of many intellectuals were dashed as they realized the artistic quality of the cinema was often not high. Audiences became even larger when the rest of America realized there was entertainment to be found at the movies. Additions to movie audiences inevitably meant changes to movie content. Early movie plots had reflected the concerns of the average, working-class person.<sup>24</sup> Following World War I both the working- and middle-classes preferred fantasy to reality when it came to their movies, and the films of

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<sup>20</sup> Burns, 54.

<sup>21</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from McGoldrick to Pace, July 1, 1930.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Lounsbury, 780.

<sup>24</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 65.

this period were more and more about indulging oneself.<sup>25</sup> In fact this was a noticeable trend in society as a whole: People had become more concerned with the profane and less with the sacred. Since they were not worried about Heaven and Hell they were very preoccupied with the material, and therefore with material gain.<sup>26</sup>

Yet another change in the motion picture's image occurred. In his book on the early movies, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, Richard Koszarski pointed out that the movies had begun life as a news item. They had been a technological innovation, societal menace, and business enterprise for a long time, but gradually their artistic potential became apparent.<sup>27</sup> Audiences realized that they were watching more than just an evening's entertainment, but a new art form as well. Suddenly the movies were acceptable, perhaps even respectable.

Much like Catholics, the people who ran the early nickelodeons and owned the movie studios were minorities who sought respect. They were largely Jews and immigrants, seeking entrance into mainstream American society.<sup>28</sup> Filmmakers wanted respect as well; in its early years in America the cinema was regarded with disdain by both the upper classes and the established artistic community. It was considered seedy by its association with burlesque and vaudeville as in the early days movies were often simply one part of an evening at the local music hall. People who worked within the industry wanted to prove that the movie provided art and entertainment that was acceptable to all Americans.

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<sup>25</sup> "An Alliance of Convenience: Independent Exhibitors and Purity Crusaders Battle Hollywood, 1920-1940," David A. Horowitz, *Historian*, vol. 59, no. 3 (Spring 1997), 554.

<sup>26</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 222.

<sup>27</sup> Koszarski, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Musser, 407.

The motion picture perhaps had not fulfilled the hopes of many intellectuals and artists in creating a wholly American artistic tradition, but it held its title as the democratic art because of its ability to bring information and entertainment to rural areas and lower classes that were ignored by many other media. An MGM film short from 1940 boasted, “[T]he motion picture has annihilated space, blotted out the backwoods, and banished what was once our custom to call the country.”<sup>29</sup> This was in large part the problem with the movies. They popularized to an even greater degree the fiction and plays that so many people thought were too racy, those which made, in Raymond Moley’s words, “the house-wives shudder and the clergymen storm.”<sup>30</sup> They brought urban ideas to rural areas. When the film industry ushered in the Roaring Twenties with a series of real-life scandals involving more violence, shady doings, and illicit sex than the average Hollywood production, movie reformers had had it.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Mr. Hays Goes to Town***

All the wrath of social reformers meant nothing unless they possessed real power. Reformers were a minority, but they were a vocal and powerful one. As a result, they could court the federal government, the worst threat of all. “The motion-picture industry had more to fear than the censure of self-appointed moralists,” wrote film historian Mark A. Vieira. “There was the government.”<sup>32</sup> Many film historians have questioned whether

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<sup>29</sup> *Hollywood: Style Center of the World*, dir. Oliver Garver, 11 min., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1940.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond Moley quoted in Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 390-91.

<sup>31</sup> There were several scandals, but two are infamous: Popular comedian Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was tried multiple times for the murder of actress Virginia Rappe; director William Desmond Taylor was found murdered in a case that allegedly involved drugs, sex, and two established Hollywood stars. Arbuckle was ultimately acquitted and Taylor’s murder remains unsolved but the film industry was popularly depicted to be the real offender. See Leonard J. Leff & Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship & The Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 3-4; Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin & Violence on Screen* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1994), 20-23, 29; Koszarski, 205-6.

<sup>32</sup> Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 7.

the film industry was ever really in serious danger of federal control. In retrospect the answer appears to be no; it is unlikely that most Americans wanted their movies censored.<sup>33</sup> Was Washington really likely to do anything that the voters did not want? With Prohibition fresh on American minds, perhaps this seemed a moot point. It is easy to interpret historical events once the smoke has cleared, but in the midst of the fight it was not so simple to tell who was winning. There were so many local and state measures introduced against motion pictures and enough rumblings from Congress that it must have seemed inevitable that the federal government would also become involved.<sup>34</sup>

The film industry often came under fire for its business practices of blind-selling and block-booking. The former forced independent exhibitors to accept movies without knowledge of the films' subject matter, so exhibitors were never certain what they were promoting. The latter required that exhibitors buy whole blocks of films from a specific studio. In order to show the big hits of the season they also had to show B-movies and other lesser productions, which were often the most salacious movies.<sup>35</sup> When reformers accused exhibitors of pandering sex and violence, the exhibitors protested innocence by explaining the unfair contracts into which the industry forced them.<sup>36</sup> The industry was in trouble on all sides; reformers, exhibitors, and politicians had long been watching carefully Hollywood's doings when the cameras were not rolling, and now because of the sensational headlines, so was the public. In 1922 the film trade paper *Variety* reported,

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<sup>33</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 201.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 180, 189, 254.

<sup>35</sup> Horowitz, 554.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 560.

“It seems certain motion pictures are headed for national censorship.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps if the industry behaved itself on at least one front it would be less conspicuous in other matters.

Not only would government intervention in the industry mean a loss of economic and artistic freedom, but it would also be the ultimate example of the disobedient film industry being chastised by its betters. There was an element of condescension in the way reformers reacted to the cinema, as though it were a misbehaving child who had to be reined in, naturally enough by America’s self-appointed cultural leaders. The industry could not earn respect without appeasing those who called for less salaciousness: “To satisfy the public and official mind of the day the naughty, naughty motion picture had to be spanked on the wrist,” wrote Garth Jowett.<sup>38</sup>

Inspired by the other disgraced national pastime that had recently appointed a respected judge as baseball commissioner, Hollywood promised again that it would behave.<sup>39</sup> In 1922 Will Hays was appointed as the so-called “Czar” of the movies. Hays had been Postmaster General of the Warren G. Harding administration when he was offered the headship of a new film industry organization. As Hays noted in his memoirs, the previous industry organization, the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), had failed in its effectiveness after only five years because its members could not agree on anything.<sup>40</sup> The new group was established in 1921 and called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, Inc. (MPPDA).

The integrity of the MPPDA was to be assured by the presence of a man unconnected with the tarnished film industry. Hays was not only a respected politician

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<sup>37</sup> “Probing the Hays Mystery,” unidentified author, *Variety*, vol. XLV, no. 9 (January 20, 1922), 38.

<sup>38</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 121.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Will H. Hays, *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), 323.

from the Midwest but also a Presbyterian elder and “a booster straight out of *Babbitt*.”<sup>41</sup>

He was unlikely to seriously ruffle any feathers, though his appointment did worry Democrats that due to Hays’ political affiliation the newsreels now would be filled with Republican propaganda.<sup>42</sup> Though Hays was there to stop the threat of government control, many in the movie business resented the imposition of what they viewed as an in-house censor.<sup>43</sup> Film comedian Charlie Chaplin said of Hays’ appointment, “We are against any kind of censorship, and particularly against Presbyterian censorship.”<sup>44</sup>

Hays began to formulate plans to clean up the movies. NAMPI had already introduced a gentleman’s agreement called the Thirteen Points that detailed thirteen topics that were not to be depicted on the screen.<sup>45</sup> The Thirteen Points had failed to impress reformers; the MPPDA needed something new. In 1924 Hays introduced the “Hays Formula,” calling for all source material to be submitted to the Hays Office, which then advised the studio on the material’s acceptability as a movie.<sup>46</sup> 1927 saw the MPPDA propose the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” which requested that certain controversial topics be treated with taste and asked that some subjects not be filmed at all.<sup>47</sup>

In order to show some compassion to the plight of the studio, however, Hays also established the Hollywood Jury, a three-member jury that continuously rotated between representatives of the seventeen studios that belonged to the MPPDA. Studios whose proposed movies had been turned down by the Hays Office could appeal the decision and

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<sup>41</sup> Leff and Simmons, 4.

<sup>42</sup> “Politics on the Screen,” unidentified author, *Variety*, vol. LXVI, no. 1 (February 24, 1922), 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Leff and Simmons, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Walsh, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33.

<sup>47</sup> Leff and Simmons, 7.

demand examination of the case by the Hollywood Jury.<sup>48</sup> It was a noble effort to acknowledge the concerns of the businessman and the artist in Hollywood, but it backfired on Hays: Since the Jury members were always changing, a Fox Films representative, for example, who sided against a colleague from Universal Studios might face the Universal executive the next time Fox made a similar appeal. In his memoirs, Hays noted that the Jury almost always sided with its peers.<sup>49</sup> It became clear to studios and reformers alike that Hays' various rules were optional at best, and also that Hollywood did what was in the best business interest for Hollywood.

Despite the many programs that Hays introduced to keep the film industry in line, the movies still elicited complaints. The major studios had pleaded with Hays to accept the MPPDA position, but racy movies were good box office and Hollywood was not ready to give up guaranteed profits. Despite his failure to control film content Hays was not simply a moral figurehead and he was in no way ineffective; he was a gifted public relations expert whose work solved major industry problems. Hollywood was not only in trouble with reformers but was experiencing a diplomatic dispute with Mexico and the threat of government censorship. Hays solved the Mexico problem and engineered a major victory in the 1922 Massachusetts referendum on state censorship of the movies, which the industry considered the seminal test of public sentiment toward movie censorship.<sup>50</sup> No more state censorship boards were established after Hays' 1922

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<sup>48</sup> "The Failure of Movie Industry Public Relations, 1921-1934," Marvin N. Olasky, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Winter 1985), 166.

<sup>49</sup> Hays, 435.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 331-34.



appointment.<sup>51</sup> The possibility of federal censorship was kept as just that, a possibility, not a reality.

In the eyes of reformers, though, Hays was first and foremost the moral janitor of the movies. "It is asked," *Literary Digest* said in 1923, "whether Mr. Hays is employed by the movie industry at \$150,000 a year to act as a broom or a whitewash brush."<sup>52</sup> Reformers had been promised that Hays would clean up the movies and instead he was cleaning up after Hollywood. Hays was perceived as serving two masters, but one of them felt that nothing productive was being done. None of his various schemes to moralize American cinema worked and many movie reformers were impatient and angry. Hays was supposed to protect the public from the movies but he was better at protecting the movies from the public. "His position and salary," wrote Mrs. R.M. Gibbs, Vice-President of the Citizens League for Better Moving Pictures, "make him the defender of the Movies."<sup>53</sup>

### ***Reformers Sick with Hays Fever***

In 1921 New York Governor Nathan Miller greeted with disbelief one of the many industry promises to behave, saying that he had "heard that story before."<sup>54</sup> Miller's words would prove not only apt but prophetic as well; reformers and politicians would continue to hear that story over and over again for the next decade. The 1920s was simply a series of squabbles between the industry and reformers. The MPPDA would promise decent movies; that promise would fall by the wayside; reformers would agitate against the industry; and the MPPDA would make another promise in order to quiet the

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<sup>51</sup> Koszarski, 206.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *Selected Articles on Censorship of the Theater and Moving Pictures*, ed. Lamar T. Bemen (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1931), 87.

<sup>53</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, untitled essay, Mrs. R.M. Gibbs, CUA: NCWC archives.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, quoted in Walsh, 25.

reformers. Though reformers had some successes, they were ultimately ineffective because the groups involved in the movie reform campaigns did not usually work together. This meant that there was no major force behind any of their small activities.<sup>55</sup> As late as 1933 Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles complained, “The decent minded people of the country, who are still in the majority, have no means of making themselves vocal against the type of picture that they find objectionable. There is a lack of leadership for concerted action.”<sup>56</sup>

The industry was somewhat decentralized at this point as well. There were many conflicts between producers and exhibitors due to the block- and blind-booking debate.<sup>57</sup> Although they had a new industry organization, there were also conflicts between producers and other producers: Smaller companies often made movies that brought the whole industry under scrutiny.<sup>58</sup> Neither side of the film debate could give it absolute attention, so there was no clear winner. To its credit Hollywood attempted an outreach program in order to assuage the reformers’ complaints. “I know of no other industry which has included the public so frankly in its manufacturing process,” wrote MPPDA counsel Carl Milliken to Father John J. Burke of the National Catholic Welfare Conference.<sup>59</sup> Many “better films” organizations were interested in working with the film industry. These organizations were overwhelmingly women’s groups and Protestant societies.<sup>60</sup> They were often either church groups directly associated with some

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<sup>55</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 327.

<sup>56</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John J. Cantwell to John T. McNicholas, December 28, 1933.

<sup>57</sup> Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 155.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, letter from Carl E. Milliken to John J. Burke, May 15, 1929.

<sup>60</sup> Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art*, 171.

Protestant denomination or, as film historian Francis G. Couvares noted, groups “whose social morality was a secularized or ‘progressive’ version of Protestant values.”<sup>61</sup>

Many such organizations served on the MPPDA’s Public Relations Committee (PRC), which maintained an “open door policy,” meaning that the PRC facilitated communication between reform groups and studios.<sup>62</sup> Despite his best efforts, however, Hays could not stop industry business from capsizing his attempts to appease reformers. News that he was considering lifting the screen ban on disgraced comedian Fatty Arbuckle and of the production of the controversial *West of the Water Tower* alienated many members.<sup>63</sup> In 1925 a number of member organizations became disenchanted with the committee’s effectiveness, among them two very important groups, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.<sup>64</sup> They called the PRC a “smoke screen, an obvious camouflage, an approval stamp for the salacious films and for the questionable, if not criminal, conduct of the industry and its employees.”<sup>65</sup> The organizations were coaxed back with new promises. Arbuckle, for example, was not allowed on camera again. He did work as a writer and director, adopting the pseudonym William B. Goodrich to assure those concerned that he “Will B. Good.”<sup>66</sup>

In 1926 the MPPDA established the Studio Relations Committee (SRC),<sup>67</sup> following the departure of the unhappy organizations from the PRC. The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau served on the first committee beginning in 1922 and remained faithful to

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<sup>61</sup> Couvares, 587.

<sup>62</sup> Walsh, 30.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Skinner, 10-11.

<sup>65</sup> Olasky, 166-67.

<sup>66</sup> Miller, 34.

<sup>67</sup> Skinner, 11.

the MPPDA when the other groups officially rebuked the industry association.<sup>68</sup> In fact the IFCA was “the most constant and active”<sup>69</sup> of the Catholic groups who worked with the industry and one of only three major women’s organizations that cooperated fully with the film industry and created comprehensive movie programs that operated on local, state, and national levels.<sup>70</sup>

In theory both the Public Relations and Studio Relations Committees were positive ideas, but their potential was never developed. Film historian James M. Skinner explained, “[Hays’] strategy of co-opting the enemy and subsequently killing it with kindness was tried once too often.”<sup>71</sup> Some of the groups involved with the MPPDA suspected that they were being used as a public relations ploy and questioned the integrity of the Public Relations Committee, which hurt the reputations of the MPPDA and the groups who continued to cooperate with Hollywood. The Studio Relations Committee was supposed to be a fresh start for the relationship between Hollywood and moral reformers, but that too fizzled. Only one-fifth of film studios used the services of the SRC. The others were willing to take their chances with the various censorship boards.<sup>72</sup>

Garth Jowett argued that the sceptical organizations which had doubted the PRC were in fact right, that the groups that served on the committees were being used by the industry in order to create the illusion that it cared what reformers thought.<sup>73</sup> Film reform groups that cooperated with Hollywood were, as Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons

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<sup>68</sup> Burns, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Ruth Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1947), 120.

<sup>70</sup> The other two important organizations were the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Daughters of the American Revolution. See Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art*, 180.

<sup>71</sup> Skinner, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Vieira, 13.

<sup>73</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 275.

wrote, but “a spoke in the public relations wheel.”<sup>74</sup> This was a common complaint levelled at the IFCA—that it was in the pocket of the industry. Hays encouraged McGoldrick to use her radio show to cheer industry self-regulation.<sup>75</sup> The Motion Picture Bureau’s faith in Will Hays and the MPPDA ultimately damaged the Bureau’s reputation. The chairperson of the Motion Picture Committee of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers complained to the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) of Hays’ manipulation of the Better Films groups, specifically the IFCA; she complained that the MPPDA was “dissipating the energies of women, and confusing their thinking,” in order to stop them from affecting real change in the cinema.<sup>76</sup>

The Bureau worked closely with the MPPDA and many studios in order to improve the cinematic representation of Catholicism, gaining the trust of the industry by not publicly disclosing their dealings with the movie producers. The same discretion that engendered the confidence of the industry also hurt the Bureau’s reputation in increasingly critical Catholic circles because in order to keep Hollywood’s trust, the Bureau was unable to publish its dealings with the industry. McGoldrick could do little more than repeatedly assure her readers and listeners that the Bureau had many successes that could never be publicized. Hays shared this problem; he kept internal struggles private in order to show a united front to the many forces that would control Hollywood, but as a result he was unable to publicize the frequent disputes he had with studios and producers in order to keep the industry in line.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Leff and Simmons, 41.

<sup>75</sup> Vieira, 7.

<sup>76</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, letter from Mrs. Robbins Gilman to James E. Cummings, April 18, 1934.

<sup>77</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 290.

Hays' discretion hurt the way outsiders perceived him. He no longer convinced the Catholics that his efforts were having any effect on American movies. "Mr. Hayes (*sic*) has some personal friends who excuse his inefficiency, because they believe in his personal integrity and his expressed desire to serve," Bishop Cantwell told Fr. Burke.<sup>78</sup> Supporters of Hays faced increasing criticism. The female president of the Citizen's League for Better Moving Pictures complained of "the sob stuff [Will Hays] uses at all of the Women's Clubs" in order to convince them of the morality of the film industry.<sup>79</sup> When he began his position as head of the MPPDA, Hays had targeted the stars' morality, insisting their private lives not attract more criticism to Hollywood.<sup>80</sup> Throughout the 1920s, however, *Variety's* reports on the film industry regularly featured stories of extra-marital affairs, divorce, drug abuse, suicide, and phony film schools that were leading young women down a path of debauchery and ruin.

Despite the sincere efforts of the IFCA, Hollywood was as racy as ever. At best its critics depicted the Federation as naïve women who did not know they were being used by Hollywood; at worst the women were believed to be in cahoots with the MPPDA, which, it was said, subsidized their review work. There may have been an element of truth in the complaint; Frank Walsh wrote that the MPPDA paid for the mailing of the Studio Relations Committee members' endorsed pictures lists.<sup>81</sup> For her part, during a radio broadcast McGoldrick denied that the Bureau had ever accepted anything from the industry.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 31, letter from John J. Cantwell to John J. Burke, October 5, 1933.

<sup>79</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, untitled essay, Mrs. R.M. Gibbs.

<sup>80</sup> "Hays Issues Flat Warning on Moral Conduct of Stars," unidentified author, *Variety*, June 9, 1922, p. 63.

<sup>81</sup> Skinner, 9.

<sup>82</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, November 29, 1929.

In the same radio broadcast, however, McGoldrick proudly reported that the IFCA were among a handful of groups allowed access to a preview studio in the Hotel Roosevelt in Hollywood.<sup>83</sup> She also told her radio listeners in 1931 of a fundraiser the Motion Picture Bureau held in the Warner Brothers' Vitaphone studio in Brooklyn. Stars entertained the attendees and many movie companies contributed to the event.<sup>84</sup> Later that year the popular actress Mary Pickford spoke to the Bureau about the state of the modern cinema.<sup>85</sup> In 1931, two years after the denial of industry funding, the Bureau Statement of Policy and Procedure acknowledged that the MPPDA paid for reprinting of the endorsed list. The reprinting of the list was presented as missionary work, as the copies subsidized by the industry were going to "thousands of persons who have never had a Catholic reference in their homes before."<sup>86</sup>

The Bureau undoubtedly benefited from its cooperation with the MPPDA. From the ferocity of the criticism, though, one would think McGoldrick and the other Bureau volunteers were kept women in fur coats and lavish penthouses. In one of her radio broadcasts, McGoldrick attributed the criticism to "certain types of lay mind that cannot believe that this volunteer work can be free of the money taint."<sup>87</sup>

### ***"From Bad to Voice": The Movies Are Disciplined***

The arrival of sound cinema brought new worries about morals in the movies. Silent cinema presented problems that reformers could see. Sound gave writers the opportunity to play with double entendres: Sin in words as well as actions, and language

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 7, 1931.

<sup>85</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, December 2, 1931.

<sup>86</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, Motion Picture Bureau Statement of Policy and Procedure, attached to letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, March 9, 1931.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

proved trickier to control than mere sight. Actors could improvise racy dialogue that was not in an MPPDA-approved script.<sup>88</sup> As one film historian described the situation, “The movies went ‘from bad to voice.’”<sup>89</sup> The cinema was still upsetting American traditionalists and conservatives. In the 1930 film *Applause*, a nightclub singer proclaimed, “It ain’t what you do so much as what you are.”<sup>90</sup> This offered no solace to people who were concerned about the movies; what these characters did was exactly who they were, and morals could be nothing but black and white. Hollywood insisted on depicting shades of grey.

A small group of Catholic laymen and clergy decided to act before the situation could get worse. Fathers FitzGeorge Dinneen, Daniel Lord and Wilfred Parsons and laymen Martin Quigley and Joseph Breen drafted a Production Code meant to give moral guidance to American films. The Code barred screen exploration of sexuality, violence, drug use, miscegenation, and, wrote Mark Vieira, “just about everything else that makes the world go ‘round.’”<sup>91</sup> Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago used his connections to Halsey, Stuart and Company, an important financial backer of the film industry, in order to pressure the MPPDA to accept the Code.<sup>92</sup> The MPPDA did so with great fanfare. Initially the Code’s creators concealed its Catholic roots for fear of an anti-Catholic backlash that would hinder their efforts to reign in Hollywood. The reaction to the Production Code was underwhelming, however, as Hollywood had made many promises already. The Catholic press had to rally around the Code. “With this turning of the road

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<sup>88</sup> Vieira, 13.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Maurice McKenzie, November 23, 1929.

<sup>91</sup> Vieira, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Walsh, 59-60.



in motion picture production we foresee a new era of decency and restraint in America,” McGoldrick exulted during one of her radio broadcasts.<sup>93</sup>

Like previous agreements, this Code fell into disuse. Studios persisted in making the movies that drew large audiences to the movie theatres. The Depression and its negative effect on the industry called for studios to step up their attempts to catch audience attention. The gangster movie, the fallen woman film, the horror movie, and the “social problem” picture became popular genres, arousing the ire of many who disapproved of Hollywood’s increasingly deeper cinematic forays into violence, sex and social criticism. The infamous Mafioso Al Capone shared with the press his opinion that the gangster movie was a bad influence on young people.<sup>94</sup> Mae West came to town and with her particular brand of frank sexuality brought the already beleaguered industry further criticism. Later she proudly identified herself as “kind of godmother to the Motion Picture Code.”<sup>95</sup>

When the Code was first adopted by the MPPDA, McGoldrick announced that no filmmaker could get around the rules, for “the new Code of Ethics is steel-ribbed in its definiteness.”<sup>96</sup> She also applauded film advertisers who had likewise adopted a Code of Ethics, as oftentimes movies that were in fact very dull were sold with racy promotion. Movie content between the adoption of the Production Code in 1930 and the establishment of the Legion of Decency in late 1933 only became racier. These years mark the birth of what is known to film buffs as the “pre-Code” movies.

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<sup>93</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, April 4, 1930.

<sup>94</sup> Walsh, 71.

<sup>95</sup> Emily Wortis Leider, *Becoming Mae West* (New York: De Capo Press, 1997), 303.

<sup>96</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, April 4, 1930.

The term is something of a misnomer as the Code was officially adopted in 1930, but it was not until the Legion of Decency's formation convinced the MPPDA to strictly apply the Code to all movies produced by its member studios that movie content became less racy. Until that point movies were more sexual, violent, and socially critical than ever before. McGoldrick's reviews swung wildly between cheering the effectiveness of the Production Code and the advertising code, and complaining about the salaciousness Hollywood was peddling. "Only now we are beginning to see that these widely heralded Codes were not merely gallant gestures," McGoldrick announced in late 1930.<sup>97</sup> Six months later she lamented, "These are lean weeks for better pictures!"<sup>98</sup> She promised, however, that Hollywood had all but abandoned gangster movies, which must have come as a surprise to Hollywood executives, who later released *Scarface*, *Manhattan Melodrama* and many other similar movies.

The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau continued its policy of white-listing, but prominent Catholics called loudly for harsher methods in dealing with Hollywood. Echoing the feelings of both Catholics and non-Catholics, Father Burke of the NCWC complained to Bishop John J. Cantwell that "[t]he Hays organization made definite promises to us but they were never lived up to."<sup>99</sup> Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles had already written to prominent attorney and Catholic layman Joseph Scott, "This great community, of which we are proud, cannot continue to profit on wages derived from the exploitation of things that are evil, for 'the wages of sin is death.'"<sup>100</sup> Clergy and laity alike were mobilizing for the impending fight.

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<sup>97</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, December 15, 1930.

<sup>98</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 21, 1931.

<sup>99</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from John J. Burke to John J. Cantwell, October 3, 1933.

<sup>100</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John J. Cantwell to Joseph Scott, July 14, 1933.

The Legion of Decency campaign gathered momentum in the early days of the Depression and was officially established in 1933. Its establishment forced the studios to abide by the Code they had adopted three years earlier. In his history of the Legion of Decency, James M. Skinner explained why Catholics succeeded where Protestants had failed, writing, "The Protestant denominations of the country were fragmented and doctrinally at variance with one another; [Catholics] spoke with a single voice."<sup>101</sup> As we have seen, the Church was not united in its attitude toward the movies, at least through the 1920s. The Catholic film reform campaign of the late '20s and early '30s represented a realization on the part of many Catholics that if they were to successfully battle Hollywood, a concerted effort was needed. Catholics were not as inclined to unanimity as non-Catholics thought. For the sake of the American soul, though, they had to be. As the unidentified author of "The Motion Picture Industry" proclaimed, "Drastic efforts must be launched if we are to stave off national disaster."<sup>102</sup> Those efforts necessitated the hierarchy to distance itself from the IFCA, who, in the eyes of concerned Catholics, had changed from dedicated laywomen working for the Catholic good to favourite pet of the film industry. In the next chapter, we shall examine the Bureau's work for the Church with Hollywood and why its relationship with the MPPDA was so heavily scrutinized. We will also examine the changing Catholic sentiment toward the film industry and how it affected the motion picture work of the IFCA.

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<sup>101</sup> Skinner, 19.

<sup>102</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, "The Motion Picture Industry," article, author and date unknown.

### ***Chapter Three: The Motion Picture Bureau***

We spent the rest of the afternoon at a Tom Mix movie which Ito and I liked, although Auntie Mame said it was disgusting what sort of stuff was crammed down the throats of the people and the government should sponsor films of cultural structure.

Patrick Dennis, *Auntie Mame*, 1955.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Raging Politics: The Inner Dynamic of the IFCA***

As the 1920s came to a close, the Motion Picture Bureau of the IFCA attracted such vitriol from many of its fellow Catholics that one imagines the frightened organization quaking under the glare of laymen and clergy alike. The reality is not so simple. The Bureau had staunch supporters as well as critics. It held fast to its “praise the best and ignore the rest” policy and dismissed the concerns of its detractors. Among its critics were not only powerful members of the American hierarchy but also its own Federation members. Even as the Bureau was being lauded by the MPPDA, Protestant movie reformers and many Catholics, it was being scrutinized by important Catholics, including the Welfare Conference, and denounced by an entire state chapter of the IFCA.

At the centre of the storm was the head of the Bureau, Rita McGoldrick, graduate of Rosary College in Illinois.<sup>2</sup> For over a decade the Motion Picture Bureau was “a one woman Bureau,” which IFCA President Elizabeth Brennan attributed to McGoldrick’s “wide experience and brilliant mind.”<sup>3</sup> When the Bureau joined other Catholics to produce Catholic films, she was not only the sole woman on the planning committee but also the sole layperson.<sup>4</sup> The Bureau’s existence was McGoldrick’s doing: As

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Dennis, *Auntie Mame: An Irreverent Escapade* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001, c. 1955), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, 33.

<sup>3</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to Edward Pace, June 17, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, July 1, 1930.

chairwoman of the Department of Literature, she created the Motion Picture Bureau.<sup>5</sup>

Under her leadership, the Bureau became members of the PRC, later the SRC, and the National Board of Review.<sup>6</sup> She frequently advised movie studios on movies that dealt with the Church. Due to her close affiliation with the movie industry, McGoldrick faced both the admiration and condemnation of not only outsiders but her own fellow alumnae.

The IFCA, like any family and most organizations, had a healthy tendency towards dysfunction. Mrs. Harry Benzinger, Federation President in the early-to-mid-1920s, wrote to Monsignor Edward Pace at the beginning of her term, “I am anxious to have all the old inherited fights ended, so new ones may be in order.”<sup>7</sup> Her optimism was fruitless; the next year Pace noted in a letter that “former Presidents of the Federation lived only to make trouble.”<sup>8</sup> Much of the inner hostility of the Federation appears to have been at the behest of Clara Sheeran, co-founder, past President and editor of the *IFCA Bulletin*. Sheeran was unhappy in many ways with the direction and leadership of the Federation, in 1931 sharing with Pace her concern that the IFCA in its present condition would end up “on the rocks.”<sup>9</sup> Her correspondence reflects this concern, particularly her opinion of the Motion Picture Bureau, which can be interpreted as genuine displeasure with Bureau activities or envy of McGoldrick’s public visibility.

In truth McGoldrick had to be reined in by the IFCA Executive. The Bureau had the highest profile of the entire Federation. The IFCA’s other work was very similar to that of the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), an arm of the Welfare Conference. The similarity between the IFCA and NCCW did not go unnoticed by the

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<sup>5</sup> Burns, 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, letter from May Benzinger to Edward Pace, April 3, 1923.

<sup>8</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Edward Pace to May Benzinger, March 31, 1924.

<sup>9</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, May 6, 1931.

latter. Nor did the Council appreciate such copycat behaviour: They complained that the Federation focussed on “Immigration, Social Science, Education, the Girl Problem. It is an exact duplication of our work.”<sup>10</sup> In fact the Federation predated the NCCW by a year, a fact that—according to an IFCA President—explained the Council’s jealousy toward the Federation.<sup>11</sup> Jealous or not, the Council viewed such work as their territory, believing that the Federation should stick to Catholic education, a more fitting area of work for “a group of convent graduates,” as one Council member described the IFCA.<sup>12</sup> Not all IFCA members were happy with the broad social work being undertaken by the Federation and wanted the IFCA to remain dedicated to its major work, support of Catholic education.

Regardless, the motion picture work of the IFCA was bound to be publicized in the Catholic press as the Motion Picture Bureau was one of only two Catholic movie-review agencies in the ‘20s and the only such agency during the early years of the Depression.<sup>13</sup> That it sometimes worked directly with Hollywood also gave the Bureau some importance. McGoldrick responded to the accolades and publicity by raising the status of her group to that of a department, apparently acting with authority that she did not in fact possess. The alumnae were not pleased with this move and McGoldrick was ordered to stop referring to her bureau as anything else. One member wrote, “Mrs. McGoldrick has made a Department out of her committee on Motion Pictures and

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<sup>10</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Gertrude Hill Gavin to Edward Pace, September 26, 1924.

<sup>11</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from May Benzinger to Edward Pace, October 2, 1924.

<sup>12</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Gertrude Hill Gavin to Edward Pace, September 26, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Walsh, 49.

objections are being made to it. I have written her asking that she correct the heading DEPARTMENT as we only have three in the Fed.”<sup>14</sup>

Sheeran was right when she told Pace, “Politics are raging in the I.F.C.A.”<sup>15</sup> She neglected to mention that she was doing much of the raging. Sheeran had been supportive of McGoldrick for a long time. Early in McGoldrick’s tenure as head of the Department of Literature, Sheeran wrote to Pace and asked that he write a brief letter of commendation to McGoldrick.<sup>16</sup> In 1929 on the occasion of the awarding to McGoldrick of an honorary Doctorate of Laws from Fordham University, Sheeran planned to give ample space to McGoldrick’s honour in the *Bulletin* and wrote to Pace, “No matter what the jealous ones may say, Mrs. McGoldrick has done all her public work in the name of the I.F.C.A.”<sup>17</sup>

Then Sheeran’s opinion of McGoldrick changed drastically. Her disapproval may have begun around the time that members of the American hierarchy became very vocal in their criticism of Hollywood and the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau. Six months after Sheeran had so praised McGoldrick, McGoldrick sent her a confidential copy of the activities of the Bureau, seemingly to placate her, writing, “[T]he members of the Review Committee would like you to know that this kind of thing is not uncommon and it is one of the proofs of the friendly helpfulness we get from the big companies when we go to them for anything.”<sup>18</sup> Apparently the enclosed report did nothing to reassure Sheeran of the Bureau’s usefulness. A year later Sheeran was referring to McGoldrick as “the

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<sup>14</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter, signature illegible, undated.

<sup>15</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, October 27, 1931.

<sup>16</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 5, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, March 15, 1922.

<sup>17</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, May 8, 1929.

<sup>18</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Clara Sheeran, December 9, 1929.

‘representative’ of the Motion Picture Producers.”<sup>19</sup> It was her fear that the IFCA was being manipulated by the movie industry.<sup>20</sup> By 1931 Sheeran had resigned her post as editor of the *Bulletin* in disgust over the state of the Federation leadership and opined that the only worthwhile work of the IFCA was being done by the Education Department, a slap at the prolific and publicized Motion Picture Bureau.

***Callahan and Murphy and McGoldrick and McMahon***

Despite Sheeran’s disapproval, however, McGoldrick was a favourite of Bureau supporters. A man living in the Philippines wrote in 1931, by which time criticism of the Bureau was prevalent, “Too bad we do not have here an active Mrs. Rita—gold-rich of heart and soul.”<sup>21</sup> Other supporters were similarly devoted. Two years earlier a Kentucky priest, Father Henry Hanses, had informed her that the Sister Superior of a nearby girls’ school would allow her students to watch only movies that had been endorsed by the Bureau.<sup>22</sup> He later wrote McGoldrick,

I know of no more practical way of handling the moving picture situation in this country than the way you are handling it. I will confess that when I first read about you and your work in “America” I was dubious, but nevertheless I immediately wrote for your service and was surprised and delighted. I hope that you will be able to continue this service free of charge, though I personally am ready to pay for it.<sup>23</sup>

A sister from St. Aloysius Academy in Mississippi wrote McGoldrick in 1931 to inform her that the students regularly consulted the list and that “the Juniors made their selections just last week from the *Bulletin* when deciding what to choose for the Seniors

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<sup>19</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, November 30, 1930.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, letter from Louis L.R. Morrow to Rita McGoldrick, January 30, 1931.

<sup>22</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Henry Hanses to Rita McGoldrick, September 2, 1929.

<sup>23</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Henry Hanses to Rita McGoldrick, October 17, 1929.



Picture Party.”<sup>24</sup> Reverend Lawrence Murray wrote from Ireland to tell the Motion Picture Bureau, “You are doing a mighty work for God and souls.”<sup>25</sup>

The Bureau’s detractors, however, saw its reviewers as stubborn or gullible women who did not understand that their refusal to publicly condemn immoral movies was offending God and endangering souls. In particular the IFCA was often disparaged by the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), the American hierarchy’s organization for working within the broader American society. In researching both the IFCA and NCWC archives, it is obvious that there was tension, often hostility, between the two groups. This was particularly true when it came to each group’s motion picture work; the two heads had a rancorous relationship that escalated into a series of accusations and counter-accusations in the late 1920s, leading McGoldrick to make—and later withdraw due to lack of evidence—formal charges against McMahon to members of the American hierarchy.<sup>26</sup>

In 1931 the Maryland chapter of the IFCA publicly denounced the Motion Picture Bureau. Most Catholic papers chose not to carry the story, which McGoldrick credited as loyalty to the Bureau. The NCWC news service, however, felt no such loyalty and made certain the press heard about the Federation’s inner squabbles, sending out the story to Catholic press organs.<sup>27</sup> The Welfare Conference’s Motion Picture Committee actually predated the IFCA’s Bureau by at least two years but the latter was far more prolific and

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<sup>24</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter to Rita McGoldrick, signature illegible.

<sup>25</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, quoted in IFCA Motion Picture Bureau Biennial Report, 1928-1930.

<sup>26</sup> The reason behind the dispute is unknown. CUA: NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, copy of letter from Rita McGoldrick to John J. Burke, January 12, 1929; copy of letter from Rita McGoldrick to John J. Burke, January 12, 1929; letter from John J. Burke to Rita McGoldrick, January 22, 1929.

<sup>27</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, April 23, 1931.

visible, enjoying an easier relationship with the film industry through methods that the NCWC criticized.

The NCWC initially was known as the National War Council (NWC) and was formed in 1917 in order to provide support for American Catholic military personnel in World War I. One of its major feats was to repress two movies produced by the American Social Hygiene Association that lectured both soldiers and women who lived in close proximity to military bases on the dangers of venereal disease.<sup>28</sup> The Council objected to these movies on moral grounds and launched an impressive and successful campaign to have them withdrawn from circulation. The NWC was never intended as a permanent organization, but due to the potential it held as a means for the Church to become involved in American politics and society, it was too valuable to discontinue. In 1922 the NWC changed its name to the National Catholic Welfare Conference.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the events of the next decade, it was significant that the American Catholic Church had found its national voice while involved in the great movie debate.

Charles McMahon, a Catholic layman, chaired the NCWC Motion Picture Committee and reported to Father John J. Burke, a member of the executive.<sup>30</sup> McMahon, like McGoldrick, was inspired by the cinema's influential nature and hoped to use movies to battle anti-Catholicism, but soon realized that the best way to improve the movies was simply to reform what was already being produced.<sup>31</sup> Originally he had been in favour of federal censorship, but following Hays' appointment McMahon came to support Hollywood's own attempts at self-regulation. Within five years he would

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<sup>28</sup> Walsh, 13.

<sup>29</sup> It would later become the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

<sup>30</sup> Walsh, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 21-22.

denounce Hays and rally again for stringent measures to be taken against the industry, but until 1927 Hays enjoyed the support of two important Catholic groups while Protestant reformers were largely his opponents. Both McMahon and McGoldrick testified in favour of the industry in a 1926 Congressional hearing that was weighing the feasibility of federal censorship.<sup>32</sup>

McMahon became a foe to Hollywood during the fury over the 1927 MGM movie *The Callahans and the Murphys*. The campaign against *Callahans* was a perfect example of the Irish domination of the American Church. The movie told the tale of two warring Irish-American matriarchs and their boisterous families. With positive feedback from Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd and featuring the screen comebacks of two popular comediennes, Marie Dressler and Polly Moran, *Callahans* seemed destined to charm audiences.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately for MGM, many Irish-Americans took offense to the film. There were so many Irish-Americans within the American clergy and laity that in the minds of Irish-Americans, Irish meant Catholic. As a result the movie was misinterpreted as anti-Catholic. It is true the characters' Catholicism was played upon: The sign of the cross is made, at times incorrectly when the character is drunk, and the families attend a St. Patrick's Day picnic.<sup>34</sup> When charges of anti-Catholicism were levelled at MGM, however, the studio realized it had a public relations nightmare on its hands and cut the offending scenes. Hays convinced Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles to

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

issue a statement that the movie was no longer offensive to Catholics.<sup>35</sup> This did little to stay the attack. McMahon accused the filmmakers of anti-Catholicism.<sup>36</sup>

MGM not only cut from the movie anything obviously Catholic, but also edited it in an attempt to satisfy Irish societies that had believed the movie to be a bigoted attack on the Irish.<sup>37</sup> The damage was done, however. Some Irish-American moviegoers, horrified that a movie depicted them as rowdy and uncivilized, interrupted screenings with loud denouncements of the film and on a couple of occasions went so far as throwing ink, rocks, and acid at movie screens.<sup>38</sup> One theory of the day saw the film as a nefarious Republican conspiracy to lampoon Irish Catholics, thus hurting Democratic candidate Al Smith's 1928 bid for the White House; Will Hays was an influential Republican, after all.<sup>39</sup>

McMahon and the Welfare Conference lost faith in Hollywood during the *Callahans* debacle. An MPPDA insider suggested that it was not the movie that had so affronted McMahon, but the fact that he had been denied a position with the MPPDA and had not been properly appreciated for his cooperation with the industry.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of McMahon's motives, his hostility toward the industry meant trouble for Hays, who as a result lost important Catholic supporters. The IFCA was comprised of Catholic laywomen, and Hays courted all the clubwomen he could; the Welfare Conference, however, represented a liaison with the hierarchy. Catholic laywomen could not compete with this power; nor, as it turned out, could Hollywood. The Welfare Conference

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Couvares, 605.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 602.

<sup>38</sup> Walsh, 42.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

focussed its disapproval not just on the MPPDA and Hollywood but on the Federation Motion Picture Bureau as well.

Bitter that the industry would prove itself so insensitive to Catholics, McMahon later complained that Hays was trying “to hoodwink the public.”<sup>41</sup> The alumnae continued to work with Hollywood, however, apparently unconcerned that Hays was hoodwinking them. The NCWC made much of the Federation’s alleged acceptance of Hays’ money to finance the postage of its white list. Burke had insisted that the Welfare Conference decline the MPPDA’s offer to finance its motion picture committee, though McMahon had been enthusiastic about the offer.<sup>42</sup> NCWC members and supporters pointed to this refusal to take industry money as proof of their incorruptibility. As a result, the NCWC was unable to operate its Motion Picture Committee during the Depression due to a lack of funding, while the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau continued its work with no such trouble.<sup>43</sup> In a letter to Bishop Cantwell from an NCWC member, most likely Fr. Burke, the writer stated, “We would not be free from suspicion if we accepted money in any way or for any purpose from the moving picture producers.”<sup>44</sup> A memorandum from Frank A. Hall, the director of the NCWC News Service, to Fr. Ready, apparently of the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures, referred to the IFCA as having been attacked because of allegations that it was “subsidized by the picture interests.”<sup>45</sup> The NCWC also criticized McGoldrick’s Bureau because it stood firm by its decision not to issue a blacklist of condemned films as well as its belief that friendly

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<sup>41</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, Inter-Office Communication from Charles McMahon to John J. Burke, November 10, 1928.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>43</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from unidentified writer to John J. Cantwell, October 3, 1933.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Frank A. Hall to Fr. Ready, June 19, 1934.

cooperation with the movie industry was the most effective method of having Catholic concerns addressed by filmmakers.

### *The Motion Picture Bureau's Methods of Operation*

When the Bureau was first established, members questioned whether censorship might not be the best route to reform the movies, but as McGoldrick's successor Mary Looram explained, they came to conclude "that politically appointed men were not likely to agree with us on what is morally right and what is morally wrong."<sup>46</sup> The diverse complaints against the movies from various city and state boards illustrate the unlikelihood of a group of people coming to any agreement about what makes a movie obscene. Obscenity is in the eye of the beholder: The Pennsylvania state censorship board did not approve of childbirth scenes while Kansas disliked the image of a woman smoking a cigarette.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps if Pennsylvania had had just one board member who was passionately against women smoking, Pennsylvanian audiences would never have seen a woman light up, but that apparently was not of great concern.

Censors who for the most part shared a Protestant, middle-class background rarely agreed on what was obscene because there were so many different denominations of Protestantism, not to mention the differences created by regionalism, political agendas, and individual personalities. If censors could not even agree with each other, what was the likelihood that a predominantly Protestant film censorship movement working within a predominantly Protestant country would consider Catholic concerns when censoring the movies?

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<sup>46</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Mary Looram to Elizabeth Brennan, February 13, 1934.

<sup>47</sup> Walsh, 28.

The Bureau was not content to let censorship boards act for the Church. In their hands-on approach to Hollywood, the alumnae were able to affect change. Their white list policy gave them leverage. As historian Frank Walsh noted, the women of the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau did not have the power to proclaim what could or could not be filmed. Because their endorsed list and radio addresses promised free advertising, however, studios were willing to make some changes in order to appease them.<sup>48</sup> Film critic Creighton Peet wrote, "The fact is that our women's clubs, by mere suggestion, probably achieve more changes in the films which you and I see in our theatres than all the state boards put together."<sup>49</sup> Very few people realized the extent to which the Bureau could alter the movies.

The Bureau pleased studios with its work: A Fox Films executive, for example, wrote to McGoldrick to express his delight in her Bureau's timeliness in its reviews and publicity of films.<sup>50</sup> In the midst of the *Callahans* debacle, when MGM and the industry in general was being fired upon by a number of Irish Catholic interests, the MPPDA wrote a thankful letter to McGoldrick for her Bureau's quiet suggestions for changes to the picture. The studio met her requests. "I wish that that same sort of intelligent relationship could be developed with groups everywhere," wrote MPPDA secretary Carl E. Milliken. "And perhaps eventually that will be possible."<sup>51</sup> Four years later during her weekly radio broadcast, McGoldrick referred to the "blundering and commonness" of

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> "Our Lady Censors," Creighton Peet, *Outlook*, December 25, 1929, 645.

<sup>50</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Glendon Allvine to Rita McGoldrick, March 19, 1930.

<sup>51</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from Carl E. Milliken to Rita McGoldrick, October 7, 1927.

*Callahans*, but though she had been in a position to join the fray, during the Irish Catholic assault on MGM she did not make her opinions publicly known.<sup>52</sup>

Her discretion was appreciated by the MPPDA; though other endorser groups cooperated with the industry, Hays regularly showed off his relationship with the Bureau as proof positive that collaboration between reformers and Hollywood was beneficial to the industry.<sup>53</sup> McGoldrick had a winning way of dealing with industry interests, which was to follow the old adage of catching flies with honey rather than vinegar. In 1929 McGoldrick wrote to the producer of *Flight* to inform him of her deep regret that his movie was not to receive all the good advertising it might have: “Would you cooperate with us to the extent of eliminating the lines that are distinctly objectionable in order that we might carry your product on our list, in our syndicated news service, and over our radio station broadcasts?”<sup>54</sup> In particular the Bureau disliked coarse language, scenes of a “Hula Hula” dance, and the implication of prostitution.<sup>55</sup> The studio in question, Columbia Pictures, was willing to comply with many of McGoldrick’s suggestions in order to secure whatever positive publicity it could.<sup>56</sup>

In *Applause*, a nightclub singer played by Helen Morgan assured her convent-educated daughter, “There’s a couple of dames in this troupe just as good Catholics as you ever expect to see, even if they do make their living’s shaking.”<sup>57</sup> Bureau reviewers objected to this line, with IFCA Trustee Mrs. George T. McQuade summing up the general criticism by asking, “Why didn’t you call them Episcopalians, or Baptists, or

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<sup>52</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, June 11, 1931.

<sup>53</sup> Walsh, 49.

<sup>54</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Joe Brandt, November 7, 1929.

<sup>55</sup> Walsh, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, excerpt from *Paramount Service Manuel* (sic), November 23, 1929.



Methodists, or compliment some other religious sect by their virtue?”<sup>58</sup> The dancers’ Catholicism was concealed with added background noise.<sup>59</sup> When IFCA members were offended by the appearance of birth control advocate Margaret Sanger in a Fox newsreel, the studio repressed the clip. An executive also offered McGoldrick the opportunity to appear in a newsreel in order to counter Sanger’s comments. She declined because birth control was a topic about which “Catholic women cannot talk . . . without offending the delicacy which is our pride.”<sup>60</sup>

The pro-birth control film *Seed* became “a family defense feature” following the Bureau’s complaints to Universal Studios.<sup>61</sup> The same studio once went as far as reshooting scenes that involved burning a set, thus incurring a sizeable cost, in order to please the IFCA.<sup>62</sup> In 1927 the Bureau complained that two Universal movies were “disgustingly vulgar” and ought to be withdrawn from circulation. Jason Joy, head of the Public Relations Committee, reminded the studio that McGoldrick had testified in Congress in favour of the industry in addition to undertaking other anti-censorship activities. Universal repressed the movies.<sup>63</sup> IFCA records show that a number of other movies were revised according to the wishes of the Motion Picture Bureau.

McGoldrick also worked as an advisor on pictures that involved Catholicism in their plots, including *Show Boat* and *The Garden of Allah*.<sup>64</sup> When Irish societies in New York formed into “vigilance committees” shortly after the chaos of *The Callahans and the Murphys* and publicly denounced *The Garden of Allah*, McGoldrick and her

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<sup>58</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, attachment to *Paramount Service Manual* (sic), November 23, 1929.

<sup>59</sup> Walsh, 51.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, undated.

<sup>62</sup> Walsh, 34.

<sup>63</sup> Couvares, 600.

<sup>64</sup> Walsh, 34, 50.

volunteers averted another such disaster by sending a letter of endorsement to several important Catholics and members of the Catholic press.<sup>65</sup> The Motion Picture Bureau's methods are a prime example of why the industry chose to cooperate with the Better Films organizations. They offered free advertising of pictures and a happy coexistence to show the media; Better Films groups gave something in exchange for the studios' efforts. Hard-line groups that called for government censorship or other strict measures offered nothing in exchange for everything.

The Bureau's faithful adherence to the white list policy was due to a strong belief that public condemnation was good publicity for an immoral movie. Their argument was not without merit, as many controversial movies attract attention by the very fact of their controversy. That was the case in 1915 for the first blockbuster movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, against which accusations of racism were levelled. As the actress Lillian Gish wrote in her memoirs, "Everyone wanted to see the film that the N.A.A.C.P. and the Booker T. Washington clubs were trying to have outlawed."<sup>66</sup> This has been the case for many movies since *The Birth of a Nation*. Sensationalism is equal parts media attention and public outcry.

McGoldrick believed that issuing a list of condemned pictures would backfire, serving only to generate publicity for the films in question. The Bureau's list of endorsed movies was an attempt to teach moviegoers that clean movies were better. Staying true to the IFCA's passion and commitment to education, the Bureau was dedicated to improving motion pictures by educating the audiences who frequented them. McGoldrick's message was that intelligent people chose clean movies, explaining in a

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<sup>65</sup> CUA, Records of the Rector of the Catholic University, box 8, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Carl E. Milliken, October 2, 1927.

<sup>66</sup> Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 159.

radio broadcast that the Bureau service was “helpful to priests, teachers, parents, librarians, theatre men and the thousands of intelligent individuals who take the trouble to select worth while [*sic*] entertainment for themselves and the members of their families.”<sup>67</sup> McGoldrick’s radio broadcasts regularly featured information about cinematic innovations. Colour, sound, music, wide-width film, and television were among the topics about which McGoldrick sought to educate her audience in order to foster in them an appreciation for the technology of film.

McGoldrick often blamed audiences who insisted on frequenting salacious movies for their continuing success. The studios were businesses with natural interest in making money, and as far as the moguls and producers could tell, salacious movies were the way to ensure good box office returns. “Motion picture producers are business men, they are not philanthropists,” McGoldrick told her radio audience in early 1931.<sup>68</sup> Noting that the vast majority of movies were acceptable, McGoldrick warned her listening public, “If you go of your own free will to see the unmeritorious 30%, then that is your own fault.”<sup>69</sup> (Emphasis hers.) She went so far as to assert that not only movie reviewers but producers as well were tiring of racy themes in the movies, thus placing the blame for the success of mature cinematic themes squarely on the shoulders of moviegoers. McGoldrick also held the writers of modern fiction somewhat responsible for the state of the cinema because many movies were based on popular books and plays. “If popular fiction dips for its theme into the gutter, the screen will reflect that action,” she warned her listeners.<sup>70</sup> Even so, McGoldrick believed that as tarnished as the screen was by

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<sup>67</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, November 29, 1929.

<sup>68</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, January 5, 1931.

<sup>69</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, February 4, 1932.

<sup>70</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, June 11, 1931.

association with tawdry source material, movies did not “sin as grievously as the current book.”<sup>71</sup>

If audiences were educated enough in morals and art, they would realize immorality was not worthy of their patronage. Though she admired the artistic merits of some movies, McGoldrick took an unsentimental, practical approach to the problem of the movies. She generally was not held back in her quest to rid the screen of immorality by respect for the movies as an art form. McGoldrick’s review of *The Taming of the Shrew* declared it to be “a little less Shakespearian than Shakespearian scholars would have it perhaps.” She went on to reassure her listeners that it had “no objectionable line or situation,” making it a lot less Shakespearian than his fans would have it.<sup>72</sup>

As she saw the situation, the creators of modern fiction were corrupt and filthy, but the creators of modern cinema were just doing business. In her defense, Hollywood executives seemed to share her ideas of the movies as a commodity, plain and simple, likewise depicting themselves as honest businessmen who were merely giving the public what it wanted—which was not an untrue assessment of the state of affairs. “These are the days when the most fastidious person may have a wide variety of splendid films to select from,” stated McGoldrick, “if he will take the trouble to select a motion picture as he would a book or a garment to wear,”<sup>73</sup> (Emphasis hers). Movies were simply a product that moviegoers bought, as they also bought clothes and groceries. Like they did with those products, moviegoers must comparison-shop for their entertainment. McGoldrick told her radio audience of a complaint the Bureau had received from a woman who was disgusted with a film she brought her children to see. The blame was on

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<sup>71</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, February 2, 1933.

<sup>72</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio broadcast, Rita McGoldrick, January 24, 1930.

<sup>73</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, January 29, 1931.

the woman: "Without any vision, or without the shopping sense that is the average woman's asset, she took the children in to see pictures with a risqué title without having made inquiry beforehand as to their rating and suitability," McGoldrick explained.<sup>74</sup> Once movie fans started thinking about their choices, once they stopped paying for racy movies, producers would stop making those movies. Speaking of gangsters, fallen women, and "the ultra-smart sophistication of the current problem plot," McGoldrick said, "We think we have had enough of that type of thing. Also, we believe that the producers are beginning to feel the same way about it."<sup>75</sup>

One subscriber wrote McGoldrick, "We don't have a lot of money to spend on shows so we like to know something about what we go to when we have to spend for six."<sup>76</sup> Someone, most likely McGoldrick, underlined this sentence and wrote, "This is typical of so many! The economic argument for need of an endorsed list seems to be a general one,"<sup>77</sup> (Emphasis hers). The IFCA Bureau fulfilled a need for many people who wanted to control what their children were seeing, as well as providing to film fans some idea of the quality of the movies before any admission was paid. Salacious movies still did well at the box office, however, causing the American hierarchy to realize that stricter measures had to be taken if the industry was to be convinced to make clean movies.

The Bureau's many detractors did have a point: The Bureau's white list policy was not effective in halting the production of racy movies because racy movies undeniably did good business. Though Hays was pleased with the work of the Bureau,

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<sup>74</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, February 4, 1932.

<sup>75</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, June 11, 1931.

<sup>76</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Mrs. S.W. McKnight to Rita McGoldrick, undated.

<sup>77</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, annotation on letter from Mrs. S.W. McKnight to Rita McGoldrick, undated.

he did not fund the white list because it helped to clean the cinema, but because it provided good advertising at a reasonable price.<sup>78</sup> A Columbia Pictures executive credited the IFCA with “helping to fill the seats of the many theatres throughout the world, particularly in America.”<sup>79</sup> The white list also promoted movies for studios that continued to make other films that were increasingly objectionable to members of the American Catholic community. In his pamphlet on the state of the American cinema, Catholic layman Arthur Maguire claimed the white list was nothing but free advertising for producers, “who laugh at them behind their backs.”<sup>80</sup> Maguire also attacked the argument that a condemnation of a movie merely publicized it, calling that assertion “a scandalous lie.”<sup>81</sup>

The Bureau’s willingness to cooperate with the MPPDA was an endorsement of Hays when many other reformers were highly critical of him. McGoldrick worked diligently for the Church but also for Hollywood; she travelled the country on MPPDA funds to give speeches in favour of the MPPDA to everything from a small Catholic group to a roomful of financial executives.<sup>82</sup> Her speeches touted the triumph of Hays’ regime and industry self-regulation. In her radio broadcasts she often lauded Hays’ aggressiveness in tackling immoral movies. At times McGoldrick was Hays’ number-one cheerleader. Arthur Maguire stated that Hollywood was filled with propagandists, “both Catholic and others.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Walsh, 51.

<sup>79</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, letter from W.J. Healy to Rita McGoldrick, February 23, 1931.

<sup>80</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, “An Epistle from a Layman to the American Hierarchy (the Modern Apostles) on the Movie Question,” Arthur D. Maguire, pamphlet.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Walsh, 51.

<sup>83</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, “An Epistle from a Layman to the American Hierarchy (the Modern Apostles) on the Movie Question,” Arthur D. Maguire, pamphlet.

### *Tug-of-War: The Bureau, the Church, and the Industry*

McGoldrick's work for the MPPDA did not mean that she was unfaithful to the hierarchy's public stance on moving pictures. The American Church was not an advocate of government censorship; in fact it was very much against such measures.

McGoldrick's cooperation with the MPPDA was mainly to defend the industry's successful regulation of its own product and thus to hinder the federal censorship campaign; her public defense of the MPPDA can be interpreted as upholding the general Catholic viewpoint. The problem, however, was that McGoldrick made an effort to be involved in industry work, whereas the hierarchy was not as convinced of Hays' abilities and was watching Hollywood carefully. In 1933, for example, MGM asked Cantwell to suggest a Catholic censor who would advise the studio on Catholic concerns. Cantwell declined to work with the film industry long enough to put forward a name.<sup>84</sup>

As time progressed, McGoldrick, and thus the Bureau, were increasingly caught in a tug-of-war between the Church and Hollywood. The Bureau's main reason for existing was to protect Catholicism and Catholics from salacious movies. Many people in Hollywood felt that the IFCA was too conservative in what it would accept in the cinema and far too easily swayed by the will of the clergy.<sup>85</sup> McGoldrick's loyalty to the Church was unconditional and the early founders of the Legion campaign knew it: When McGoldrick was told by its writers not to publicize the Catholic roots of the Production Code for fear of an anti-Catholic backlash, Father Wilfred Parsons told Martin Quigley,

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<sup>84</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John J. Burke to John J. Cantwell, October 3, 1933.

<sup>85</sup> Leon Matthew Hutton, "The Formation of the Legion of Decency: The Shaping of an American Catholic Identity" (M.A. thesis, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1992), 45.

“She didn’t like it, but she always does what we ask of her, even though she doesn’t know why.”<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, McGoldrick stood firm in her refusal to publicly condemn salacious films, despite growing sentiment within the American hierarchy in favour of such a measure. She continued her support of Hays and his work, though Catholic leaders were increasingly unhappy with his record. The biggest problem with McGoldrick was undoubtedly that in the eyes of Hays, Hollywood, and perhaps many of her supporters, she represented the Catholic viewpoint on the movies. The IFCA Bureau was not a household name by any stretch, but it was by far the most visible of any Catholic movie reform group, particularly due to its work with the MPPDA. Many Catholic leaders were silent on the movie question, either because they were still quietly assessing the situation or because they simply did not care. McGoldrick’s passionate dislike of a blacklist and her celebration of the MPPDA looked as though the Catholic Church and Hollywood were arm in arm, which misrepresented the reality: The relationship between the Church and the industry was increasingly an unhappy one.

More and more the Bureau faced criticism from those unhappy with its methods. The Bureau’s opponents, complained McGoldrick, “covered a good work with a cloud of actual scandal in the public press.”<sup>87</sup> She was thus grateful for the many supportive letters the Bureau received. In early 1931 McGoldrick wrote to Pace complaining of the “unfair and uninformed recent attack” on the Bureau.<sup>88</sup> She forwarded letters from Bureau supporters to Pace to show the encouragement and loyalty the service received.

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<sup>86</sup> Walsh, 61.

<sup>87</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, Motion Picture Bureau Confidential Report for week ending December 8, 1930.

<sup>88</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, March 9, 1931.



He responded, "They all go to show that your work is appreciated not only by Catholics but also by others who though not blessed with the faith still have a Christian sense of decency."<sup>89</sup> He also expressed concern for her health, requesting that she not strain herself in her dedication to her work.<sup>90</sup> His words of encouragement appeared to do little; in June IFCA President Elizabeth Brennan asked him to convince McGoldrick not to resign from the Bureau in the midst of what Brennan called "trying times."<sup>91</sup>

McGoldrick, under attack from within and without her organization, needed to be convinced that the IFCA Board supported her work. Though privately McGoldrick was feeling stress from the attacks on the Bureau, she tried to rally her reviewers and supporters. "A stray complaint now and then may be expected," she commented in a Bureau meeting.<sup>92</sup> In a confidential report she referred to the "few critics of the Bureau," who had been complaining as of late.<sup>93</sup> The truth of the matter, though, was that McGoldrick did not only grapple with critics outside the IFCA but with her fellow alumnae as well.

At the 1930 IFCA convention, alumnae had learned that the Motion Picture Bureau accepted industry money to finance its list.<sup>94</sup> It is safe to assume that many delegates were unhappy to hear this, as it cast a pall over the entire Federation. Early in 1931 the Maryland chapter of the IFCA had publicly denounced the Bureau due to its acceptance of MPPDA money and also its adherence to a white list, thus refusing to

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<sup>89</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Edward Pace to Rita McGoldrick, April 29, 1931.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to Edward Pace, June 4, 1931.

<sup>92</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, Motion Picture Bureau meeting minutes, January 27, 1930.

<sup>93</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, Motion Picture Bureau Confidential Report for week ending December 8, 1930.

<sup>94</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from unknown writer to John T. McNicholas, January 16, 1934.

condemn salacious movies.<sup>95</sup> Now McGoldrick's own Bureau was holding what Brennan termed an "indignation meeting."<sup>96</sup> Brennan believed that if McGoldrick were to read aloud to her Bureau a letter of support from Pace, "a most disagreeable misunderstanding" would be resolved.<sup>97</sup> Two weeks later Brennan reported to Pace that the Bureau meeting had been "very amicable."<sup>98</sup> Apparently as a result of the amicability, McGoldrick postponed her resignation for a few months. This turned out to be the only route possible as her fellow Bureau members were hesitant to take on a position that brought so much abuse.<sup>99</sup>

On June 17, 1931, the same day Brennan wrote Pace to inform him that McGoldrick had chosen to remain with the Bureau for several more months, the Vatican wrote McGoldrick regarding the IFCA's work in moralizing the movies. "Surely any organization that is engaged in a work which improves the character of motion pictures is one of the greatest importance," wrote Cardinal Pacelli, also informing McGoldrick that Pope Pius XI had "noted the many letters of encouragement and endorsement which the Bureau has received . . . ."<sup>100</sup> McGoldrick and Brennan believed the letter to be a commendation though Sheeran complained to Pace that it was a nothing but a "superbly non-committal generality"<sup>101</sup> and resented the fact that McGoldrick and Brennan had apparently sought Papal acknowledgement in secret without informing Pace; it is likely Sheeran also believed she ought to have been informed of their plans.<sup>102</sup> Sheeran was not

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<sup>95</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, Motion of Maryland IFCA chapter, February 28, 1931.

<sup>96</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to Edward Pace, June 4, 1931.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to Edward Pace, June 17, 1931.

<sup>99</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, July 1, 1931.

<sup>100</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Cardinal Pacelli to Rita McGoldrick, June 19, 1931.

<sup>101</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, October 27, 1931.

<sup>102</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, September 23, 1931.

pleased with the letter and refused to mention the honour in the *Bulletin*.<sup>103</sup> Pace told her that regardless of the strength of the words, any positive Vatican letter reflected well on the Federation.<sup>104</sup>

Despite her intention to resign in the early 1930s, in the midst of the attack on the Bureau, McGoldrick continued to act as chairwoman. McGoldrick's position as head of the Motion Picture Bureau did not become easier with time. Brennan planned a dinner to celebrate McGoldrick's honour, as the Vatican letter was the first such citation the Federation had received.<sup>105</sup> The dinner was held almost two years after the letter was written, probably to remind McGoldrick that she was not out of favour with everyone. In 1933 conditions within the Bureau were deteriorating. A concerned Alice Ames Winter, head of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and an important Studio Relations Committee member, wrote MPPDA counsel Carl Milliken about the internal strife of the Federation Motion Picture Bureau. Mrs. Burr, resigning chairwoman of the West Coast Motion Picture Bureau, selected her own successor, Mrs. Hearn, without McGoldrick's approval. McGoldrick refused to acknowledge Hearn, causing the Bureau's West Coast Committee to feel that its work was wasted. Both McGoldrick and Brennan, who remained a McGoldrick supporter, did not respond to Hearn's letters. Winter worried that the hostility would adversely affect "this very valuable group."<sup>106</sup>

Bureau members showed signs that they no longer wanted to be part of a one-woman Bureau. In early 1933, Hearn sought permission from McGoldrick for the West Coast Committee to publish its own list as the New York list was often obsolete by the

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Edward Pace to Clara Sheeran, November 14, 1931.

<sup>105</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to Edward Pace, March 3, 1933.

<sup>106</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 126, Excerpts from Winter letter, April 3, 1933.

time the West Coast Committee had received it.<sup>107</sup> She received no response to her request. With the hierarchy stepping up the attack on the industry, however, McGoldrick's days were numbered. The American hierarchy continued its assault on Hollywood, which likewise meant an attack on the Bureau. Clergy affiliated with the IFCA may have felt some pressure from their colleagues who were unhappy with the Bureau. When the news broke that Brennan had secured a Vatican commendation for McGoldrick's motion picture work, Clara Sheeran wrote to Pace that Brennan had made an egregious error, "especially since you as Director explained so carefully the situation in reference to the Hierarchy in America and your own position in the University."<sup>108</sup> She apologized that the IFCA had come to the point of so thoughtlessly dismissing the Director's advice.

One clergy member called Bureau reviewers the "disappointed, subsidized, inefficient women of the IFCA."<sup>109</sup> Even when the criticism was aimed at the industry and not directly at the Bureau, the reviewers were guilty by association. In Father Daniel Lord's pamphlet, "Motion Pictures Betray America," Lord charged the movie industry with "the most terrible betrayal of public trust in the history of our country."<sup>110</sup> He used the rhetoric of blasphemy to describe Hollywood, accusing producers of worshipping their own god, the box office. The allegation that the IFCA was simply being used by Hollywood was common by the time "Motion Pictures Betray America" was published in 1934, so readers of Lord's pamphlet could assume that the IFCA helped the producers to worship a false idol. In Lord's dramatization, the producers became the infidels and

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<sup>107</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 126, letter from Mrs. Hearn to Rita McGoldrick, February 3, 1933.

<sup>108</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Clara Sheeran to Edward Pace, September 23, 1931.

<sup>109</sup> Walsh, 118.

<sup>110</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, "Motion Pictures Betray America," Daniel Lord, pamphlet, 1934, 1.

Catholics the crusaders. Where did that leave the IFCA, good Catholic ladies who were aiding Hollywood in its destruction of the nation, the world, and Christ's kingdom? Could they still be good Catholics if they were foolish, ineffective, and even blasphemous?

### *The Men Weigh In*

McGoldrick retired later in 1933, allegedly due to poor health. McGoldrick's health was known to be weak. Pace often warned her not to overdo her work to the detriment of her health. Elizabeth Brennan, too, referred to McGoldrick's health problems. Martin Quigley found McGoldrick irritating, which he attributed to her menopause.<sup>111</sup> McGoldrick herself spoke of needing "a breathing spell" from Bureau work.<sup>112</sup> Illness was widely given as the reason for her departure. Her unhappiness due to attacks from important Catholics cannot be ignored, however. A letter she wrote to Pace in the summer of 1931 reveals a more probable reason than illness:

I feel very sad about this whole work for I know that it has gone to the ends of the earth and has done a great deal of good . . . . Personally, I never wish to do any organization work again ever, and it makes me feel a little bitter that this expression of a Catholic lay activity had to receive so much abuse from our own kind.<sup>113</sup>

It was inevitable that the Motion Picture Bureau would give up its method of reviewing movies in the face of changing Catholic sentiment. Once McGoldrick had retired, Hearn contacted the NCWC with a list of both recommended and condemned films, asking that the Council publish it.<sup>114</sup> The Bureau's white list policy stayed in place for a time following McGoldrick's resignation. The Bureau had long defended its

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<sup>111</sup> Walsh, 99.

<sup>112</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 1, letter from Rita McGoldrick to Edward Pace, July 1, 1931.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from unidentified writer to John T. McNicholas, January 16, 1934.

decision to compile a white list as opposed to publishing, and therefore advertising, a list of movies that were deemed immoral. Considering the criticism McGoldrick had received from IFCA members, apparently some within her own Bureau, it is not improbable that a large part of the Bureau's adamant refusal to blacklist films was McGoldrick's doing.

Initially the American hierarchy was loathe to support any action against the film industry; Catholics generally supported Hollywood's attempts to clean house. This was why the IFCA had adopted the white list. McGoldrick, however, had not simply abided by the Church's early feelings on the movie problem, as she herself was against the idea of blacklisting movies.<sup>115</sup> She was not ready to give up the white list when the clergy moved toward more stringent methods. Her personal feelings against the idea of a blacklist dictated the IFCA's stance; the Bureau, as Elizabeth Brennan had commented, was a one-woman show. With the hierarchy agitating against Hollywood, however, the IFCA recognized the necessity of adopting stricter measures if it were to remain relevant to film reform.

As the Hierarchy stepped up its attack on Hollywood, McGoldrick came to appear hopelessly out of step. Eventually the Bureau embraced the hierarchy's call to condemn salacious films, with Mary Loomer, once the Bureau's vice-chairwoman and following McGoldrick's resignation the new head, assuring the concerned hierarchy in 1935 that the IFCA had only adopted a white list policy when that seemed the thing to do.<sup>116</sup> A year earlier, however, in a letter written soon after her tenure had begun, Loomer had explained to IFCA President Brennan that in its earliest years the Bureau had

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<sup>115</sup> Walsh, 134.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

experimented with compiling both white- and blacklists only to find that blacklisting films simply advertised the films in question.<sup>117</sup>

Soon after Looram's report, Brennan wrote Bishop McNicholas of Cincinnati, a major figure in the Catholic campaign against the movies, to offer the Federation's help in the Bishops' crusade to clean up Hollywood, reminding him that the IFCA had spent a decade working diligently against immoral movies "with little assistance from any other Catholic source."<sup>118</sup> McNicholas finally responded to her letter three months later to assure her that he recognized the IFCA's "gentle efforts."<sup>119</sup> The implication, however, was that it was now the time for "militant spirit" rather than gentle efforts.<sup>120</sup> In the same vein, the National Council of Catholic Women, an arm of the Welfare Conference, acknowledged the Bureau's accomplishments but stated that they simply were not enough.<sup>121</sup>

In 1928 Rev. George Reid Andrews, an important Protestant film reformer, reported to Charles McMahon that the Hays Office was holding up the IFCA Bureau as the authority on the Catholic Church and the movies. McMahon told Andrews that "both the industry and Mrs. McGoldrick were deceiving themselves."<sup>122</sup> Mary Robbins Gilman of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers wrote the NCWC to ask whether the Federation represented the Catholic Church on the topic of movies. She was assured that

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<sup>117</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Mary Looram to Elizabeth Brennan, February 13, 1934.

<sup>118</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Elizabeth Brennan to John T. McNicholas, February 16, 1934.

<sup>119</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John T. McNicholas to Elizabeth Brennan, May 15, 1934.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, "Motion Pictures: A Problem for the Nation," Mary G. Hawks, pamphlet, p. 10, October 1933.

<sup>122</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, Inter-office Communication, Charles A. McMahon to Burke, November 10, 1928.

it did not.<sup>123</sup> There had to be some official pronouncement on the part of the hierarchy, however, or the public and the industry would never realize that McGoldrick was not the arbiter of Catholic opinion. "I hope that the [Bishops] Committee will not be obliged to say anything publicly against this organization; but these good women must not think their judgments are to be accepted as representing Catholic thought or Catholic Action," McNicholas wrote in a letter to Catholic layman Arthur Maguire.<sup>124</sup>

The Bishops, clergy, and concerned laymen had begun their own campaign against the movies and it soon displaced the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau. "Let your theatre ticket be your ballot for better pictures," McGoldrick frequently advised her radio audience.<sup>125</sup> Now Daniel Lord said of the average moviegoer, "His admission ticket is a ballot against the morality of Jesus Christ."<sup>126</sup> The following chapter will describe the development of the Legion of Decency campaign. The Legion quickly became the most important social pressure group with which Hollywood struggled, eclipsing the many other groups that had either cooperated with or vexed the MPPDA. The Bureau had an important decision to make: Accept the Legion's terms so as to join the much more prominent organization, or quietly continue its own gentler approach, which many in the Legion campaign were striving to make obsolete. Many within the IFCA were upset with the direction the Bureau had taken and presumably supported the Legion of Decency. In order to retain its influence on the industry, the Bureau had to become involved in the

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<sup>123</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, letter from Mary Robbins Gilman to James E. Cummings, April 18, 1934; letter from Charles A. McMahon to Mary Robbins Gilman, April 25, 1934.

<sup>124</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John T. McNicholas to Arthur Maguire, May 31, 1934.

<sup>125</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, August 6, 1930.

<sup>126</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, "Motion Pictures Betray America," Daniel Lord, pamphlet, 1934, 48.



hierarchy's crusade against Hollywood. The Legion's tactics may have been harsh, but they viewed the situation as a dire one. This was war, and war was men's work.

## ***Chapter Four: The Legion of Decency***

The Mickey Mouse vogue among the juniors demonstrates what fearful changes Will Hays, the Legion of Decency, and Aroused Parenthood have wrought in a mere twenty years or so. My sister Eileen and I, movie fans when we were five and six, respectively, would have scorned Mickey Mouse in our youth; we preferred Theda Bara to Fatty Arbuckle, and that was the acid test.

Ruth McKenney, *My Sister Eileen*, 1938.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Knights Called to the Crusade***

Dramatically speaking, the Legion of Decency is a better story than the IFCA.

The IFCA's relationship with the MPPDA was a happy one, a bond of mutual cooperation that Will Hays could hold up to the media whenever the film industry came under fire. The relationship between the Legion of Decency and the industry was a different one altogether: Finally Hollywood came up against a force as powerful as the industry itself. The American Catholic hierarchy versus Hollywood was the Clash of the Titans, both driven by a need for respectability and a desire to be cultural leaders.<sup>2</sup>

The Church's success with its film reform campaign was remarkable. Social scientists had already concluded that movies could be damaging to children. Scholarly reports of the detrimental impact the movies could have on young people had been released, such as the famous—and later, when they were dismissed as inaccurate, infamous—Payne Fund studies. The Payne Fund studies were released in 1933 and had attracted so much negative attention for the industry from the media and public that around the Hays Office they were known as the “Payne-ful” studies.<sup>3</sup> As Garth Jowett remarked, however, the most effective American social control of the movies was not

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth McKenney, *My Sister Eileen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Couvares, 584.

<sup>3</sup> Leff and Simmons, 37.

implemented by scientists, academics, or even politicians. Instead, the American hierarchy was in charge of the situation, gaining control by raising concerns that were quite subjective; namely the matter of morality, which could not be disproved so easily.<sup>4</sup>

The American Church was in a good position in the early 1930s to negotiate with Hollywood. The industry was constantly needled by various city and state censorship boards, not to mention, as Ruth McKenney identified it, “Aroused Parenthood”: a platoon of women’s clubs, church groups, and film reform organizations. These groups made wildly differing demands of the industry. Hays, the Presbyterian elder, had originally been put in charge of the MPPDA to please the many Protestants who were upset by the state of American cinema. There were still too many outspoken critics of Hollywood within the ranks of Protestant reformers, however, and Hays found Catholics were more likely to be his allies. Protestantism also presented a less united front than Catholicism and dealing with its censorship activities would mean making different revisions and omissions for every single group; as historian Charles Morris described it, being “kicked to death by grasshoppers.”<sup>5</sup>

The reality of municipal and state censorship boards pointed to the possibility of federal censorship. Government control of the movies was an even greater threat than the constant cuts ordered by the smaller boards. It became apparent that drastic measures had to be taken by those who wanted to prevent federal control of the movies. A federal inquiry into the industry would not only hamper Hollywood’s artistic freedom but more importantly would bring many business practices under scrutiny. The film industry did not want federal censorship. Neither did Catholics; Archbishop McNicholas explained to

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<sup>4</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 379.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 206.

the Protestant film reformer, Reverend William Sheafe Chase, "In general, I am opposed to the mania for legislation as the cure-all of our ills and the solution of every problem. The Church must stand as a great leader, fearless and independent."<sup>6</sup> Catholic film reformers also chose not to target the industry's practice of block-booking, which many other film reformers hoped to end.<sup>7</sup> With the economic woes of the Depression and the threat of federal legislation, the Church's pro-business, anti-censorship stance and its united structure made it an ideal partner for Hollywood. It provided the industry the opportunity to deal exclusively with one body, essentially offering what Charles Morris called "one-stop shopping."<sup>8</sup>

Catholics were also more likely than conservative Protestants to be at ease with the idea of entertainment as recreation, which Garth Jowett attributed to the Church's "strong European background."<sup>9</sup> Jowett pointed out that Catholic clergy generally were comfortable with their parishioners attending Sunday movie shows. An NCWC press release from 1921 assured the public that Catholic efforts to clean the movies ought not to be confused with "any Blue Law propaganda."<sup>10</sup> The Church was not fundamentally opposed to entertainment, only to entertainment that it found immoral. It was not the medium itself but the content that was dangerous.

In addition to being of similar mind in many ways to the industry, the Church also presented a very real threat to filmmakers that Protestantism did not because Protestants could not present the same united front that Catholics did. "They are not afraid of the

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<sup>6</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John T. McNicholas to William Sheafe Chase, March 22, 1934.

<sup>7</sup> Walsh, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, 206.

<sup>9</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 406.

<sup>10</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, NCWC press release, January 1921.

Protestant opposition,” wrote Bishop Cantwell to Fr. Burke of the NCWC.<sup>11</sup>

Protestantism was comprised of a number of denominations that often had little to do with each other. A statement from an Episcopalian minister would not necessarily rally Baptists, Presbyterians, or Fundamentalists. Catholicism was a large denomination; its laypeople were under the direction of their spiritual authority and must do as they were advised. “[T]he respect for Church authority fostered by ritual and doctrine makes its attitude a power over its members,” explained Garth Jowett.<sup>12</sup> Concerned Catholics considered the film reform campaign to be a Holy Crusade, one in which all Catholics must take part. Will Hays credited the Legion of Decency with the success of his Production Code Administration. “It was the moral force of the Catholic Church that gave the *coup de grâce* to Code-breakers,” he later wrote. “And it was the concrete program of the Legion of Decency, quickly taken up by other groups, that spearheaded the public demand for Code enforcement.”<sup>13</sup>

When the American hierarchy made the decision to combat the film industry, Hollywood faced no small threat. “These people, as a religious group, had been the last to lose patience and had even interceded for us with the others. We were in for a storm,” said Hays.<sup>14</sup> Catholic patience had worn thin: “It is time Hollywood cleaned its house,” Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles wrote in July 1933.<sup>15</sup> The film industry was particularly vulnerable at that point. Studios had switched to sound film production at some cost only to face the Depression a few years later. The industry’s Achilles heel was its finances, so

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<sup>11</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, letter from John J. Cantwell to John J. Burke, November 10, 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Jowett, “Media Power and Social Control,” 414.

<sup>13</sup> Hays, 450.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John J. Cantwell to Joseph Scott, July 14, 1933.

the Church targeted industry coffers, a tactic it had used earlier to force the first implementation of the Production Code. This time the Church would not fail.

“To bring pressure to bear on the part of bankers would be Catholic Action in its widest sense,” Cantwell wrote to McNicholas.<sup>16</sup> Cantwell spoke with Attilio Henry Giannini, the chairman of the Bank of America, which was a major financial backer for the film industry, and convinced him that banks must stop funding an industry that manufactured immoral products. Cantwell also encouraged Cardinal Hayes of New York to likewise pursue John D. Rockefeller’s support.<sup>17</sup> The bankers who financed motion picture interests were convinced by the Church that the industry should be forced to clean up its act and they ordered Hollywood to fall in line. The moguls promised that their studios would follow the Production Code they had signed three years before.

Catholics involved in the movie fight provided studios with added initiative to toe the line. In 1933, following a report by Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles on the dire state of American cinema, the hierarchy formed the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures in order to keep track of the situation.<sup>18</sup> In addition, there was a growing trend within the Catholic film reform movement to have Catholic laypeople pledge to stay away from immoral movies. So-called “legions of decency” were being established in parishes all over the country. The hierarchy was wise enough to recognize that the many local organizations had to be united into a national one, which would give the movement more strength. In November of 1933 it created such a group, the National Legion of Decency. “The Legion of Decency will be maintained as a permanent protest against everything in

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<sup>16</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John J. Cantwell to John T. McNicholas, July 17, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Walsh, 84-84.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

the moving picture which is subversive of morality,” the Bishops stated in a press release that also attributed the recent improvement in the character of the motion picture to the Legion campaign.<sup>19</sup> The Legion of Decency pledge read in part,

I wish to join the Legion of Decency, which condemns vile and unwholesome moving pictures. I unite with all who protest against them as a grave menace to youth, to home life, to country and to religion . . . . Considering these evils, I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality. I promise further to secure as many members as possible for the Legion of Decency.<sup>20</sup>

In 1934 the first and largest of several Catholic boycotts of the movies began. It affected Philadelphia, a city with a high Catholic population. Historians have questioned whether the Philadelphia boycott did Hollywood any real harm. In *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin and Violence on Screen*, Frank Miller reported that Philadelphia box office revenue declined by forty percent, and in his article “The Failure of Movie Industry Public Relations, 1921-1934,” Marvin N. Olasky wrote that theatre patronage dropped to half its usual number and that the industry buckled to the Legion’s demands as a result.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, Frank Walsh argued that early in the boycott theatres were affected badly, but as time wore on attendance picked up again; Martin Quigley even considered the boycott a failure that might reflect poorly on the embryonic Legion campaign.<sup>22</sup>

As the boycott’s degree of success is unclear, it is more appropriate to say that the possibilities revealed by the boycott scared the industry into accepting the new order. Production Code administrator Joseph Breen described with some relish a meeting between studio presidents: Among the frightened moguls was a weeping Harry Warner

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<sup>19</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, Legion of Decency press statement, November 19, 1934.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 321.

<sup>21</sup> Miller, p. 82; Olasky, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Walsh, 117.

begging for help with the boycott, “and well he should, for you could fire a *cannon* down the center aisle of any theatre in Philadelphia, without danger of hitting anyone!”<sup>23</sup> (Emphasis his). The reality was that while Catholics were only twenty percent of the population nationwide, they were as much as fifty percent of the eastern cities, which was the biggest movie market.<sup>24</sup> Whether the boycotts did much damage is not the point; a mobilized force of Catholics had the capacity to do serious damage, and Hollywood was afraid.

### *The Madhouse of the Universe Is Tamed*

In 1933 the devout Catholic Breen took over the position as head of the MPPDA’s Production Code Administration (PCA).<sup>25</sup> The PCA had replaced the Studio Relations Committee. The movies from the early years of the Depression are identified today as the “pre-Codes,” films characterized by frank depictions of sex, violence, and freer exploration of social taboos. Though the Production Code was in place during this period of filmmaking, the PCA head, Charles Wingate, was not in a position to strictly impose it. As a result, movies were more controversial than ever directly following the adoption of the popularly-termed Hays Code.

Breen turned out to be the right kind of person for the position of PCA director. He had begun his career in the Hays Office in 1929 and in 1930 had worked to drum up support amongst Catholics for the Production Code. He combined an interest in the industry with connections to the American hierarchy. “Among Catholics, he was God,” wrote Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons in *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*. “Among public

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<sup>23</sup> Jack Vizzard, *See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 50.

<sup>24</sup> Walsh, 91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 88.



relations men, Breen was Moxie . . . . Among producers, Breen was warden.”<sup>26</sup> Breen held a healthy contempt for Hollywood, which meant he was unlikely to be easily manipulated. *Esquire* called him a “hard-boiled, two-fisted Irishman who can outshout the pick of Hollywood hog-callers.”<sup>27</sup> In Breen’s eyes Hollywood was “the madhouse of the universe,” and he treated it as such.<sup>28</sup> His integrity was never compromised: When a director once suggested Breen accepted bribes in exchange for leniency in film cuts, Breen punched him.<sup>29</sup>

Though his job required him to act as a mediator between the industry and the public, Breen did not try to coddle producers or mollify censors. As committed as he was to the Church and to film reform, and as disdainful as he was of Hollywood, he was not gentle with reformers with whom he disagreed, whether Catholic or otherwise. When a priest wrote to Breen criticizing the IFCA, Breen responded with a letter that began, “My dear Bozo,” and then proceeded to get nasty.<sup>30</sup> He quickly established himself as the *eminence grise* of the MPPDA. *Film Weekly* identified him as “the Hitler of Hollywood,” casting Hays merely as Hindenberg.<sup>31</sup> With Breen in place the Code was not in danger of being shirked as it was before: “I am the Code,” he declared.<sup>32</sup>

The Legion of Decency now had a friend in the PCA. It was also gathering strength in its pledges and its publicity. In one impressive public display, fifty thousand faithful filled Cleveland Stadium and took the Legion oath.<sup>33</sup> The American hierarchy had proven itself capable to take on the film industry, unfortunately for the IFCA Motion

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<sup>26</sup> Leff and Simmons, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Olasky, 169.

<sup>28</sup> “The Breening of America,” Leonard J. Leff, *PMLA*, vol. 106, May 1991, 435.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Vieira, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Quote in Leff & Simmons, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Vizzard, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Walsh, 100.

Picture Bureau, which was pushed aside when the American Hierarchy decided to take official action. When Elizabeth Brennan wrote to Bishop McNicholas and suggested that the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau be permitted to give the fledgling Legion of Decency the benefit of its years of experience, McNicholas warned her, "I very earnestly hope there will be no expression of opinion by any group which can be construed as an interpretation of the Catholic position, or of the judgment of the Bishops on the cinema."<sup>34</sup> The IFCA had overstepped its boundaries.

### ***To Blacklist or Not to Blacklist: The Legion Movie Review Controversy***

Now that the hierarchy was actively battling the movie menace, the IFCA's gentle efforts were no longer viable. No one could agree, however, on what measure would provide the Legion with the proper force it needed. As Father Daniel Lord complained, without a blacklist, Catholics were told "'Don't go,' but we don't say *Where* they are not to go,"<sup>35</sup> (Emphasis his). The IFCA persistently argued that a blacklist not only told people where not to go, but also gave them clear directions on how to get there. Lord's opinion, however, was shared by many people. One advocate of the blacklist was Archbishop Curley of Baltimore. He put a spin on the IFCA's long-held "praise the best and ignore the rest" policy by arguing, "If we 'boost the best,' we should damn the rest."<sup>36</sup>

Others were hesitant to publicly condemn movies, sharing with the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau the old feeling that to do so would only serve Hollywood in the long run. Bishop McNicholas of Cincinnati, head of the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures,

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<sup>34</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John T. McNicholas to Elizabeth Brennan, May 15, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Lord, quoted in Leff and Simmons, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, 96.

Martin Quigley, the Catholic layman and publisher of the *Motion Picture Herald*, and Joseph Breen all agreed that a blacklist was not an appropriate method to take. They favoured a white list, believing that an organized Catholic campaign complete with members who would pledge abstinence from objectionable movies could frighten Hollywood more than enough.

Too many people favoured the blacklist, however, and were already acting on that opinion. Whether blacklists publicized immoral movies or not, they served the purpose of catching Hollywood's attention as well as prolonging the movie debate, which the industry would rather have put to rest. When Hollywood was under the scrutiny of reformers and the press, politicians were also likely to be watching. The shadow of government censorship was always present. The blacklist could be a genuine threat to Hollywood, while even its most ardent supporters would have to admit that the Bureau's white list did not pose a threat to the industry. Some bishops supported the work of the Bureau, but others thought it "undertakes and does not accomplish."<sup>37</sup> The black list attracted attention.

The condemned list published in Bishop Curley's diocese alarmed Hays into action and he sent an MPPDA representative to Baltimore in an attempt to reason with Curley.<sup>38</sup> The Chicago diocese also published a blacklist. This list garnered much publicity as it was carried by a number of sources and most likely exposed to concerned movie fans their worst fears about the Legion campaign; that it was nothing more than Catholic censorship of the movies at its most humourless and hair-splitting.<sup>39</sup> Daniel Lord composed not only a blacklist but also encouraged his readers to target offending

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<sup>37</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, Confidential Report on Cinema Congress, April 1934, CUA.

<sup>38</sup> Walsh, 96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

studios with a letter-writing campaign. He made several fierce attacks on Hollywood personalities as well, categorizing many audience favourites as immoral and sinful due to the roles they played onscreen.<sup>40</sup> Though the criticism was featured only in the Catholic press, it perturbed MGM executive Irving Thalberg enough that he complained to Bishop Cantwell of Lord's attacks on the popular actress Norma Shearer, who happened to be Thalberg's wife.<sup>41</sup>

The list controversy threatened to harm the newly-formed Legion of Decency. Legion members had sworn an oath not to patronize immoral movies. There were many lists they could consult to ascertain which movies were to be avoided but the lists did not always correspond; in such a case, which list was right? The confusion could dishearten Legion members and lead to apathy, which was dangerous to a movement that relied on the passion and commitment of its pledges. It became apparent that the Legion itself needed to issue an official list of condemned movies. In May 1931, McNicholas had expressed in a letter to Arthur Maguire his discomfort with the idea of using a blacklist, but eventually he changed his mind.<sup>42</sup> A year and a half later in a meeting of the Bishops' Committee on Motion Pictures he advised of the necessity of the blacklist.<sup>43</sup>

The IFCA Bureau still had the support of some members of the hierarchy. Archbishop Murray wanted the IFCA to work as the Board of Preview for the Legion of Decency. Archbishop Curley, however, reminded the Bishops that the Bureau had steadfastly refused to issue a blacklist and on the recommendation of its Jesuit advisors

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from John T. McNicholas to Arthur Maguire, May 31, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, Excerpts from the Minutes of the Bishops' Meeting, November 1935.

had chosen to ignore the work of the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures.<sup>44</sup> The Chicago blacklist was initially used as the national list but many were unhappy with its overly harsh judgments. The Chicago Legion's reviewing techniques were also questionable as apparently most of the work was privately done by a laywoman, and often the priests who were publicly condemning movies had themselves never viewed the films in question.<sup>45</sup>

The National Legion of Decency needed a new list provided by a reviewing committee with expertise. Though the IFCA had long been criticized by many within the Legion movement, the alumnae proved to be the best choice for reviewers, particularly since Mary Loomer had taken over as the new Bureau head. She did not feel as strongly committed to the white list as did her predecessor. The Bureau set to work reviewing for the New York Legion and the alumnae demonstrated their capacity to work well at their new job. Though their early work was done in secret,<sup>46</sup> in early 1936 the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau officially became the reviewing committee for the National Legion of Decency.<sup>47</sup> The IFCA continued to publish its own white list even as it compiled a blacklist for the Legion, but as Legion of Decency historian Paul W. Facey explained, upon involvement with the Legion the IFCA switched its attention "from the praiseworthy to the blameworthy."<sup>48</sup>

Some time earlier McGoldrick had tried to raise her Bureau to the status of Department but met opposition from her colleagues. With the Bureau now working for

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Walsh, 131.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 126, NCWC Press Release, February 1936.

<sup>48</sup> Paul W. Facey, *The Legion of Decency: A Sociological Analysis of the Emergence and Development of a Social Pressure Group*. (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 86.

the Legion, however, it became a Department of the IFCA in 1936.<sup>49</sup> The volunteer status of the women also made them appealing to the Legion, as the reviewing committee thus did not constitute a heavy financial strain upon the organization.<sup>50</sup> Though the Bureau was ultimately accepted by the Legion as an appropriate review service, they were still not free from derision, sometimes being referred to as “Mrs. Looram’s Ladies.”<sup>51</sup>

***“It Could Never Happen Again”: What Became of the Code and the Legion?***

In his 1936 encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, Pius XI called the Legion of Decency “a holy crusade against the abuses of the art of the cinema.”<sup>52</sup> The Pope also recognized the Protestants and Jews who likewise had taken up the crusade. The Legion of Decency credited itself not only with the nation’s moral salvation but also with the movie industry’s economic revival.<sup>53</sup> It seemed that for many people the Legion had come along at exactly the right moment. In his article, “The Failure of Movie Industry Public Relations, 1921-1934,” Marvin N. Olasky listed a small percentage of the groups that supported the Legion campaign, giving the names of twenty-eight organizations—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—including the Masons, Elks, B’nai B’rith, Knights of Columbus, National Education Association and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. The full list, he noted, was several pages longer.<sup>54</sup>

Not everyone was so thrilled with the Catholic campaign and its ramifications, however. The Production Code seal displayed at the beginning of every Code-approved

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<sup>49</sup> Burns, 11.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, 205n.

<sup>52</sup> Pius XI, *Vigilanti Cura*, *Papal Encyclicals Online* [website]. Accessed March 26, 2003. Available from <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11VIGIL.HTM>

<sup>53</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 126, NCWC Press Release, February 1936.

<sup>54</sup> Olasky, 168.

film was often the subject of the very vocal derision of audience members.<sup>55</sup> The dissenters are best expressed by the words of a movie fan in 1934, who complained to Joseph Breen of “social thieves and moralistic skunks, the agents of gang religion . . . trying to rob us of our human rights. . . .”<sup>56</sup>

The original Production Code stayed in place until 1966. At that time it was replaced by a new Code that was meant to reflect the liberalization of American society. Even this Code could not last and two years later the PCA was replaced by the Code and Ratings Administration, which judged for each reviewed movie the appropriate age group. The MPPDA became the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). The MPAA has come under fire for the battles it chooses to fight: As one character in *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* proclaims, “Just remember what the MPAA says: Horrific, deplorable violence is okay, as long as people don’t say any naughty words!”<sup>57</sup>

The Production Code outlasted the Legion of Decency by one year. The Legion acted as moral vigilante for three decades, but eventually revised its method from one of control to one of guidance. In 1965 the Legion became the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP). NCOMP tempered moral analysis with aesthetic criticism and was judged NCOMP-etant by conservative Catholics who longed for stricter moral judgment.<sup>58</sup> NCOMP invited a number of other reviewers to join the alumnae in the reviewing committee in order to obtain a more diverse approach to the movies. Representatives of the Federation slowly dwindled until the alumnae were no longer

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<sup>55</sup> Walsh, 110.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, dir. Trey Parker, 81 min., Comedy Central, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, 203.

involved in the new organization. NCOMP lasted only fifteen years. The American Church no longer has an official body that exclusively monitors the movies.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which began life as the National War Council in 1917 and was the first to review movies from a Catholic standpoint, continues to appraise movies for Catholics, now combining both moral and artistic judgment in its reasoning. Today it is rare, however, for the Catholic Church to condemn movies, contrary to popular belief. Due to the lingering memory of the days of the Legion and also to a widespread misunderstanding of the Catholic Church as a monolith in opinion and action, when a Catholic group or individual protests a movie the media often misrepresents it as official condemnation of the film in question. For example, two of the most controversial movies in recent years that inspired great shows of Catholic opposition, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Dogma*, were never actually condemned by the Vatican. The lowest category in the USCCB film reviews is not “C” for “condemned,” as it was in the Legion’s reviews, but “O” for “morally offensive.” The USCCB film reviewers might not want their readers to attend those movies, but they will not insinuate that not only are the movies condemned, but so too the moviegoers.

Early Catholic movie reformers never saw themselves in the same light as those people who were controlling or wanted to control content; rather they saw themselves as much-needed moral guides for a confused people. According to both the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau and the Legion of Decency, the government, church groups, and various other groups had no right to tell you when you could and could not watch a movie—as long as it was the right kind of movie. Moviegoers had the right to make up their own minds without government intervention—as long as they made the right decision.



“The censors wouldn’t even let me sit on a guy’s lap, and I’d been on more laps than a napkin,” commented Mae West.<sup>59</sup> The Code and the Legion denied the American people the right to view sophisticated and adult exploration of intelligent themes. As *The Nation* commented, “Thus far the censors have spent all their time protecting children against adult movies; they might better protect adults against childlike movies.”<sup>60</sup> Sexual passion was always capped with a fade-out so that the audience could only draw its own conclusions. “You had the impression that if you had sex, you were going to fade out,” Woody Allen explained.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the social problem movie was a genre that was just beginning to develop during the Depression but adherence to the Code and the establishment of the Legion of Decency disallowed any screen exploration of social, judicial, and political questions.

Artists were hindered by the Code’s strictness. One writer took out his frustration on the PCA, goading Breen and his staff with the stage direction, “From offstage we hear the scream of a naked woman.”<sup>62</sup> Often in the pre-Code years Hollywood had produced rubbish, but barring filmmakers from addressing social problems, different philosophies, violence, criminality and sexuality did not stop rubbish from being released. Intelligence and artistry separate the good from the bad and not one group’s definition of morals.

In a way the system of having various city and state censorship boards was better for the American film heritage. Studios did not cut the master negatives because different censors called for different cuts. Modern audiences can see some of these

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<sup>59</sup> Leff and Simmons, 53-54.

<sup>60</sup> *The Nation* quoted in *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre Code Hollywood*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> “So, Woody, Do You Feel Like Talking About It?” Sarah Boxer, *New York Times*, November 11, 2002, Section B, 1, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Vizzard, 99.

movies intact and as they were intended.<sup>63</sup> Once the Code was in place, one censor operated with one set of rules, so the master negatives were cut accordingly.<sup>64</sup> The integrity of many films has been permanently damaged as a result.

Each generation of film reformers has viewed the past as halcyon. Critics of the film industry always think that earlier years were better. In his 1992 tome against the entertainment industry, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, American film critic Michael Medved argued that Hollywood lost touch with America when the Production Code fell apart. He longed for the days when movies like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* were produced.<sup>65</sup> Frank Walsh, however, pointed out that even in Medved's golden age of Hollywood, Joseph Breen nearly blocked the Frank Capra movie because it reflected badly upon the American government.<sup>66</sup> Father Daniel Lord had once lamented that George Raft was teaching young boys to be criminals and that Norma Shearer was teaching little girls to be kept women.<sup>67</sup> Lord missed the wholesome days of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, but the sudden Pickford-Fairbanks marriage in 1920 directly following her quick divorce was one of the many silent film scandals that had brought about the accusation that Hollywood was leading young people astray.<sup>68</sup> There is always a golden era that seems ideal to those not living in it: "Every country has its 'Merrie England'," explained Orson Welles.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Koszarski, 202.

<sup>64</sup> Vieira, 210.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 343.

<sup>66</sup> Walsh, 333.

<sup>67</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 125, "Motion Pictures Betray America," Daniel Lord, pamphlet, 1934, 36-37.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles* (New York: De Capo Press, 1998), 100.

For many people outraged by the modern entertainment industry, the reign of the Production Code and the Legion of Decency is America's idyllic past. The Code and Legion both operated on the assumption that the American public, as film historian Thomas Doherty explained, "need not debate the right or wrong of some issues or even utter aloud certain unpleasant matters."<sup>70</sup> Jack Vizzard, Hollywood censor during the Code and Legion years, called the time "Americana of a certain period. It was a product of the age of Babbitt, and of the Crash. It could never happen again."<sup>71</sup> It is comforting to regard the years of the Better Films groups, the Production Code and the Legion of Decency as a faded Norman Rockwell print, but modern would-be censors with agendas new and old demand our attention.

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<sup>70</sup> Doherty, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Vizzard. 15.

## Conclusion

They had gone to the “movies.” The movies were almost as vital to Kennicott and the other citizens of Gopher Prairie as land-speculation and guns and automobiles.

Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, 1920.<sup>1</sup>

Though IFCA Motion Picture Bureau members saw real danger in the movies, their potential for good could not be ignored. Rita McGoldrick advocated that students be taught film appreciation so that they would not waste their leisure time on unworthy entertainment. The Bureau took a similar stance in its approach to its followers, hoping to teach them about the cultural, artistic, musical, technical and educational aspects of movies in order to foster in filmgoers some discretion; as McGoldrick once described it, some shopping sense.<sup>2</sup> The position of the cinema as the art of the masses was solid. The best tactic to deal with the problems posed by the motion picture was to acknowledge that it was not going anywhere and also to acknowledge its validity as a form of entertainment. Reformers who wanted to ban the movie were unlikely to win over devoted moviegoers, who counted in the millions. After all, as McGoldrick told her radio audience,

For every man and woman who reads a good book a week, a hundred go to the motion picture theatre. For every one who goes to a concert or to opera, ten thousand go to the movies. For everyone who has access to good paintings and good sculpture, probably one hundred thousand go to the movies. (Emphasis hers.)<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the genuine good of the motion picture, McGoldrick and her film reviewers could hardly deny that movies in the early years of the Depression were becoming more and more scandalous. McGoldrick relentlessly assured her radio listeners

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1996), 227.

<sup>2</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, September 10, 1930.

<sup>3</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, June 30, 1931.

that Hollywood was changing its ways, but in between her reassurances she noted, "The various studios are still bent on furnishing us with gangster and racketeer heroics."<sup>4</sup> She realized that even as the IFCA worked with the MPPDA, Hollywood was busy producing movies that outright violated the Code. McGoldrick's usual method in dealing with the industry was to call attention to the good and to emphasize Hollywood's willingness to produce wholesome family fare. Eventually, however, she had to admit that the Code had not fulfilled her hopes.

Still she did not allow her doubts to keep her down long, as just months later she enthused, "The tide has turned."<sup>5</sup> But the movies were not becoming any less frank in their depictions of sexuality and violence. McGoldrick blamed the writers of modern fiction as well as vaudevillian performers who had flocked to Hollywood with the advent of sound technology. She blamed the audiences that patronized these movies. She blamed everyone, in fact, but the industry itself. "The loudest most blatant, most colourful barker gets the crowd," she said in the industry's defense.<sup>6</sup> It is little wonder that some concerned Catholics questioned whether McGoldrick's true loyalty lay with the Church or with the MPPDA. The film trend of the early 1930s did not reflect well on her relationship with Hollywood.

The Bureau's leadership in the Catholic film reform movement was undone by the pre-Code movies. Its non-aggressive tactics with Hollywood worked until the mobster and the fallen woman were crowned King and Queen of the box office. It was not good for the IFCA's image to cooperate with an industry that produced movies racier and raunchier than had ever been seen in the U.S. In the age of the fugitive John Dillinger

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<sup>4</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, May 7, 1931.

<sup>5</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, November 5, 1931.

<sup>6</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, July 3, 1930.

and the mobster Al Capone, Arthur Maguire accused movie producers of being the “Real Public Enemies.”<sup>7</sup> Nice, respectable Catholic ladies did not associate with public enemies. In order to change film content, it became obvious that it was not cooperation but control that was necessary. For a time, however, the IFCA Motion Picture Bureau represented to the film industry the Catholic voice in the great movie debate. In a unique moment in history, Progressive women working in the Catholic interest cooperated with Hollywood and helped to hold off federal control of one of the nation’s largest industries.

The early years of the twentieth century in the United States saw many cultural changes take place. It is significant that a group of devout, Catholic laywomen could join a movement populated by middle-class, Protestant women and rank among the leaders of the reform. It is significant that a respected, conservative politician from the Midwest could be coaxed into becoming the “Czar” of the movies. It is significant that in a country that presented itself as Protestant and nativist, Jewish-Americans could build the fourth largest industry and it is also significant that this industry could come under the control of an Irish-American social pressure group.<sup>8</sup> As Leon Matthew Hutton pointed out in his M.A. thesis, “The Formation of the Legion of Decency: The Shaping of an American Catholic Identity,” before the end of the century, both a Catholic and a movie star would become President.<sup>9</sup> The Church and the film industry each became more respectable, perhaps due to their relationship with one another. In the struggle over film content, the Church proved itself dedicated to conserving the morals of the nation, while

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<sup>7</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, “An Epistle from a Layman to the American Hierarchy (the Modern Apostles) on the Movie Question,” Arthur D. Maguire, pamphlet.

<sup>8</sup> Vieira, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Hutton, 158.

Hollywood proved itself capable of producing movies that were not likely to call the force of government censorship down on its head.

Much has been written on the relationship between Hollywood and the Catholic hierarchy. Too little, however, is known of the relationship between the film industry and groups such as the IFCA. "The real importance of women's groups in Hollywood was little known or understood by the general public," wrote Garth Jowett.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between the Bureau and the MPPDA was mutually beneficial: The Bureau was given an opportunity to communicate and work directly with the studios while the MPPDA was able to depict itself as a willing participant in the film reform movement. The Bureau could rightfully boast of "intimate, friendly relations" with Hollywood, giving it an edge over many other movie reformers.<sup>11</sup> Film reform was dominated by Protestant groups, many of whom admired the Bureau's work. The General Federation of Women's Clubs expressed its hope that Protestant women might achieve the same amount of good work that the Motion Picture Bureau accomplished.<sup>12</sup> The alumnae could often see the fruits of their labour reflected on their local movie screens. Though not all-powerful in Hollywood, they were prominent on both the Public Relations and the Studio Relations Committees. The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau affected real change in the movies throughout the 1920s and into the Depression.

When the cinema was still in its infancy, reformers realized the social influence it could have. In the early years of the movie, one man even argued that the cinema ought to be declared a public utility so that it might be forced to fulfill its potential.<sup>13</sup> Rita

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<sup>10</sup> Jowett, *Film the Democratic Art*, 180.

<sup>11</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 2, letter from McGoldrick to unknown recipient, October 22, 1928.

<sup>12</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 30, letter from Loomis to Brennan, February 1, 1934.

<sup>13</sup> Jowett, "Media Power and Social Control," 199.

McGoldrick and her film reviewers did not go that far, but they did encourage the film industry to make movies that would educate and inspire audiences. In 1922 Father Burke of the NCWC spoke to the Federation, telling its members that they were called to a crusade: “The Crusade that calls to us is that of united national Catholic action. The Holy Land that is to be redeemed – is our homes: our schools: the sanctities of virginity: of motherhood: of fatherhood – redeemed again unto the hopeful light of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> Catholic Action called for the alumnae to battle what they perceived as a misuse of a medium capable of genuine good. The Bureau told concerned Catholics what movies they might see “without offending God.”<sup>15</sup>

Their methods were not strong enough to control the industry, but that was not what the alumnae had set out to do. Their goal was to advise Hollywood on moral matters, to serve as a watchdog for anti-Catholicism, and to encourage the industry to produce wholesome rather than salacious entertainment. The alumnae achieved at least a moderate degree of success. The Legion of Decency had monumental success but eventually its pronouncements seemed hopelessly out of touch with the society it was trying to protect and contain. Would the IFCA have lasted any longer if the American Church had not decided to change its tactics in dealing with Hollywood? The threat of government censorship as advocated by many outraged reformers was always present; perhaps if the industry had not aligned itself with the Church, the government would have placed the industry under its thumb. The industry would have had little need for alliance with “better films” groups if government censorship had been instituted.

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<sup>14</sup> CUA, NCWC archives, coll. 10, box 116, letter from Burke to the IFCA, October 31, 1922.

<sup>15</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, col. 33, box 6, quoted in transcript of radio broadcast, Rita McGoldrick, November 29, 1929.



Conversely, it is conceivable that the government would never have chosen to regulate the industry. Perhaps the raciness of pre-Code films was not just a passing trend, as McGoldrick had assured her listeners, but was an indication of the direction in which the American cinema was heading. Was it inevitable that the industry would have become more immune to the demands of film reformers and the threats of government censorship due to an increasingly liberal society, if not for the actions of the American hierarchy?

The IFCA Motion Picture Bureau operated during a time when reformers could find themselves working directly with the moviemakers and see the fruits of their labour reflected on movie screens. Readers might question whether it is likely that reformers today would be accepted so openly by Hollywood. An even more important question, however, is this: In the years since the heyday of women's clubs and church groups in Hollywood, how many television shows have not been broadcast due to social pressure groups? How many movies have been edited by the industry itself in order to please the religious right or the political left? How many in the public are even aware of such actions? Americans in the 1920s and '30s were unlikely to know what changes had been wrought by the IFCA or other groups. To what degree do social pressure groups today control the images we see?

Countless Hollywood award shows celebrate the cinema as the architect of the American dream, but when the industry comes under attack, executives and entertainers are quick to insist that the media has no real influence. Just how much influence it has remains to be established. The human race has long known how to raise hell and no mass medium is likely to teach it anything new. "The Motion Picture is about fifteen years

old,” declared a film short in 1921. “Sin is somewhat older than that, yet the censors would have us believe that it was not Satan but Thomas Alva Edison who invented ‘The Fall of Man.’”<sup>16</sup> Whether they attributed to the movie great educational potential or considered it a terrible threat to civilization, the passion with which reformers regarded the cinema is evocative of its power. “Great events may come and go unknown, unheralded, but not so a motion picture,” rhapsodized Rita McGoldrick in 1930. “So they have thrived, these flickering phantoms of reality, that have now learned to talk!”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Non-Sense of Censorship*, quoted in Walsh, 24.

<sup>17</sup> CUA, IFCA archives, coll. 33, box 6, transcript of radio address, Rita McGoldrick, July 3, 1930.

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