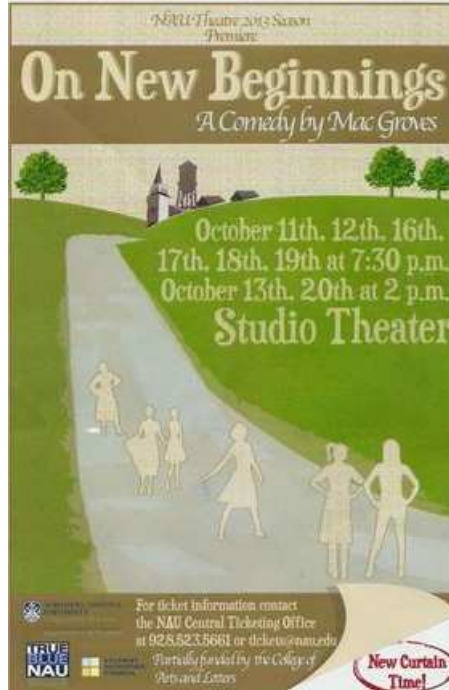


Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

October 30 2013: An Anti-Church Play

My daughter Charity is attending Northern Arizona University as a Theatre major, on the Performance track, so she is acting in plays put on by the Theatre department. Ordinarily, the directors (professors) in the department choose plays written by professional or recognized playwrights, but for the Fall 2013 season, the first play was written by a favorite NAU professor, Max Groves, *On New Beginnings*. As her parents, we dutifully went up to Flagstaff (in mid-October, it still was not all that cold yet) to see her play.

From what Charity tells me, the play is semi-autobiographical, or at least draws heavily on Grove's experience growing up in Oklahoma (center-east, from the names of towns that were dropped) and his



exposure to "southern" suburban church culture. I say "southern" because, like Texas, the eastern part of the state is more "southern" in culture, while the western part is more "western". My father was born and raised on the western side of the state, near Clinton, but my grandparents moved to the eastern side of the state, near Tulsa, so I've seen both sides. Ditto for Texas; I've seen Dallas and Houston ("southern"), but I've also seen Lubbock and Hereford and Fort Stockton ("western"). The church culture I've seen in Tulsa and Pryor Creek are similar to what I've seen in Huntsville, Alabama: medium to large-size churches have a more suburban or contemporary feel, with the style of music and doctrinal emphases, while smaller churches feel more rural, with their traditional style and a tendency to be legalistic (probably why they remain small). The play involves a "study group" of six women (too bad for male actors this season!) from New Beginnings Baptist Church. Three women have problems - one is a sex addict who is involved with various men in the church, including a pastor and the policeman husband of her "study group" friend, who also suffers from alcoholism, and the third is a middle-age mother whose husband wants a divorce and (as she discovers) is currently in jail for a homosexual encounter with a minor. Two of the other women are farm girls, accustomed to coarse language and mannerisms and plain-speaking, and the last is a teenager who (if I understood correctly) was involved in prostitution when she lived in Shreveport, Louisiana. The play has three acts; The first is a (lengthy) introduction to the six women and their problems and personalities and the tensions of their friendships. The second is monologues by the sex addict as she confesses her guilt at a church service and implicates several men in the church (without naming them, of course) and by the middle-age mother who refuses to bail her divorce-seeking homosexual husband out of jail. The third is the

denouement as the "study group" friends adjust to their newly-unchurched circumstances and decide that their friendship and mutual support are more important than the dirty linen that previously they all knew about but is now exposed and is in the process of being cleaned up.

Technically, the play was okay - the first act dragged on a bit with a lot of dialog as the women gradually show up at the "study group" meeting, and the last act dragged on a bit, slowly and not cleanly tying up the issues. As a thought-provoker, the play was quite successful - but not in the way I originally expected.

Max Groves is not a believer -or, at least, I assume so, based on what my daughter tells me and the fact that he is a drama professor in good standing at a public university - Christians (at least, true *orthodox* ones) don't succeed in such an environment, a problem that is becoming increasingly and stridently real. I'm sure most of the people who sat through the play were not believers, either, or at least sat through the play with apparent enjoyment. Charity did not mention that anybody got up and left during the performance. Perhaps Max Groves intended the play to be "Christian bashing", perhaps most of the audience expected or at least accepted that the play would be "Christian bashing", but certainly I was expecting it to be, based on what Charity told me about it beforehand - especially when she mentioned that Groves was concerned about how her Baptist parents would react, or at least curious. As I watched the first act unroll, that's what I was thinking - the portrayal of "good Christian ladies" hiding their problems and sins, barely disguising their antipathy and judgment of each other, and "studying" a book (recommended by the adulterous pastor) that cast the controversial "wives submit to your husbands" doctrine in sexual sadism terms. Maybe other "church people" Christians would have been offended and this portrayal - but you're reading the thoughts of an engineer and liberal arts scholar who is aware of the problems with the church and has himself taken a stand against "church culture"! So I found myself gradually recognizing that the play was not so much "Christian bashing" as anti-"church culture".

This became especially clear to me during the last act, in which the sex addict and the alcoholic have found themselves "no longer welcome" at New Beginnings Baptist Church", with its hypocrisy and judgmentalism. The sex addict has confessed her problem, thus acknowledging it as a *problem* (or *sin*) that she wants to overcome. The alcoholic has committed herself to a detox treatment, and the group is going to see her through it. The middle-age mother has accepted her responsibility to not be naive and dependent on her unbeliever-behaving husband. All the women express their love for each other and intent to support each other. In short, I note that *this is what Christianity is supposed to look like*, the reality of it, and not the "church people" false front. For me, the play became: Act One - How it is NOT supposed to be; Act Two - Reject the Hypocrisy; Act Three - How it IS supposed to be.

Max Groves is not (so far as I know) a believer. Yet his play could have been written by one. Tone down the blasphemy, take out the unnecessary bit where the sex addict takes off her underwear from under her skirt and then takes a cell-phone photo of her privates, make it clear that the women are affirming their relationship as authentic Christians during the last act, and this is a play that [Waypoint Theatre Company](#) [1] could present at the old Scottish Rite Cathedral on the big



stage! Drama is communication; it is not merely entertainment. Groves wrote the play to express his impressions of the churches

of his youth and his opinion of Baptists and Christians. It could easily be (licensed and) reworked very mildly to be a rebuke to "churchianity" and an affirmation of true Christian repentance, accountability, and fellowship.

Another thing that occurs to me is that the "church culture" of Grove's youth turned him off from Christian truth. The books that I've been reading about the younger generation of Americans and their unfavorable view of Christianity report the points of disagreement as being primarily with "church culture". Jesus gets a black eye from the way the people who wear His label act on Sunday morning and the related attitudes they carry through the week. How much better if the church strove rather to be [effective](#) [2] rather than merely attractational or traditional. How much better if the Christians would pursue *Christ* and pleasing Him and living out a [Christian Worldview](#) [3] rather than merely conforming to "church culture".

The final thing that was communicated to me by this play, indirectly, is how Christian dramatists are supposed to "get their creds". Charity and several of her theatre major friends are Christian, and they have chosen to "get their creds" by studying acting at a public university, rather than a specialist private academy or by simply "working the streets" - auditioning, getting parts at lower-class theatre companies, and working themselves up, gaining experience and exposure along the way. However, all three of those options are dominated (even in earlier times) by a pervasively non-Christian, even anti-Christian perspective. This is true of the entire public university setting as well. The stories of university professors actively working to undermine the Christian commitments of their believing students are legion. It is no surprise that Charity and her friends were expected and required to compromise their positions on moral purity in order to be cast in a university drama department production - and, as Charity tells me, she was glad to be cast in *this* one, because the other Fall '13 production was *much worse*. I suppose I should be glad that she was cast as the blasphemy-spouting, obscene gesture-flipping farm girl, and not the panty-removing, genital-photographing sex addict, but the fact that the university drama department (and from what I've seen, the University of Arizona is much, much worse in this respect than Northern Arizona University) not only condones the practice of requiring student actors to compromise their moral positions, but actually *encourages* it, is disheartening. But what are these budding actors supposed to do? Hold to their convictions and be marginalized, like a Kirk Cameron? Or keep it under wraps and carefully go along until you "get your creds", like a Mel Gibson (and suffer the sort of image problem that he has)? It's a hard call - really underscores the necessity of being in authentic fellowship with other believers who can advise, support, and commiserate.

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1. www.waypoint-theatre.org
2. dlormand.us/church.html#05Jan12
3. <http://www.colsoncenter.org>