

The Eyes of Tammy Faye: A far cry from Elmer Gantry

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Directed by Michael Showalter; written by Abe Sylvia

The Eyes of Tammy Faye concerns itself with Tammy Faye Bakker, who along with her husband, Jim Bakker, “rose from humble beginnings to create the world’s largest religious broadcasting network and theme park,” according to the film’s press notes. Their televangelical empire fell apart in the late 1980s. Jim Bakker went to prison in 1989 for “defrauding the faithful” of \$158 million.

Michael Showalter’s film, from a screenplay by Abe Sylvia, attempts both to mock and humanize the Bakkers. The filmmakers, however, mistake “humanizing,” recognizing that people have different and sometimes quite contradictory sides to them, with “condoning” and “excusing.” Having misguidedly set themselves the task of turning Tammy Faye Bakker into an icon of female empowerment and sexual tolerance, they make the even more grievous error of treating Christian fundamentalist hucksterism itself with kid gloves.

The Eyes of Tammy Faye briefly dramatizes Tammy Faye’s childhood, endured in straitened circumstances in International Falls, Minnesota. She is the daughter of a divorced and remarried mother (Cherry Jones), herself a Pentecostal preacher. Later, at bible college in 1960, Tammy Faye (now Jessica Chastain) meets Jim Bakker (Andrew Garfield). Bakker, in our first glimpse of him, cheerfully informs his listeners that his vision of religion sets great store on the “here and now.” God, he asserts, “does not want us to be poor.” He mocks the notion that the poor are “blessed.”

Jim and Tammy Faye soon marry and set out on the road as itinerant preachers. They eventually come to the attention of preacher Pat Robertson (Gabriel Olds) and his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). Bakker becomes the first host of CBN’s *The 700 Club*. In 1971, they meet thuggish evangelist Jerry Falwell (Vincent D’Onofrio), busy “fighting the liberal agenda, the feminist agenda, the homosexual agenda.”

Tammy Faye is by this time expressing her unhappiness about her husband’s personal conduct. “You can’t leave me home, alone and isolated,” she says. But he regularly does precisely that.

Jim and Tammy Faye eventually launch their own Christian television operation in 1974, the PTL (Praise the Lord) Television Network. The money from donors begins to roll in. In 1978, they open up Heritage USA, a “Christian-themed” water park, theme park and residential complex in Fort Mill, South Carolina. It becomes the third-largest such park by attendance in the US.

Scandals erupt. Financial scandals—Jim Bakker diverts millions

for the couple’s lavish lifestyle and other expenses. The *Charlotte Observer* runs a series of devastating exposés. Sexual scandals—Jim is accused of having made “homosexual advances,” while Tammy Faye begins to carry on with a record producer (Mark Wystrach). Bakker takes to the airwaves to denounce the attacks of the “secular press.” “Tammy and I,” he asserts, “are undergoing the most vicious attacks on the history of this ministry.”

In the mid-1980s, Tammy Faye sticks her neck out by interviewing an AIDS patient in Los Angeles. He tells her on the air, “Jesus loves us the way we are.” Falwell is horrified.

Eventually, things go from bad to worse. By now, Tammy Faye is addicted to pills and nearly dies from an overdose. When the bottom falls out, after promising to help, Falwell betrays the Bakkers, denouncing them in public. Bakker, who “stole PTL blind,” goes to jail, and Tammy Faye drops out of sight. She divorces him. Ten years go by before Tammy Faye has the opportunity to sing in public again. A title informs us that she died of cancer in 2007, after a long struggle with the disease.

The Bakkers’ story has dramatic possibilities, and neither Bakker would have to be portrayed as a monster, but it would need to be approached differently, far more critically, as part of the broader American social drama. As it is, the events are told in a perfectly efficient, businesslike manner, but very superficially.

The marked rise of televangelism and Christian fundamentalism as a political force in the 1970s and ’80s is bound up with America’s economic decline and the shift to the right of the entire political establishment. As we noted in our obituary of Falwell in 2007, in the vacuum created by the Democratic Party’s abandonment of any program of social reform and the protracted decay of the trade unions, the right-wing fundamentalist, along with “dozens of other television preachers helped mobilize disoriented sections of the middle class and working class behind a program which resulted in a dramatic transfer of wealth from working people to the super-rich, as well as enriching a sizeable layer of the upper middle class, including Falwell himself.”

The Bakkers helped themselves to millions of dollars, exhorted out of their viewers. The latter made sacrifices, went without, so the PTL ministry could “save souls.” The *New York Daily News* explained in 2017 that the Bakkers’ “shopping sprees reflected insatiable greed. In 1984, after an exhaustive run through luxury stores in Manhattan, they added \$24,500 in furs (including a full-length Blackglama) and \$27,500 in jewelry (one item was a \$6,000

diamond bracelet) to their homeowner's insurance."

While in New York, the *News* pointed out, "the couple stayed at a suite in the Waldorf Astoria, complete with a fireplace and baby grand piano. ... Later that year, the couple chartered a Gulfstream for a \$107,000 flight to Palm Springs. Jim's feet no sooner touched the ground than he raced off to buy three luxury cars, including two antique Rolls-Royces, totaling \$170,000. They shared a secret suite at the Heritage Gold Hotel, with gold-plated bathroom fixtures and a 50-foot walk-in closet. Even the doghouse was air-conditioned."

John Wigger, the Bakkers' biographer, has explained that coinciding with their rise to fame, the couple "embraced the prosperity gospel, which taught believers to expect the best of everything. In the era of post-World War II affluence, the good life and the godly life merged. The message fit the 1980s perfectly. Many evangelicals might not have agreed with Gordon Gecko, the fictional character portrayed by Michael Douglas in the 1987 film 'Wall Street,' that 'Greed is good,' but they generally had little patience for the notion that restraint, let alone poverty, was any better."

The Eyes of Tammy Faye treads lightly on all this. We are led to believe that Tammy Faye had nothing to do with the wholesale looting. In any case, she certainly benefited from it.

More importantly, Showalter's film has precious little to say about the damaging, befouling role that fundamentalism and religion in general play in American life. The US ruling elite, among the most ruthless and murderous in world history, drapes itself in Christian piety. All the thousands of elected officials who fleece the public in the interests of the financial oligarchs follow suit. Nowhere in the advanced capitalist world is there such criminality, and nowhere is there greater swearing on and by the Bible. The filthy rich, swimming in luxury, promise the oppressed that "a better place" for them lies ahead.

The film addresses none of this. Its main theme is that Tammy Faye Bakker had a good heart, that she was tolerant, that she somehow represented female empowerment.

Chastain, we are told by the production notes, studied Bakker "for seven years, going so far as to memorize all of her mannerisms and vocal inflections from the hours of tape she watched." Chastain does a fine impersonation. Actors have a tendency to imagine that physical imitation constitutes getting to the essence of a human personality. Hollywood in general at present likes to imagine that achieving verisimilitude in terms of physical locations and period hairstyle and clothes is the same thing as grasping the truth of a historical epoch or social milieu.

Chastain, one of the producers of *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* (and who won an Academy Award for her performance in the film), asserts that her subject "was nothing like the caricature the media fed off of. ... She preached acceptance and compassion and meant it, and that's what we wanted people to see in this film. When everyone turned their backs on people with HIV and AIDS, she invited a high profile gay pastor who had AIDS to be on her show. She also hosted Praise The Lord network shows all day long, wrote four books and released twenty-four albums. She never got paid for any of it, she gave her money back to the church." This is so much misleading dust thrown in the public's eyes.

The production notes go so far as to proclaim Bakker "An Icon Ahead of Her Time." Some publicist has worked her or himself up to argue that in a world "where powerful men, religious or otherwise, escape scandal with little to no consequences, Tammy Faye stands apart. Unlike Jim, she never turned away from her faith or eschewed her gentle and loving version of God for a fire and brimstone replacement. Because her heart remained open to the experiences of others, she was beloved despite her transgressions and evolved beyond her televangelist and tabloid stardom."

The makers of the 2000 documentary with the same title, in which the present fiction film bases itself, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, observe that "Whether you liked them or not, Jim and Tammy Faye were television pioneers. ... We felt it was important to tell that story. Without Jim and Tammy Faye you wouldn't have the Kardashians, Oprah or *Good Morning America* ." What higher praise ... !

In his *Elmer Gantry* (1927), American novelist Sinclair Lewis left us a scathing picture of the religious charlatantry of the early decades of the 20th century. His lead character, a heavy-drinking womanizer, turns to the ministry as a means of earning a living, as another might choose dentistry or undertaking. "Where could Elmer find a profession with a better social position than the ministry—thousands listening to him—invited to banquets and everything. So much easier than—Well, not exactly easier; all ministers worked arduously—great sacrifices—constant demands on their sympathy—heroic struggle against vice—but same time, elegant and superior work, surrounded by books, high thoughts, and the finest ladies in the city or country as the case might be."

Later, Gantry teams up with the charismatic Sharon Falconer (an obvious reference to evangelist and media celebrity Aimee Semple McPherson, who founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel in 1927). Every night Gantry and Falconer save souls and rack up converts. However, Lewis writes, "Elmer could not consider the converts human. Sometimes when he was out in the audience, ... he looked up at the platform, where a row of men under conviction knelt with their arms on chairs and their broad butts toward the crowd, and he wanted to snicker and wield a small plank. But five minutes after he would be up there, kneeling with a sewing-machine agent with the day-after shakes, his arm round the client's shoulder, pleading in the tones of a mother cow, 'Can't you surrender to Christ, Brother? Don't you want to give up all the dreadful habits that are ruining you—keeping you back from success? Listen! God'll help you make good! And when you're lonely, old man, remember he's there, waiting to talk to you!'"

Such disrespectful attitudes must be revived, sooner rather than later!



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