
Gender Representations and Performance in Lois Weber's Silent Film, Hypocrites

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Abstract

It is common knowledge that discourses on feminist film criticism are centred on the representation of women in cinema, where the woman's image is often suffocated with negative stereotypes that often rape her of her true strength and identity. This imbalance of gender representations in cinema where the male folk are honoured with authority, power and dominance and the female is the object of spectatorship or spectacle while the male holds the gaze clearly substantiate the claim that cinema is made to favour the male gender. This study will therefore examine the silent film Hypocrites to ascertain how gender is represented as well as the performances of the male and female characters in projecting the theme of the film. This study will be foregrounded by symbolic interaction and reception theories which will constitute the theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: *Silent film, hypocrisy, truth, performance, gender representations.*

Introduction

Performances in Silent films are akin to mimes where viewers understand the message or conversations through music, sound and gestures. This narrative technique has similarities with theatrical dance drama where dialogue is substituted with dance performances, songs, choreographed movements, music and gestures, body language and facial expressions. The audience must therefore pay rapt attention to the actors and suspend disbelief if they must participate in the theatrical experience. Silent film shares its events with the viewing audience through diverse ways such as on-screen text, gestures and music just like in classical theatres (Greek and Roman theatres) where the chorus often plays multiple roles as a character in advising the tragic hero, acquainting the audience with past events, in flashbacks and foreshadowing of events, as prologue and epilogue, etc.

Silent Films

Generally speaking, silent films are films produced without sound except for musical accompaniment in form of keyboard as background music. Often than not, the dialogue of the actors and situations are made known to the viewing audience through texts written on screen. An online write-up noted the integral role played by music since the early years of the movie industry where silent films were shown with live musical accompaniment because "it gave the audience emotional cues for the action taking place on the screen. Small town and neighborhood movie theatres usually had a pianist accompany the film; large city theatres would have entire orchestras" ("Silent film"). This online submission accentuates the importance of "body language and facial expression" to enable the audience understand better the actor's feelings and what he or she is trying to show or the message they are passing across. It further cited some notable silent films which include: *La Presa di Roma*, *Filoteo*

Alberini, 1905; *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith, 1915; *The Thief of Bagdad*, Douglas Fairbanks, 1923; *The Gold Rush*, Charlie Chaplin, 1925; and *Pandora's Box*, GW Pabst, 1928 (“Silent film”).

Symbolic Interaction Theory: is a sociological theory that “relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction.” This theory is derived from Max Weber’s belief that people’s actions are dependent upon the way they interpret “the meaning of their world” thus, “Symbolic interaction theory analyzes society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. Subjective meanings are given primacy because it is believed that people behave based on what they believe and not just on what is objectively true” (“Crossman”).

Reception Theory: is concerned with the text and the reader rather than the work and the author. Reception theory which is also referred to as audience reception focuses on the individual reader’s reception and how he or she interprets a work of art or literature and makes meaning out of it.

In review of Wolfgang Iser’s(1974)Reception theory, on the subject of production of meaning, Yanling Shi comments on Iser’s submission that a literary text has “two poles” which are the artistic and aesthetic poles thus: “the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader” (Shi 983). According to her, Iser’s interest is on “the question of how and under what conditions a text has meaning for a reader” thus “he sees meaning as the result of an interaction between text and reader” (983).

In this regard, the silent film *Hypocrites* will be analyzed in the context of the production of meaning by looking at the actions, interactions and lifestyle of the actors. More so, the performance, relationships and gender roles will be seen from the way the viewing audience understood it.

Music and Sound in Silent Films

Silent films are often accompanied with sound and music. Such sounds which may be in form of keyboard or drums, serve as background music, or sound effects which enhance the mood and the plot. Sounds in silent films may be used as signifiers to connote danger, horror, surprise, or an unpleasant situation that is about to unfold. Thompson and Bordwell argued that “sound should not simply duplicate the image in some way: off-screen sound could add narrative information, incongruous sound effects or music could change the tone of a scene, and no diegetic sounds could comment ironically on the action” (189). Their observation that “most silent films were accompanied by live music, ranging from a piano or an organ to a full orchestra” shows the pivotal role of music to silent cinemas hence “from the cinema’s beginning, inventors attempted to join the image to mechanically reproduced sound, usually on phonograph records” (Thompson and Bordwell177).

To expatiate on the subject of silent films, Tim Dirks observed that silent films “were without synchronized sound” and they emerged in 1891 lasting till 1927. According to him, “most early silent were accompanied with a full-fledged orchestra, organist or pianist to provide musical background and to underscore the narrative on the screen. Some even had live actors or narrators” (“Dirks”). This technique enhances the performance of the actor who uses actions, gestures and body movement to convey the message of the film to his or her audience who depends on him or her to deduce meanings from the actions.

Similarly, in his analysis of Ousmane Sembene's film *Xala*, Augustine-Ufua Enahoro mentioned the pivotal role and importance of music and song to film narratives noting that "music and song form the basic structure of the film." Though his analysis is on a particular film yet his submission that "music conveys messages and the rich atmosphere of scenes" and also helped to "evoke the feeling and emotions of the audience," are significantly relevant to other films. In the final analysis, one couldn't agree more that "music is used to communicate feelings, mood and to create a sense of time" (Enahoro50).

Gender Representations

It is common knowledge that the female gender is often represented in the stereotypes of a witch, prostitute, voiceless, and object of male visual pleasure, etc. in films. This kind of representation always deny her of her strength and true identity while the male's identity as the powerful gender and subject of action puts him at an advantageous position over the female. This "gender-specific stereotypes of the strong man saving the weak and passive woman" establishes the notion that "gender drives many cinematic conventions" (Kolker99). This lends credence to Mulvey's (1985) assertion that woman is represented in cinema as object of male visual pleasure, and spectacle for male gaze, for the male holds or bears the gaze and the gaze is male while the female's body is a spectacle and "can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness"(309). Reason is that "the structure of the gaze in film is really the structure of the male character and of the male viewer, gazing at the female character, who is built into the narrative as the object of desire" (Kolker99). In sum, Kolker's submission that the cinema or "film is all about the gaze" which may be of women and of other events give the viewing audience a direction to follow an action (288).

The explanation of the various ways women and men react to situations in cinema as given below indicates how film determines or defines roles according to the actor's gender thus:

Only women put their hands up to their faces to express horror, fear, sadness. Men may jerk their shoulders back or put an arm out---often a protective arm if a woman is with him. A man will allow his head to fall on his forearm in a moment of stress or pull it down between his shoulders to express anger. Women cast eyes upward for a variety of sexually related reasons; men work their mouths, usually in a self-contained smile or smirk. Men may raise their eyes, but usually as a look of annoyance. (Kolker99)

The excerpt above puts the female gender in the stereotype of vulnerability and weakness, and object of distraction to dramatic or cinematic action as opposed to the male who connotes power and strength as a subject or agent of dramatic or cinematic action. To put gender representation on various perspectives, the observations of the various dimensions, forms or categorizations of gender representations are necessary:

The study of gender and sexuality in cinema has many dimensions: the representation of gender difference and of desire and sexuality on screen; the gendered dynamics (both social and psychic) of viewing films; and the questions of production and address that gender inevitably influences, such as who makes films, and for whom?"(Corrigan, White, and Mazaj706)

The Silent Film, *Hypocrites*.

To my mind, a hypocrite connotes someone who is deceptive, and insincere in his conducts, and, perhaps, a liar. The film *Hypocrites* tells the story of the deception of the lives of the congregation of a modern church. The film centres around four major characters and a large

cast of unnamed minor characters. The major characters are: Gabriel-The Ascetic (Mr Courteney Toote), The Woman (Miss Myrtle Stedman), The Abbot (Mr Herbert Standing), and The Queen (Miss Tarrington A). The dialogues spoken in the film are not heard. We only see the movement of their mouths overshadowed by some keyboard playing at the back ground. The conversations, reactions and situations are conveyed to the viewing audience intermittently as onscreen texts.

Synopsis

The film starts with the gate of truth opening to mankind. Then, camera cuts to a church scene to reveal Gabriel - The Ascetic (Mr Courteney Toote) preaching to his congregation from the book of Matthew chapter 23, verse 28, on the subject of 'hypocrisy.' Typical of hypocrites, two choir members are pre-occupied with the contents of a newspaper as they both glance over its content while the preacher laments over their nonchalance towards God's words, and painstakingly enjoins the congregation to be truthful and trustworthy. At a glance, he observes the deception in the choristers, and on this realization, they put away the newspaper. Gabriel's message of truth convicts the congregation of their hypocrisy and propels The Abbot to connive with a group of male members of the church to force Gabriel to resign but should keep him out of it, having exhibited a bit of hypocrisy by pretentiously commending Gabriel for a "great sermon this morning."

Having dispersed the congregation, Gabriel picks up the newspaper to read its content which reveals the captions on "hypocrisy the only evil that walks invisible, except to God alone" (by Milton) and on "why the truth has startled wicked Paris." He falls into a trance where he enjoins his congregation to follow the narrow path as he leads the way through the rugged and sloppy narrow bush path. Only The Woman (Miss Myrtle Stedman) and another lady trail behind as they stumble and fall, and struggle to crawl and meander through the rugged narrow path while the rest of the congregation walk the broad way. This action propels a little girl to challenge The Abbot (Mr Herbert Standing) to "leave the gold and come," but he would rather go the broad way.

Gabriel's desire to enshrine truth and sincerity in their hearts compels him to search for truth. He finds truth in the image of a naked woman and pleads with her to come to his congregation. Through fasting and prayers, he carves his own ideology of truth- the naked woman –a symbol of truth. The Abbot volunteers to unveil this art work of truth to an enthusiastic crowd amidst celebration with pomp and pageantry. The assembled crowd is shocked at the visage of the art work- a naked woman, the symbolic truth; they cover their faces in shame. A little girl laughs at their misery but her laughter is short-lived and her face fell as she sees the angry mob throw down Truth –the art work, and strike Gabriel to death with spears and swords for daring to expose their hypocritical lives. The Woman and her counterpart who have followed Gabriel all along stay by his corps. Truth- the naked woman - leads Gabriel's spirit to various sectors of society to expose the true identities and lifestyles of his congregation through a mirror which she holds up to him in her hand. Camera cuts back to the church as we see Gabriel get back from his trance, but seated unconscious with the newspaper still in his hand. The onscreen text revealed that a preacher dies after preaching a message on hypocrisy to his congregation. Truth in her naked form departs from man as the gates opens and she returns to her abode while the gate of truth closes once again against man.

Analysis of *Hypocrites*

Typical of silent films, *Hypocrites* opens with music at the background without audible dialogue rather the subject matter and reactions are projected through text on the screen for the viewing audience to be abreast of every situation. The major characters are few namely: Gabriel-the preacher, The Woman, The Abbot, and The Queen, and perhaps Truth - the naked woman.

▪ **Symbolic/iconic features**

Most significant in the film's iconographic representations are: Firstly, Truth (as a character) represented as a naked woman which gives truth a feminine identity. Secondly, the gate which opens to allow humans have access to truth and also closes at the exit of Truth in the end of the film when she is rejected by the characters. Thirdly, the mirror, which is held up by Truth (the naked woman), as a medium to x-tray the actions and lifestyles of the actors and the various situations in their social, political, and moral lives so as to reveal the deception, immorality, corruption, dishonesty, and all forms of unpleasant practices they indulge in to extrapolate and establish the theme of hypocrisy. All these three iconic features are related and revolve around Truth as the agent of action, instrument to convey the director's intent, and as a centre or medium of discourse.

The mirror, with its undeniable proofs of the true identities of the characters as revealed by the naked truth herself, exposes the hypocritical nature of humans in all sectors of society. This clearly indicates Weber's desire to use various iconic features familiar to humans (as characters and viewers) to drive home her message of dishonesty and hypocrisy.

Furthermore, the gates of truth opens at the beginning of the film leading to the abode of naked truth-the naked woman - whom Gabriel beckons on to follow him and come to his people. Unfortunately, the rejection of truth leading to the demolition of her statue by the angry mob and the demise of Gabriel compels Truth to return to her garden and the gates of truth closes against unrepentant man and humanity, leaving them to continue in their hypocritical lives.

▪ **Gender Representations in *Hypocrites***

Truth is represented as a naked woman. Truth is a symbolic character with feminine features who plays alongside Gabriel- the protagonist or hero. Appearing from the beginning of the film to the end (except at the church scene), and playing side by side Gabriel- the preacher, perhaps Lois Weber creates her as a support for the male character to strike a feminist chord of gender balance.

The naked woman, symbolic of truth - "naked truth"- is a perpetuation of the woman's image and identity as object of visual pleasure where the man holds the look or bears the gaze. The unveiling of the statue of a naked woman as Truth by the Abbot, in the company of all-male priests, and before a mixed crowd of sundry personalities, further demeans womanhood to the status of public spectacle.

Two remarkably worrisome issues about gender representations in this film are that: truth is given a feminine identity which is a plus to women, but unfortunately, she is naked while her counterpart, Gabriel, is fully dressed in his priestly robe which perhaps connotes holiness. This paradox of a holy priest beholding a naked feminine figure can lead to another dimension of argument or criticism in feminist film discourse which is very critical to the woman's image and screen identity. In as much as the director is trying to disseminate the idea that truth should be transparent, bare and naked, and bereft of shades of dishonesty, this kind of representation is a perpetuation of the age-long stereotypes that feminist film critics condemn. Weber, though a woman, chooses to represent truth metaphorically, as a naked

woman, for “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other” (Mulvey305).

On the other hand, Mulvey observed that the representation of women in cinema is subject to narration informed by the point of view of the filmmaker which comprises the directors, scriptwriters and producers (God’spresence40). Regrettably, Johnston (1976) decries the place of commercial cinema which is more manipulative of the image of woman than the art cinema since the auteur theory “permits authors to play god,” and this status of the filmmaker as a domineering and manipulative entity negates the image of women in cinematic narratives (qtd. in God’spresence44).The onus therefore lies on feminist film critics to question such kinds of representations by women filmmakers as Bill Nichols argued that “feminist film practice must challenge the dominant film practice, whose means of signification are keyed to a patriarchal ideology ...” (Nichols 315).

The subject of the woman’s body as the centre of discourse, together with the objectification of women and dehumanization of womanhood deserve more attention from feminist film critics with special appeal to female filmmakers (screen writers, directors and producers) to deconstruct these mundane representations with alternative and experimental films. The woman’s body which is pleasant to look at with its appeals and pleasurable visuals/visage often than not confronts the male character and viewer with the truth of his own emotional weaknesses, which he may unconsciously or consciously display. The audacity and flagrant exhibition of woman’s nakedness in the public glare, as seen in the character of Truth challenges and opposes male’s weakness, thereby bringing about conflict and anger as evident in the scene of the unveiling of Gabriel’s art work– the symbolic truth (and his ideology of truth) -the naked woman where. The Abbot and other males subjugated Truth by throwing down her statue. The realization of their weaknesses and lack of moral values causes the crowd and soldiers to violently murder Gabriel. Perhaps this is the only smart but silly way they could be exorcised of their hypocrisy.

Truth’s acceptance of Gabriel’s invitation to come to humanity and to compliment his efforts in pressing home the message of truth and sincerity to his congregation spells the collaborative efforts of both genders in bringing sanity to society. Furthermore, the willingness of The Woman and another female character to follow Gabriel through the narrow way, and also stand by him at death defines the place of woman as a faithful partner and an icon of truth. These two female characters who crawled through the rugged narrow path of truth trailing behind Gabriel demonstrated their resilience and tenacity despite their femininity to show that women are courageous and dependable allies. There is yet another female character who is willing to follow suit but whose husband refuses her the opportunity as he stumbles with their baby in hand in an attempt to go with her. Thus they turn away from the narrow path. This goes to show the pressure marriage puts on women thus her commitment to a wifely role and motherhood deny her the privilege of daring the path of truth.

It is pertinent to note that the female characters in the film are more willing to co-operate with the male gender as revealed in their readiness to follow Gabriel through the rough narrow path crawling in their weaknesses in search of truth, while the male characters go through the broad way in search of pleasure and gold which eventually leads to their demolition of the statue of truth- the naked woman. Gabriel’s chase after the truth, who runs from him trying to hide behind trees and bush paths is indicative of the sexual relationship between both genders similar to the manner a male chases a female to satisfy his emotional

craving. Eventually, Gabriel catches up with naked truth and pleads with her to come to his people - this is akin to a groom wooing his bride. Truth follows Gabriel and he forms his own ideology of truth and secretly carves an art piece of a naked woman-a symbol of truth, a representation of the naked woman he has formed ties with.

▪ **Performance in *Hypocrites***

In a simple term, performance means to put up a show, an action or appearance in order to entertain, to educate or to inform. According to English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017), performance is defined as “an act of presenting a play, concert, or other form of entertainment.” In this regard, performance is the ability or manner with which the male and female characters interpret or represent situations in the *Hypocrites*. The dramatic performance is accompanied with keyboard music which gives it a uniqueness that is akin to silent films. Gabriel’s mimetic dramatizations succinctly convey the frustration of a preacher who is burden-stricken with a desire to prepare his congregation for heaven. His performance tells of his displeasure over the nonchalance and corrupt lifestyle of Christians who are overly obsessed with worldly pleasures and immoral activities. Gabriel’s graphical performance and dramatization help the viewing audience to identify with him and give interpretation to his demonstrations with ease.

Similarly, the performance of different situations by the characters at tests to the film’s credibility and verisimilitude. Some examples of these situations which are remarkable include: (1) The opening scene in the church where Gabriel persuades his congregation through gesticulations and facial expression to give up a hypocritical life and embrace truth that calls for transparency. (2) Gabriel’s invitation of his congregation to walk the narrow way which culminates in his carving an art piece-the naked truth, the unveiling of truth. (3).Gabriel’s visit to various sectors of society in the company of truth to reveal their hypocritical lifestyle. (4). The feeling of guilt and remorse by Gabriel in reaction to Truth’s disclosure of the mote in his eyes (his faults or weaknesses) through the mirror, and which he must remove first before admonishing The Woman. Stricken by this revelation, Gabriel slowly turns away from her, waves off his hand as she tries to take hold of his hand while he raises the other hand to his forehead in a gesture to cover his face in shame. This posture portends the recognition of his hypocritical lifestyle.

In a similar fashion, the performance of giddy-dizzy drunken-stupor movement by the priest who goes to spy on Gabriel’s ark work is a display of great artistic creativity and dexterity. Additionally, the dramatization of weakness and resilience by The Woman, and her mate as they crawl along the narrow way following Gabriel behind, is the climax of their quest for truth -though weak and tired, - they are willing to go on as seen in the other character who stretches her hand for support as indicated in the onscreen text to mean “I need your help.”

Gabriel’s performance of rejection, disappointment, loneliness, and frustration when told by the bourgeoisies that truth can only be welcomed if clothed in their ideas clearly conveys the message of futility of his effort to transform them and the society at large. Similarly, great performance is exhibited by the social class, and religious bigots like The Abbot who at different points demonstrated their anger towards the presence of truth in their society.

Aligning the Theories with the film *Hypocrites*

With reference to the **Symbolic Interaction Theory**, the situation in which the actors find themselves is symbolic of a society where the citizens are eager for social integration. A society where class is more important than religion, where ambitious political aspirants and leaders buy the heart of the masses who are yearning for a better life with false promises and

lies. The symbolic and pivotal role of the naked woman whose nakedness exposes the realities of their identities through her mirror is unacceptable to the people. They cannot relate or interact with her simply because she is a stranger just as a female character notifies Gabriel that truth can only be welcomed if clothed in their own ideas. Thus, the characters have assumed a lifestyle for themselves which is symbolic of their nature—a corrupt society where truth is alienated. Truth's final retreat into her garden and the closure of the gates against humans show the characters' subjective notion of truth as a misnomer that wants to alter their own truth—a life of hypocrisy, corruption and dishonesty. Though they know that their way of life is hypocritical, yet they have a collective resolve to go the broad way full of gold and lasciviousness rather than the narrow path. Individual's subjective truth and belief in living a life of merriment, deception and dishonesty can only be a result of their interactions, which results in their collective resolve to dismantle Truth culminating in their collaborative murder of Gabriel at the unveiling of truth.

Conversely, **Reception theory** which has to do with the text and the reader with regards to the production of meaning by the audience tells the viewer's ability to understand and deduce meaning from the actions and situations of the characters. Therefore, the audience is able to understand and interpret the characters' performance from their gestures or gesticulations, the background music, on-screen texts and mise-en-scene. The film *Hypocrites* is remarkable in its use of iconic elements, ranging from the naked woman to the gates opening and closing, the mirror as a hand prop, the candle stand and paraphernalia at the altar, the newspaper with its imageries and captions, the visage of Gabriel as he pleads with his congregation to shun their corrupt ways and embrace the truth, and to the various crowd scenes. All of these help to enhance the visual aesthetics of the film and aid the viewer in reading meaning to the relationship between male and female genders, to understand the various situations, and the attitudes of the characters.

A Feminist Perspective on Symbolic Representation of Truth

Metaphorically, Truth in its gender form presents the woman as an enigma and offense to other characters especially the male characters. She serves both ways: first, as an enigma to the male characters who wish to know the object of Gabriel's art work which he was secretly working on which prompted one of the priests to spy on him. Her identity is concealed from other characters until the day of the unveiling. The natural propensity for man to search out hidden truths gives him pleasure, excitement and energy but in this case, upon discovering the naked truth statue, the whole excitement dissipates and it is replaced with repugnance. Having seen truth in her nakedness at the unveiling, men's anger arose culminating in the demolition of her statue. Thus nudity or nude images of the woman's body in cinema (as seen in the character of Truth in *Hypocrites*) disrobes her of her essence thereby shifting the focus of the viewers from the message—woman as a subject/the medium to view society, to woman—as the object to be viewed. This brings us to understanding the culture of the society hereby represented in the film, a society that is morally depraved. Little wonder that Rose Alexander argued that “popular culture reflects a lot about a society and its people” (qtd.in God's presence, 217). Though film, like other media, aims to entertain, educate and inform, caution is required in the manner woman as character is portrayed or represented so as to contain the minds of the audience from shifting focus from the idea or subject of discourse -- woman as a key player in social development rather than an object of male vilification or provocation.

Truth's double role both as an object of spectacle for men and as the bearer of the mirror through which society's true identity is revealed makes her a victim of man's creation—her

statue is demolished. The demolition of her statue and disregard for her presence (or rather, her invisible presence) as she goes through different scenarios of man's activities in society with a mirror in hand revealing their hypocritical and deceptive lives to Gabriel critically poses the question of the disregard for the existence, relevance and sacrificial impute of women to social stability, development and cleansing. The crowd's rejection of Truth is revealed through a character's response to Gabriel that truth can only be welcomed if clothed in their own ideologies. This total disregard can be equated with an unwanted guest whose contributions, no matter how meaningful or impactful they may be, may never be acknowledge because she is regarded as an outsider, an intruder whose presence is not welcomed. This correlates with Vivian Gornick's argument that the life of a woman is akin to that of an outsider:

The life of woman, like the life of every outsider, is determinedly symbolic of the life of the race; that this life is offered up, as every other outsider's life is offered up, as a sacrifice to the forces of annihilation that surround our sense of existence, in the hope that in reducing the strength of the outsider—in declaring her the bearer of all the insufficiency and contradiction of the race—the wilderness, grief, and terror of loss that is in us will be grafted onto her, and the strength of those remaining in the circle will be increased (qtd. in Penley207).

Conclusion

Typical of silent films, *Hypocrites* uses iconic features, imageries, symbols, performance and music to enhance its narrative. The actors' gesticulations, accompanied by musical instruments and on-screen text give a wholesome performance to the subject matter of hypocrisy and conveys the message of truth that is suppressed, identities that are deceptive, and a lifestyle that is corrupt. Lois Weber's use of a naked woman to represent Truth indicates the pivotal role of the female gender in directing the society to the path of truth as seen in the character of Truth whose presence opens the gates of truth and also leads and shows Gabriel the real identities of his congregation from her mirror. However, women's transparency and truth can only make significant impact through manly support and acceptance, otherwise, her efforts will be frustrated by male hegemony, patriarchal oppression and aggression as evident in the scene of the unveiling. Thus the representation of gender roles and performance of situations in the *Hypocrites* are convincingly interpreted to convey the director's intent. Unarguably, the *Hypocrites* directed and produced by a woman is remarkable for its thematic thrust on religion with its focus on the church, society and humanity.

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