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What do ‘The Hunger Games’ and ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ have to do with American Christianity today?

OPINION AMY HAYES | DECEMBER 9, 2021



Remember the opening of the first *Hunger Games* movie?

At the annual reaping ceremony in District 12, Capitol representative Effie Trinket plays a short film for her captive audience. The montage, narrated by President Snow, depicts scenes from Panem’s history — the Districts’ rebellion against the Capitol, the ensuing devastation, the Capitol’s victory over the “traitors” — all culminating in the origin of the Games as a “pageant of honor, courage and sacrifice.” Stock images of young people with arms raised in victory silhouetted by the dawning sun float across the screen. Soaring music reaches a triumphant peak.

“*This* is how we remember our past,” intones Snow, referring to the Games. “*This* is how we safeguard our future.”





Effie

After mouthing along with these final words, Effie's pink eyelashes flutter open as she gasps breathlessly. "I just love that!" she exclaims, purple lips quivering.

Wait, what? She, she ... loves what now? The ritual murder of children by other children?

The State's brutal oppression of the masses?

The starvation of the many for the gluttony of a few?

Yikes. How could a person possibly love any of that? It'd be easy to write off dear Effie as a monster, plain and simple. But labeling people as psychopaths, while incredibly satisfying, is just lazy and boring. Perhaps this character isn't as one-dimensional, nor this story as far-fetched, as we'd like to believe.

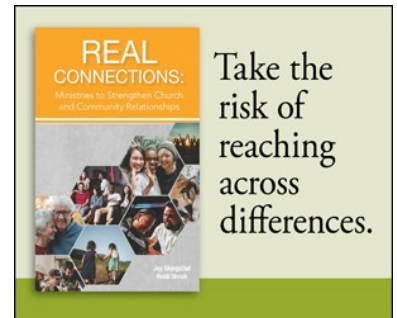
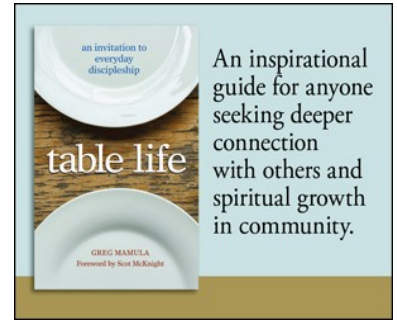
What if instead we grant Effie her humanity? What kind of upbringing and life could so warp a person that they no longer recognize such evil, that they even delight in it?

To understand that we must leave District 12 and return to Effie's home: the Capitol.

Capitol Christianity

In the post-apocalyptic world of Panem, the Capitol exploits the Districts for their lavish lifestyles, something the *Hunger Games* franchise goes out of its way to illustrate through the absurd make-up, fashion and food choices of these elites. What gets no attention, however, is the

"What if instead we grant Effie her humanity? What kind of upbringing and life could so warp a



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mundane details of life in the city. Probably because they are, in fact, mundane.

Nevertheless, if we want to understand Effie, we must speculate about these dull tidbits. After all, one propaganda film annually does not a monster make. To truly suppress the innate empathy humans feel for one another requires a lifetime of indoctrination, both formal and informal.

So, what songs did little Effie sing with her friends as they jumped rope in the school yard? Which dates did she learn were important in social studies? Who were her heroes and what stories did she reenact in make believe?

Did little Effie attend church on Sundays? Did she pray for her favorite tribute to survive the Games? Did she thank God when the others died?



*Josh Hutcherson, Elizabeth Banks and Jennifer Lawrence in The Hunger Games: Catching Fire.
(Murray Close/Lionsgate)*

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allow Christianity? It is, after all, a faith founded on a rebellious peasant who defied an oppressive empire to bring the good news of liberation to the least of these and then encouraged others to do the same after his public execution by the state. A bit of a problematic narrative for the Capitol, I'd say.

Because in this post-apocalyptic world, Panem rose from the ashes of the United States, it's plausible that Effie practices Christianity. But would the Capitol even



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Still, it's easier to pervert faith than persecute it. In fact, the loyalty and fervor of the faithful offer a strategic advantage to any empire that successfully harnesses them, so it's more likely than not that the Capitol encouraged Christianity — at least an interpretation that supported, rather than threatened, their empire. And it would only take a few tweaks.

Take Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler in Mark 10, for example. Can't have little Effie asking adults why they haven't sold everything and joined the Districts, can we now? Simply make the narrative about increasing charity to the poor or about generosity. But under no circumstances acknowledge that the rich young ruler's wealth was a product of his complicity in an exploitative economy, an injustice that no amount of piety, sincere or otherwise, can redeem.

Or what about the Lord's Prayer? Maybe little Effie memorized it but learned that "daily bread" meant anything she considered lacking in her life — a life, mind you, abounding in comfort, security and *literal bread*.

Imperial Christianity

It takes a lot of theological acrobatics to force Christianity to make (nonthreatening) sense inside an empire. First, you must gut the Gospels of their obvious focus: justice and liberation for the least of these. Then you must fill the resultant vacuum with something, probably the pursuit of personal righteousness *a la* cultivating the fruits of the Spirit. Purity culture also works particularly well here. And then just spiritualize any remaining odds and ends that don't already make sense, like God's promises to provide for the physical needs of the poor.

That's how Panem would've done it. How do I know? Because that's how we do it.

Offended by the thought that we're more Capitol than District 12? Honestly, same here.

First, I am not living in a post-apocalyptic world. Second, if I were, I would be on the side of the resistance, fighting against the

**“Offended by
the thought
that we’re**

evil empire, not lounging in the lap of luxury while people starved. Third, I relate more to Katniss than Effie. And I'm guessing you feel the same.

more Capitol than District 12? Honestly, same here."

Should we, though? To be fair, it's only natural to identify with the protagonists of any given story, and most post-apocalyptic stories are narrated by oppressed underdogs — think of June in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Tris in *Divergent*, Winston in *1984*, or Neo in *The Matrix*. No one sees themselves in Agent Smith or Commander Fred. We're not supposed to.

And since we're not hunting with bow and arrow like Katniss or fleeing forced surrogacy like June, we assume that the apocalypse hasn't happened yet. But maybe we shouldn't be so sure.

From subjecting enslaved women to **experimental surgeries without anesthesia** to testing birth control on **unsuspecting Puerto Rican women** to **forcing hysterectomies on immigrant women** held in detention centers, the U.S. has a long history — and present — of systematically exploiting women's bodies. Then there's our nation's lack of clean water, which goes far beyond the ongoing crisis in **Flint, Mich.** Or what about how 40% of food in the U.S. goes to waste — **108 billion pounds of food annually** — while 38 million of us experience food insecurity?

Just how fictional is Panem, really?

(Post) Apocalypse now

This rather reminds me of the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* when Captain Barbosa explains to Elizabeth Swann how stealing Aztec gold cursed him and his crew to roam the earth as the living dead.

"I hardly believe in ghost stories anymore," she responds, raising her eyebrows at an apparently normal Barbosa. Minutes later, after stabbing him in the heart to absolutely no effect, Swann stumbles out onto the ship's deck where moonlight



Elizabeth and Barbossa

exposes the pirates as enchanted skeletons. Horrified, she runs back to the captain's cabin where Barbossa rebukes her.

“You best start believin’ in ghost stories,” he snarls, raising a bony finger. “You’re in one.”

Had Swann not been kidnapped from the safety of her home, she might never have been confronted with this reality. Her privileged position protected her from the truth. As does ours.

But like Swann, we can no longer deny what’s right in front of our eyes.

We best start believin’ in post-apocalyptic worlds.

We’re in one.

And if you’re like me — a middle class white person — then I’ve got bad news for us. We’re not the underdog.

We are the empire.

Amy Hayes currently serves a Clemons Fellow with BNG. She is a master of divinity student at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology.

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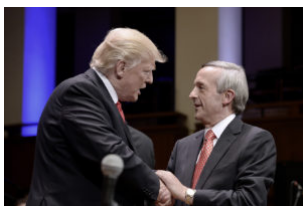
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