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Christian Hypocrisy Through the Tales of King Arthur: An Analytical Essay Comparing *King Arthur* (2004) and *The History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1966)

The tales of King Arthur are known throughout the world for being tales of adventure, courage, and incredible feats of strength. In the 2004 film *King Arthur*, directed by Antoine Fuqua, Arthur goes on a mission with his knights to defeat the invading Saxons and, through this, contests his own religious beliefs due to conflicting problems with Rome. Opposingly, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey's Arthur is devoutly Christian and even has mother Mary upon his shield so that she is always watching him in battle (Book 9, Chapt. 4, p. 153). Though they both remain faithful to the Christian cause and fight for the Christian faith, they do so very differently. The historical occurrences around the time of the text and the film's release critically explain why the Arthurs behave differently.

Throughout the film *King Arthur*, there is an apparent struggle to determine whether or not Arthur and the knights are doing the right thing. Though they are fighting on behalf of Rome, and therefore, on behalf of Christianity, the Knights - specifically Lancelot - still have a love and nostalgia for their pagan upbringing. Arthur is now a Roman and is therefore working on behalf of the Pope and God, yet it is still clear that he does not have complete trust in the system, nor does he believe that the clergymen are the epitome of righteousness. This conflict is brought to light in a pivotal scene with Arthur and Germanus. After Arthur and his men have sacrificed fifteen years in service of a country that has done nothing but ensure their continued fighting and

bloodshed, Germanus once again sends them on a trip that could kill them and then guilt-trips Arthur by claiming that if he does not comply, he does not truly have faith in the Lord. Germanus says, "Will you defy the Pope, Arthur? Rome? God himself" (*King Arthur*, 2004)?

Interestingly, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *King Arthur* has no personal conflict with Christianity. Instead, there is only a debate over whether or not murder could be considered aligned with the Christian faith, and King Arthur himself does not even make this argument. Before a battle, Dubricius is giving a speech to the Britons against the Saxons. In this speech, he talks about how honorable it is to be a Christian and to fight for the Christian nation and people. In Chapter 4, Geoffrey notes,

"For he that shall die for his brethren, offers himself a living sacrifice to God, and has Christ for his example, who condescended to lay down his life for his brethren. If therefore any of you shall be killed in this war, that death itself, which is suffered in so glorious a cause, shall be to him for penance and absolution of all his sins" (Book 9, p 153).

Not only is Dubricius claiming that killing the Saxons is good, but he is also claiming that it is Godly and that the soldiers would not have to atone for killing a person because no act of sin is happening. Though it goes against the 6th Commandment in the Bible, killing other people in the name of Christianity is righteous and holy, and Arthur is one of the leading proponents of the violence. Secured with mother Mary on his shield, Arthur slaughters over 400 people in the name of Briton and the name of God, and he is revered and celebrated for this atrocious act of brutality.

Through both of these interactions with the Christian faith, it's clear that in the 2004 film *King Arthur*, he has a much more nuanced understanding of what Christianity is and what

Christians should stand for. Arthur has a much more individualistic idea of what it means to be a Christian, and it is intimately connected with his own moral values and interpretation of the Bible rather than the Roman Catholic Church's version of Christianity. Geoffrey's King Arthur does not focus on this fear; instead, he would rather spend his time rousing his men to be as brutal as possible to cleanse the world and their souls of non-Christian blood. These contradicting characteristics of Arthur mirror the historical contexts of the time regarding shifting moral responsibilities. In 2004, individuals came together after the 9/11 attacks throughout the US. Arthur represents what all people should strive to be: someone who is brave and resilient, empathetic and compassionate, and willing to fight for the freedom and rights of others in the face of an overwhelmingly evil force. This is why Fuqua's Arthur struggles so much with Christianity, considering there are so many high-ranking Christian officials who use the religion to elevate themselves and keep people who are different from them down. In Geoffrey's day, masculinity and power were associated with a man's ability to murder and conquer as much as possible. It did not matter who got in Arthur's way if they were opposing him; it was his duty to remain on top, no matter how he did it.

Fuqua's film came out in 2004 and is an interpretation of the confusion of the Iraq war. Not only were Americans struggling with their faith at the time after the tragedy of 9/11, but many became hyper-nationalistic and wanted revenge in any way they thought possible. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's time, *The History of the Kings of Britain* was written merely 30 years after the first Crusades were to ravage different parts of the land. With these significant conflicts happening in both eras, it can be argued that King Arthur represents various moral qualms of the time. Fuqua's Arthur is struggling with a lack of freedom, being forced into servitude and killing with his Knights while being forced to witness atrocities happen to people who do not comply

with Roman Christian standards. Not only has he been complicit in some of these horrors, but he has had a direct hand in helping oppress the Woads, who simply want to occupy their native land and practice their native religion.

This parallels many US soldiers and citizens struggling with the aftermath of 9/11 and the knowledge that the US was directly responsible for murdering thousands of innocent Iraqi citizens. Meanwhile, in Geoffrey's time, these Crusades were revered amongst the people of Geoffrey's stature. This can be seen through Dubricious' speech urging the Briton soldiers to continue murdering the Saxons and anyone different from them. If a soldier had a problem with this mass genocide, it was emasculating and showed that that soldier lacked faith and power.

Finally, it should be noted that in Geoffrey's text of Arthur and Fuqua's film of Arthur, both are revered as God-like figures. Geoffrey introduces Arthur in the first chapter as a youth of "[...] such unparalleled courage and generosity, joined with that sweetness of temper and innate goodness [...]" (Book 9, pg 149). Similarly, towards the end of the film, Arthur meets with Cerdic before the final battle, and Cerdic describes Arthur as such; "Arthur. Hm. Wherever I go on this wretched island I hear your name. Always half-whispered, as if you were a... god. All I see is flesh, blood. No more god than the creature you're sitting on" (2004). Both Arthurs are being elevated as a force upon nature, though Cerdic completely undermines Arthurs's link to Godliness by mentioning his flesh and blood in the film. There is another mention of Arthurs's legend through Guinevere, in which she claims that Arthur and his knight's tales were told as a bedtime story, as a folklore to be revered. Both Arthurs are tied to holiness, God, and faith itself. They diverge in controversies with the church, but at the end of both tales, Arthur remains a figure that cannot be matched.

Both versions of King Arthur are courageous and noble tales of overcoming the odds and recapturing people's faith. Though they differ in many noteworthy ways, it is interesting that both versions of Arthur adequately represent incredible moral characteristics that each society of their time valued.