

Dead Wrong

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

The release this month of the Albert Brooks movie, "Defending Your Life," got me thinking. We are supposed to be living in a secular age - an age of science and technology, an age which sees all reality in terms of matter and the laws of physics, an age which has broken free of superstitious, spiritual notions.

Putting aside old-fashioned religion, Secular Man is simply one more animal among many which have evolved from the primordial ooze - nothing more than matter-in-motion, a bundle of electro-chemical reactions subject to stimulus-response conditioning.

But you'd never know it if you went to the movies!

Materialism may be big at the university, but it sure doesn't sell at the cinema. The last couple of years have seen a spate of movie hits which have taken - get this! - the afterlife as the fundamental premise of their stories. That is, the movies keep portraying man as something special, something beyond mere matter, something with a spiritual dimension which survives the death of the body. Consider a few.

Last summer's box office smash was the Patrick Swayze - Demi Moore romance, "Ghost." When he gets murdered, his disembodied spirit stays on the scene and uses the help of a spiritualist medium to protect his former lover from harm - and convince her that his devotion to her will be undying.

In the preceding year Steven Spielberg had released a movie with a similar premise-line. When the Richard Dreyfus character dies in an airplane crash, his disembodied spirit remains long enough - painfully but self-lessly - to help his former girlfriend (Holly Hunter) get on with her life and let go of memories of him as she begins to love someone new.

In the movie thriller "Flatliners," reflections on the afterlife take on a deeper moral dimension. When medical students (Kiefer Sutherland, Julia Roberts, Kevin Bacon) perform unauthorized experiments upon each other - inducing death and then medically reviving the patient after increasingly long periods of momentary waiting - they learn (to their horror) that the dead must expiate their past transgressions against people and deal with their deepest regrets or fears. Otherwise there can be no peace and redemption.

Likewise, in the recent comedy by Albert Brooks, "Defending Your Life," the afterlife begins with a day (or days) of judgment which determines if one goes on to a higher level of existence or must

be recycled back into this world for another go-round; there is no hell about which to worry. The scene of intermediate "judgment" for one's soul takes place in a very Westernized, suburban, bureaucratic version of the (Eastern) Hindu encounter with karma. And the only standard of judgment is whether you have lived a life in which your personal fears and anxieties were overcome. If not, you must go back and try again.

The movies simply will not settle for the idea that this body and this life are all that we have. We could go on to mention here movies like "Heaven Can Wait," "Chances Are," or "Jacob's Ladder." There simply is a fascination with the hope (and in a few cases, fear) of some kind of afterlife for man.

But in dealing with the subject of death, the modern cinema is dead wrong.

The notions of life-after-death which modern movies project to the viewer (whether seriously intended or simply being a fictionalized setting for the movie) have this one thing in common: they ignore or distract us from the crucial Biblical truth that man lives but once, and then must face the judgment of a holy God (Hebrews 9:27). For that reason men are, all their lives, subject to bondage in the gripping fear of death (Heb. 2:15).

The romances, comedies and thrillers which we see in the movies cannot adequately relieve us of that fear. Suggestions about love outlasting death, about reincarnation, about second chances (with no worry about hell) cannot overcome our deep-seated fear of death - fear of falling into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

Only the Savior Jesus Christ can grant us confidence in the face of death. Through His death He rendered powerless the one who had the power of death (Heb. 2:14). By His resurrection, He has gained the victory over the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:20-26), so that we can rejoice and declare: "O death, where is thy sting?" (vv. 54-57). Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes on me, though he die, yet shall he live - and whosoever lives and believes on me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).