



Brian McClinton

Agora



ALEJANDRO Amenábar's *Agora* is totally unlike any film that has ever come out of Hollywood, and that is its strength. It unequivocally puts religion in the dock – not just Christianity but all religion. It pulls no punches in its portrayal of the conflicts of the 4th century CE, with the Christians, clad in dark, Taliban-like robes, coming off the worst of a bad bunch.

Some Christians have attempted to deny the basic truth of *Agora* and maintain that it merely repeats the distortions of the anti-Catholic Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But they only have to read J.B. Bury's *A History of Freedom of Thought* (1913) or the more recent work, *The Closing of the Western Mind* (2002) by Charles Freeman, to discover how Christianity turned the Roman Empire from a relatively open, tolerant and pluralistic civilisation of the Hellenistic world into a culture that stifled freedom of thought – 'the disease of curiosity', as Augustine called it – and demanded unswerving obedience to a fixed authority.

Bury writes: "During the two centuries in which they had been a forbidden sect the Christians had claimed toleration on the ground that religious belief is voluntary and not a thing which can be enforced. When their faith became the predominant creed and had the power of the State behind it, they abandoned this view. They embarked on the hopeful enterprise of bringing about a complete uniformity in men's opinions on the mysteries of the universe, and began a more or less definite policy of coercing thought" (p52). Freeman's book, which explores how the European mind was closed in the 4th century, is subtitled 'the rise of faith and the fall of reason'.

In the film the heroine Hypatia (excellently played by Rachel Weisz) is intended to embody what was defeated: she represents philosophy, reason, science, learning, pacifism and scepticism, in opposition to fanaticism, blind faith, emotionalism, dogmatism, violence and intolerance.

At one point a character says that she believes in 'nothing', and she replies, "I believe in philosophy". At another, she tells her ex-pupil turned Christian, Synesius, "You don't question what you believe; I must".

The film is not intended as a biography of Hypatia, who does not provide the film with its title and about whom much is uncertain. Rather, it is a fictional depiction of this conflict between reason and faith, symbolised by the desecrating of a library. The 'Agora', which means 'market place', is here transformed from a site of debate and conversation to one of violence and conflict. Whether or not the real Hypatia was a proto-Galileo musing on heliocentrism is largely beside the point; she was the sort of person who *might* have done so.

Some facts are pretty clear. She was a philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and teacher of the late 4th century CE. She had, in the words of Charles Kingsley, the 'spirit of Plato and the body of Aphrodite'. Alexandria was a seething cosmopolitan cauldron of pagans, Christians and Jews, all at one another's throats. Bishop Cyril of Alexandria was a fanatical Christian and, according to Freeman, his shock troops, the Parabalani, were viewed with such terror that the emperor himself asked that their numbers be limited to 500.

All this is reasonably well documented, as is the fact that Hypatia was murdered by a Christian mob. Why? The film suggests that Cyril incited them by quoting Paul's injunction that a woman should not be allowed to teach and the command in Exodus that "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". Who knows if this is true, but it fits as a plausible surmise.

Agora, then, gives flesh and blood to a genuine historical conflict of ideas and beliefs. But how good is it? It is tempting for a secular Humanist to give it the thumbs up because it is about the martyrdom of a Humanist, Amenábar is a self-confessed atheist,

and a real ideological conflict is so rare in mainstream cinema these days. Also, it contains modern resonances, with the Christian zealots and Parabalani bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Ayatollahs and Taliban of today. In this sense, Europe can be seen as the civilisation under threat from modern Islamic extremism, or it resembles America under threat from domestic Christian fundamentalism.

Visually, it is a feast, full of striking images and offering a convincing portrait of 4th century Alexandria. But unfortunately Amenábar wants to have his cerebral cake and eat it. Believing that a movie about ideas with no sex and only a little gore is sure to bomb at the box office, he has thrown in an unconvincing love triangle and some sword and sandals flavouring into the mix, and they spoil the intellectual taste.

Two pupils, in particular, are in love with Hypatia (though that doesn't stop them from becoming Christians): Orestes (Oscar Isaac), who later becomes the Prefect of Alexandria, and the slave Davus (Max Minghella). She rejects their advances, being 'wedded to science', as it were. At one point she hands Orestes a cloth with her menstrual blood on it. She cannot understand how there could be any beauty in love since there is no harmony or beauty in her menstrual cycle. As for the slave, he doesn't stand a chance being from a different class. So this romantic sub-plot makes her appear as both frigid and a snob – a kind of high priestess of Humanism.

It does, however, allow the director to present a positive dimension to Christianity. Davus is radicalised by the way in which the Parabalani help the weak and needy, people from a similar low status as himself, and it is interesting that the pagans who have ruled Alexandria tend to speak with upper class English accents. Christians who are annoyed by *Agora* should note that it does give them one major saving grace. A pity, then, that they largely ignored it for most of the next sixteen hundred years.