

Thomas Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Faith-based initiatives and economic realities

Like many Texans during this recent Passover and Easter season, I received in the mail an unrequested videocassette "Jesus," courtesy of Campus Crusade for Christ International.

The cassette package shows four scenes with facial views of an adult Jesus. He looks nothing like my movie Jesus, the ascetic and inwardly tormented Willem Dafoe in Martin Scorsese's film version of Nikos Kazantzakis' "Last Temptation of Christ." Having taken decades to break the taboo against showing the face of Jesus on film, Hollywood should have tried to be consistent.

What does Hollywood have to do with

"Jesus," anyway? During the past presidential election, Hollywood was stigmatized as a Sodom where the morally depraved Bill Clinton felt right at home and a Gomorrah where the cash-deprived Al Gore visited heathen temples to gather tainted pieces of silver. Hollywood's screen images were assailed as more spiritually objectionable than the golden calf of Exodus. But the G-rated "Jesus" video proclaims in bold, golden letters: "Released by Warner Bros. A MUST SEE!" Has godless Hollywood had an unreported Damascus experience?

The "Jesus" cassette package reveals one more sign and wonder in our time. On its front a single quotation is highlighted: "... Meticulous attention to authenticity. . . " You might think a movie version of the life of Jesus Christ would be validated by impeccable scholarly sources such as my colleagues at the University of

Texas at Austin, Michael White, director of Religious Studies and a prime mover in the production of the PBS series "From Jesus to Christ," or Marvin Olasky, senior fellow of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. But the authority here is Time magazine.

Nonetheless, the "Jesus" video had its intended effect. It set me to thinking about the role of religion in our lives and the calls from the White House to cut tax burdens, mainly on the wealthy who most benefit from our way of life, and replace federal government programs with faith-based initiatives. These are critical topics as we debate how to set priorities for the accumulation and use of resources by our national government and whether we should curtail the major role it has played since the Great Depression in attending to the needs of the least of our brethren.

In my New International Version Study

Bible, I found many relevant teachings of Jesus. For example, Mark 10:21: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." And Matthew 19:23: "[I]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." On the basis of these two passages, the wealthy Christian lobby should strongly oppose programs that target an average tax cut of \$6 million for the 4,500 largest estates and \$200 apiece for 142 million other Americans. Nor should they want to replicate nationally the George W. Bush tax-cut experiment in Texas that has left our state with no funds to support the costs of the 50-percent increase in students enrolled in higher education mandated by Gov. Perry's Education Commission. Current trends project a significant increase by 2030 in the percentage of the Texas labor force without any post-12 education.

Because all the increase in real income in the United States in the past 30 years has gone to college graduates, these projections are bleak. This analysis is provided by the Texas A&M Center for Demographic Research, hardly a hotbed of liberal thinking.

In the 1980s the father of our current president declared that Reaganomic tax cuts of the sort his son is now advocating were not Christian economics, but "voodoo economics." The proposed sequel, Voodoo 2, will not satisfy the Christian mandate of Matthew 25:35: "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." The past 20 years have proved that even in the best economic times, not enough trickles down from the increasingly wealthy to quench the thirst of the hard-working poor.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at The University of Texas at Austin. Contact him at: tpalaima@mail.utexas.edu.