

THE LEGION OF DECENCY — A CONFORMER

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ARTICULARLY provoking to all thinking American men and women is the word 'reform' as applied to the activities of the Legion of Decency by hostile journalists and Motion Picture people. These opponents emphasize its most undesirable connotation which is best typified by the cartoonist in the long-nosed, lugubrious crank wearing a crepe-draped hat and carrying an umbrella. Such was the Prohibitionist. Such is not the Legionaire. This misconception may be caused by ignorance of the Legion's purpose or it may be a trick to place the organization under an unfavorable light. American adults of the present generation are so constituted psychologically that reformers appear as frightful bogies that haunt their efforts to enjoy legitimate recreation. The Legion of Decency may be termed a reform movement in the widest sense of the word 'reform': "an amendment of what is vicious, corrupt or depraved." From this it is apparent that the Legion's opponents are in error. But, what precisely is its aim? Sincere and unprejudiced study clearly manifests that its aim is conformity between the pictures produced and the dictates of Common Law which are fundamentally the basis for the producer's voluntarily accepted "Code to Maintain Social and Community Values in the Production of Silent, Synchronized, and Talking Motion Pictures." The Legion, then, is a conformer; not a reformer. This distinction is very important, for to conform is to *bring into harmony with the laws or customs of society*. Hence, there is not a frantic, fanatical effort to correct an evil by administering a resented rod, but a thoughtful suggestion is offered for consideration as every man is cognizant of the value of conformity to the laws in the race's effort to become completely civilized.

In their failure to conform with the Common Law, Motion Picture producers strike at society by offering pictures untrue to life. They would have man believe that a gilded dunghill is really his 'Castle in Spain.' This Legionaires resent, and because they do they are branded reformers. But are they?

Journalists, in particular the reviewers of Motion Pictures, show a superficial knowledge of human nature when by innuendo and 'clever' writing they set forth the Legion as a group of abnormal people. To the contrary, Legionnaires are sane and normal. Their 'Castle in Spain' must be habitable. Legionnaires laugh at humorous gags; tears for the victims of tragedy flow freely. They know the need for laughter and tears. They too possess the qualities of sympathy and understanding which distinguish man from beast. However, they relish clean comedy and despise tragedy that is sadistic or moronic. In their homes they are unwilling hosts to a foul-mouthed guest with indecent stories. Abnormal persons are not their associates. Truly they reveal themselves by the constant vigilance over their children whom they never encourage to be bad but whom they mould towards goodness. This process of moulding is done by making the children conform to what is commanded by law and right reason. Indecency and abnormality are no more acceptable to the Legionaire or his children in the darkened theatre than in his home. They ask no more of the Motion Picture producers than that they be conformers to the Common Law which binds man equally when at work or play. But is that all they ask?

Proceeding logically let us first consider the very definition of the Legion of Decency. Here we should find the organization's objective. Here we must find the basis for the distinction between 'reform' and 'conform.' The definition: "The Legion of Decency is an organization of American people, largely parents and guardians of youth, voluntarily recruited in every State and Territory of the nation, from among people of every religious belief or of no religious belief, regardless of political, economic or social affiliation or color; whose sole aim and purpose is the actual and effective opposition of moving picture theatres showing cinema productions classified as (C) black—notoriously immoral and indecent."¹ Here then is the object of the Legion: "effective opposition of moving picture theaters showing cinema productions classified as (C) black—notoriously immoral and indecent." Where do they place the distinction for 'conform' and 'reform'? By determining what is meant by the terms "immoral and indecent." These are concisely defined in the *Corpus Juris*. "An act against good behavior and a just delicacy; any action or behavior which is deemed a violation of modesty or an offense to delicacy; that which is unbecoming in language or manners. In the plain, ordinary,

¹ *Manual of Handy Reference*, Chicago Council, Legion of Decency.

and usual sense of the term "indecent" includes certain improprieties of language as well as wrongful acts."² And again: "Obscenity is such indecency as is calculated to promote the violence of the law and the corruption of morals."³

Here then is the basis for the distinction and hence on what reasonable grounds is the Legion of Decency to be scornfully dubbed a reform movement? Certainly not in the clear light of the logical analysis of the object of the organization and the points in Common Law which define this object.

From this analysis it is also apparent that the Legion is not seeking to have the producers completely convert their output. The Legion is doing no more than demanding that non-conformity with existing laws must be corrected. Further, the Legion encourages attendance at moving picture theaters when the cinema shown conforms to the norms of decency and morality. Such reasonable action is indicative of the conformer and should set aside the false fears that the Legion shall ultimately emasculate the movies. The Legion's only quarrel is with the degenerate production.

Beyond the analysis of the Legion of Decency's object and its definition there is the further appeal to man's right reason, which, again is asking no more than conformity. What reasonable man can say that indecent and immoral pictures do not stir up the lower appetites? Who among the producers can advance a sound reason for the pornographic sequences in the more vicious productions? Can they prove that this came about unwittingly? On the contrary will they not admit that they have prostituted their reason and their product in quest of packed theaters and a bulging box-office?

The clarion call of the Legion of Decency is to the standards of law and right reason. Youth and old age respond whole-heartedly to its summons. Its appeal is to man's higher nature. Hence, to the hostile journalists and Motion Picture people the Legion points out that their senseless cry of: 'reform' is as false as the fabled shepherd boy's 'wolf' when there was no wolf. Too, the Legion by its doctrine of conformity preaches a lesson learned by the Roman Empire when it had been reduced to a minor world power. Failure to conform with the dictates of law and right reason brought about this vast destruction. Why should it be otherwise with the world-wide empire of the Motion Picture Industry? The answer is too obvious.

² 31 C. J. 414.

³ 46 C. J. 854.