

TRUE STORY

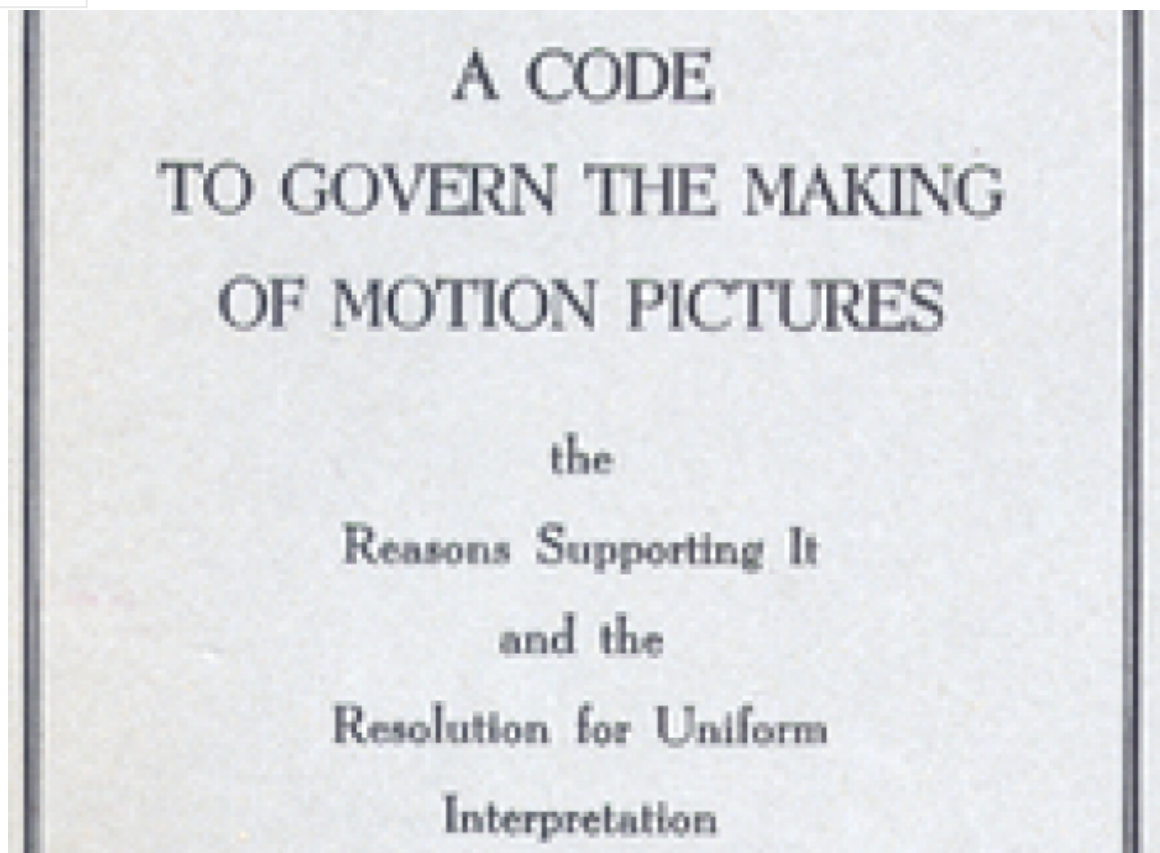
## Daniel Lord: The Jesuit Who Shaped Hollywood's Moral Compass

---

CULTURE

09\_12\_2024

*Christian  
Peschken*



In the late 1990s, while working as a film producer in Hollywood, I was asked by the Producers Guild of America to chair the Social Awareness Committee. This role intrigued me, as I had a keen interest in how movies influence audiences and the responsibilities

of those creating and distributing them. My research into Hollywood's history led me to the "Production Code," or "Hays Code," a set of moral guidelines voluntarily adopted by the film industry in 1930. This code shaped the content of American films for decades and was largely based on a document by a Jesuit priest, Father Daniel Lord SJ.

**The Hays Code, named after Will Hays**, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), governed film content for over 25 years. Its enforcement ensured that no film could be shown in American theaters without adhering to its standards, with violators facing hefty fines. Although controversial, the Code aimed to address growing concerns about the influence of increasingly explicit content in movies.

### **The Man Behind the Code: Father Daniel Lord SJ**

Born in Chicago in 1888, Daniel Lord grew up in an era dominated by family-friendly theater and vaudeville performances. His exposure to such wholesome entertainment deeply influenced his views on what movies should offer. Joining the Jesuit order in 1909 and being ordained in 1923, Lord combined his religious vocation with his love for storytelling and the arts. He even played piano for silent films during his youth.

By 1930, as films transitioned from silent pictures to "talkies," the industry saw a surge in sensational content. Movies began incorporating crime, risqué dialogues, and suggestive scenes to attract broader audiences. While mild by today's standards, such content shocked many viewers at the time. Father Lord was particularly disturbed, not only by the moral implications but also by the declining quality of films. He envisioned cinema as a medium for both great art and moral upliftment.

### **Crafting the Code**

In early 1930, Father Lord traveled to Hollywood to propose a moral framework for filmmaking. His original draft for the Production Code included a preamble, general principles, and twelve specific applications covering issues like crime, sex, vulgarity, religion, and obscenity. The Code outlined that films should not glorify sin or crime, ridicule religion, or undermine social values. Its principles were broadly ethical and not explicitly Catholic, ensuring they resonated with a diverse audience.

For strategic reasons, Father Lord's involvement in writing the Code remained a secret for years. Anti-Catholic sentiment was still strong in America at the time, as evidenced by the fierce backlash against Catholic presidential candidate Al Smith in 1928. Publicly revealing the Code's Catholic origins might have jeopardized its acceptance by

Hollywood studios.

### **A Legacy of Morality and Controversy**

The Code's adoption marked a turning point in Hollywood. It served as a guide for self-censorship and reflected a broader societal desire for moral responsibility in entertainment. However, its application varied over time, sparking debates between those who felt it was too restrictive and others who believed it was too lenient. By 1967, the Production Code was replaced by the MPAA rating system, which categorized films by age suitability but avoided censorship.

Despite its flaws, the Code left an indelible mark on Hollywood. Father Lord's foresight about the impact of media on society resonates today, as modern entertainment often struggles with balancing artistic freedom and moral accountability. Critics lament that contemporary media frequently glorifies violence, explicit sexuality, and ideological extremism, lacking the moral grounding once provided by guidelines like the Hays Code.

### **Beyond the Code: Father Lord's Wider Influence**

The Production Code was just one aspect of Father Lord's remarkable life. He authored hundreds of pamphlets, many of which sold millions of copies, and helped build the Sodality movement in North America, fostering Catholic solidarity in schools and parishes. His 70 plays and musicals, over 70 religious books for children, and numerous radio broadcasts further showcased his creativity and dedication. A dynamic speaker and prolific writer, he tirelessly promoted Catholic values as a positive and uplifting force in society.

### **Lessons from the Past**

Father Daniel Lord's contributions remind us of the profound influence of storytelling on culture and values. His work reflects a belief that entertainment can inspire and elevate, rather than degrade. As society continues to grapple with media's role in shaping perceptions, revisiting the principles he championed might offer valuable insights into creating content that entertains responsibly while respecting the moral sensitivities of its audience.

Father Lord's legacy in Hollywood underscores the power of individuals to effect meaningful change, even in industries as influential as entertainment. His vision of morally conscious cinema remains a testament to the enduring relevance of ethical leadership in creative pursuits.

### ***About the authors of this article***

**Christian Peschken** is a distinguished film and television producer with over 30 years of extensive experience in Hollywood, where he produced numerous television films. In the late 1990s, he served as Chairman of the Social Awareness Committee for the Producers Guild of America, reflecting his commitment to meaningful and impactful storytelling. Since 2014, Peschken has expanded his influence by serving as the Geneva and United Nations correspondent for EWTN, combining his expertise in media with a focus on global and social issues.

**Stephen Werner**, a theologian and historian, has been a lecturer in religion and philosophy for 28 years at Saint Louis University. He has also taught in the Department of Religious Studies at Webster University in Missouri. Werner is authored a book about Father Daniel Lord and the Hays Code, a pivotal moral framework for Hollywood films. Christian Peschken is contributing to the German translation and distribution of this book, further bridging their shared passion for faith, history, and media.