Loyalty options

Notes after last evening's two-hour film-group discussion of the 1981 Best-Film Oscar **"Chariots of Fire"** (Warner Bros.)

1 We were unanimous when a U.S.Army Lt.Col. (Ret.) said "Loyalty is what this movie's about." Together we spelled it out. (The story's historical, so I'll use the actual names of the Olympics '24 [which we're discussing right in the middle of the Olympics 78 years later].)

Both of the protagonists Gold-medalled as runners: **Eric Liddell**, Scots Presbyterian, whose steady loyality was to God, "the glory of God" (as in the Calvinist-Reformed-Presbyterian Westminster Catechism Q. "What is man's chief end?" & A. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever"). **Harold Abrahams**, secular Jew, whose loyalty was to himself, though loyalty to his family, though unexpressed, was a factor, peeking out in his twice-expressed appreciation for his family. Political authorities pressed on both of them loyalty to country--in the case of Eric, Scotland; of Harold, England--Scots/English polarity being one of the many binaries providing tension & color to the true story. (The tensest scene of pressure for loyalty to Britain: the Prince of Wales, who became Ed.VIII, tried unsuccessfully to get Eric to run on Sunday (to Presbyterians, "the Sabbath": we see Harold, whose Sabbath was Saturday, looking intently to see whether Eric would dishonor the Christian holy-day-of-the-week).

And the dons of Caius College (their Cambridge school) urged both, especially Harold, to bring glory to their college. After the two dons expressed to Harold their concern about his religion (the 1st Jew in the college in 700 years, back to when the Jews were expelled from England), they agreed that class (Harold being a "plebian") was also somewhat of a problem.

Women? I thought loyalty to his girlfriend was a factor in Harold's motivation, but nobody agreed with me! Eric's loyalty to his sister, in keeping his promise to become a missionary (in China), could be seen also as loyalty to his promise (but both are within his comsuming loyalty to God).

IRONIC NOTE on loyalty: The Prince of Wales, when he became Edward VIII, was disloyal to the throne in being loyal to Wally Simpson; then, after resignation (& possibly also before), was disloyal to his country in his pro-Naxi activities.

2 The loyalty issue was much in our minds because of Enron & the Olympics disloyalties--the Enron execs disloyal to employees, the auditors, & the public: I recall my father's pre-investment personal investigation of the *character* of key management personnel of any firm in which he was thinking of investing; so I wasn't surprised at Jane Quinn's concluding sentence (NW 2.18.02): "Good companies come from good character, as well as smarts." As for the Olympics pair-skating scandal, the French judge had'nt enough character to resist home-pressure to throw to Russia, but did have enough conscience to repent--with the result that the Canadian pair were given Golds (as the Russians had been fraudulently honored). The French judge had voted in **loyalty** to her country's Olympic Committee, rather than to truth (viz., the truth that the Canadian pair were far superior to the Russian).

As a general category, excessive group-loyalty finds examples not only in the Enron & Olympics scandals but in the extensive Roman-Catholic-hierarchal cover-up of clergy pedophilia, with spreading of the disease by "re-assigning" culprits parish-to-parish. A recent BOSTON GLOBE Ellen Goodman column compared the Enron "corporate loyalty" scandal to the RC Church's Boston Diocese's "spiritual loyalty" scandal. Can the people trust Wall St.? Can commuicants trust their boys to the priests? No trust without integrity, no integrity with ass-covering & the sweeping of problems under the rug.

3 The movie's 1st words, spoken by an Anglican priest in public worship, are "Let us pray": the film is enveloped by Church of England worships, the film ending with the singing of the very English hymn about building Jerusalem "in England's green and pleasant land." When Eric & Harold as freshmen checked into their Cambridge-college dorm in 1919, the clerk said, of Harold the Jew, "Well, he'll not be in the choir." "Chariots of Fire" is not antisemitic except in the possible sense that Eric's piety is more honored than is Harold's self-seeking. The

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2.16.02

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producer could well argue that the film does not exaggerate the antiJewish cultural atmosphere of immediate-post-WWI Britain. Harold senses that he's an alien, not having assimilated to the Christian culture; but he's a high achiever, & dies 54 years after getting a Gold--remembered as the exec of the Olympics International Committee. (Eric died as a missionary in China soon after WWII.)

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4 Eric's said to be usu. seen with a Bible, & is a bit of a Scripture-spouter: "Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of God is within you; [continuing, though not from Jesus] if with all your hearts you truly seek me, ye shall ever truly find me." Just before his Gold race, an American athlete hands him this on paper: "He that honors me, I will honor." To the Prince of Wales, he quietly & firmly says "To run [on Sunday] would be against God's law." And to his sister, this: "To win [the race] is to honor him [i.e., God]." His Scots elders encourage him with "Run in God's name....What we need now is a muscular Christianity, to make folks sit up and notice." Eric: "God created me fast."

5 The cantus firmus of the musical theme is a steady heart-like beat, sustaining tension throughout the film. Pre-Olympic & Olympic excitement.

6 The reviewers? Mainly *****, before the rating-scale was reduced to ****. One: "the greatest movie ever made." Another: incites you to "ponder what your values are and evaluate which path to success is best for you."

7 "All Scotland mourned" when Eric died, & Harold's death is being memorialized in the Anglican (not Jewish) service at film-end. (Did Harold convert?) The two lives are twined together as yid/goy (Jew/Gentile) in a cultural **reversal**: the Jew represented the secular-Hellenic individual autonomy (& in this sense was the Greek!), the Gentile represented the sacred-Hebraic theocentricity (his life-aim being "the glory of God"; & in this sense he was the Jew!). Harold & Eric are unwitting personifications of the polarities (Jew/Gentile, sacred/secular) at the heart of "the West." A millenium ago, **Islam** squelched the Hellenic partner in the Arab/Greek conversation that had built a civilization in advance of the Christian. This millenium, or at least this century, will have the Islam/West confrontation at its cultural center.

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