



10-1-1997

From the Editor

William L. Blizek

University of Nebraska at Omaha, wblizek@unomaha.edu

Ron Burke

University of Nebraska Omaha, rburke@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Blizek, William L. and Burke, Ron (1997) "From the Editor," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.01.02.01>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol1/iss2/1>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

From the Editor

Abstract

The Editor introduces the October 1997 issue of the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

"We encourage potential authors to consider the variety of ways in which religion and film intersect."

When we began considering religion and film, our first experiences were with movies that made some kind of statement about specific organized religions. *The Rapture*, for example, tells us, in the way that movies tell things, that a particular version of fundamentalist, apocalyptic Christianity is either (a) a difficult path to follow ["horrific" is the term used by Carl Greiner (see Vol. 1. No. 1)] or (b) a path most suited to the ignorant, unbalanced, or foolish.

As another example, the movie, *Romero*, describes the conversion of a Roman Catholic priest to liberation theology. Produced by Paulist Pictures, this movie portrays Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero as an heroic figure in the battle for human rights in El Salvador, prior to his assassination in 1980. Finally, *Agnes of God* reveals a conflict between science and the Roman Catholic Church, concluding that science can provide only a partial understanding of the world around us. It is the psychiatrist, played by Jane Fonda, who finally decides that it is better for Agnes to remain in the convent than to be placed in either a mental institution or prison.

It soon became clear, however, that the intersections between religion and film are far more numerous than we had first imagined. Another of those

intersections occurs where movies make comment upon popular "myths," the poetic stories we construct about ultimate or inexplicable dimensions of reality and our place in reality. Conrad Ostwalt and Joel Martin (*Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*) talk about myths as essential to religion: "For it is through myth that the world view of a given religion is communicated to the participants." Here we find a movie such as *Star Wars* presenting us with the myth of the hero. Luke Skywalker enters another world, the world of the Jedi knight and "the force". He is tested in that world and returns to our world with new powers to be used on our behalf. (Even the name, "Skywalker," suggest someone of unusual powers, and the name Luke connects these powers to a Biblical figure.) Jodi Foster plays a similar role in the movie, *Contact*. As the astronomer, Eleanor Arroway, Foster takes a voyage into the world beyond and returns to share with us its message for our lives.

Additionally, one might interpret films that seem to be about particular religions in terms of religion in general. *Agnes of God*, mentioned above, might be seen as a story about science and religion in general, rather than about science and the Roman Catholic Church. Or, similarly, *Priest* might be interpreted as characterizing the spirit of organized religion in general rather than as a controversial movie about homosexual priests. And *Babette's Feast* might be seen

as a comment upon the human proclivity for spirit/matter dualism, rather than as a movie about a late nineteenth century Danish Christian sect.

Another intersection between movies and religion is the realm of basic values. When religion is seen as addressing our basic values, then movies which promote or criticize such values are dealing with religion. *Cocoon*, for example, contrasts the value of eternal life and the value of living with friends and family. *Thelma and Louise* may be seen as challenging the basic devaluation of women in our culture. Or *The Seventh Sign* might indicate our fear of the apocalypse and our strong desire to avoid it.

One way of understanding this intersection between religion and film is to take the approach of Ostwalt and Martin (*Screening the Sacred*). They describe their approach as "ideological criticism". That is, we explore what a movie tells us about our social or socio-economic world and our place in that world. Of special interest at this intersection is how race, gender, and class are portrayed in film and what role they played in the film's creation, since film is connected to economic factors in ways that other arts are not.

In the context of ideological criticism, the movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*, may be seen not as a happy, feel good movie in which the kind-hearted star, played by Jimmy Stewart, triumphs over evil and his own despair. Rather it is seen as a movie

in which religion is on the side of capitalism and the reward of religion is wealth. Or, the movie, *Romero*, might be seen not as the spiritual development of a priest, but as revealing the role of the church in supporting the oppression of the poor by the powerful upper class. As another example, movies like *Crossing Delancy* and *The Jazz Singer* may be explored for what they say of racism when Jewish characters are used to represent the questionable behavior patterns of whites. Is it possible that white audiences leave the theater after watching such movies deflecting consideration of their own racism by attributing racism to the Jews? (See Laura Levitt's essay in this issue.)

Similar issues and themes are raised by Margaret Miles in her book, *Seeing and Believing*. For Miles, movies express our basic values and concerns, but these values and concerns must be interpreted in relation to the particular cultural context in which the film is produced. If *Wag the Dog* had been produced in the 1950's or 1970's, it might be seen as a spoof of political manipulation. Appearing as it does in the 1990's, the movie makes a more serious statement about political manipulation and our culture's acceptance of such manipulation. Since accusations about the president and a White House intern have in fact been made, this movie raises as a more serious concern the possibility that the Chief Executive might take the nation to war in order to distract public attention from those accusations.

In some cases religion and film intersect in the sense that movies can be used to teach religion. *Why Has Bohdi-Dharma Left For the East?*, for example, is an effort to help the viewer understand Buddhism. (See the article in Vol. 1, No. 1) *Mr. Baseball*, starring Tom Selleck, provides similar Buddhist themes. *The Rapture* may be seen as helping viewers to understand a particular version of apocalyptic Christianity, just as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* presents the basic Christian story.

Another intersection between religion and film identifies religion with the human spirit. That is, human beings are seen as spiritual creatures, rather than merely reasoning creatures. Indeed, some of the consequences of our spirit or spirituality are quite contrary to what reason would prescribe. Such spirituality is independent of any particular religion. At this intersection we might find such movies as *Lorenzo's Oil*, starring Susan Sarandon and Nick Nolte, or *Fried Green Tomatoes*, starring Kathy Bates and Mary Stuart Masterson, or Billy Bob Thornton's *Slingblade*, or even Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, starring Jack Nicholson.

There are other intersections as well. Religious themes make their appearance in movies that are not overtly religious. The theme of redemption, for example, may be found in *The Great Santini* or *Tender Mercies* as easily as in *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall's new movie. (See an interview with Robert Duvall about

"The Apostle" in the next issue of the *Journal*.) The battle between good and evil is an obvious feature of *Pale Rider*, *Star Wars*, and *Last Man Standing*.

Some religious studies scholars have suggested that for some movies, the viewing itself is a religious experience. Wendy Wright makes this claim about *Babette's Feast* in this issue of the *Journal*. Norma Joseph (Concordia College) made a similar claim about *Punch Me in the Stomach* in the discussion that followed its showing at the national meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Mike Gillespie makes a similar claim about *Bodhi-Dharma* in the first issue of the *Journal*, but he also claims that viewing the movie is an incomplete religious experience.

The point of saying all this is to share with readers and possible authors the diversity of topics appropriate to the *Journal*. With the full support of our editorial board, we, the editors, encourage potential authors to consider the variety of ways in which religion and film intersect. We conceive of the *Journal* as reflecting a great number of possible connections between religion and film.

In this issue...

In this issue we have for the first time two essays on the same film. Both Wendy Wright and Jean Schuler have essays on *Babette's Feast*. Our hope is that over time the *Journal* will publish a body of essays on particular movies, so that

someone interested in a particular movie can turn to the index and find many pertinent essays.

This issue also includes for the first time an essay that includes clips from the movie discussed in the essay. We want to thank our friends Francine Zuckerman and Deb Filler of Punch Productions for giving us permission to use clips from *Punch Me in the Stomach* in the essay by Tania Oldenhage ["'Holocaust Laughter'": A German Response to *Punch Me In the Stomach*" (Vol.1,2)]. For legal and economic reasons, not every essay will be able to include film clips, but we expect to use film clips in many of the future essays we publish. This was one of the most important reasons for putting the *Journal* on the Internet. Be reminded: if the film takes too long to download through your particular connection, you can click the "STOP" button and then press the "Previous Page" arrow on your screen. This will return you to the text of the article.

This issue also offers for the first time film-clips from a (very professional) "homemade" movie for the teaching of religion. Scott Alexander, Indiana University, produced a film, *Abraham's Children*, which he uses in his course on major Western religions. His article, "Using 'Homemade' Documentary Video in Religious Studies", is included in this issue of the *Journal*. In the Index of Volume 1, No. 1, we list this article under the rubric of "Bringing the World to the Classroom" to indicate our interest in other "homemade" movies that might be used

in teaching religion. The word "homemade" means only that Scott created or produced the movie himself. It is in no way of only amateur quality and Scott used a number of professionals in its production.

Also in this issue, Laura Levitt (See above.) continues the strategy utilized by Andrew Greeley (See above.) of exploring themes found in more than one movie. We do not expect all of our essays to be about only one movie. We expect that many articles will explore themes in various movies, each making its own contribution.

Finally, we are delighted to be able to include in this issue an article by John Lyden ("To Commend or To Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," Vol.1,1), which raises an important question in religion and film studies. We encourage scholars who wish to discuss this question (or any other questions about the intersection of religion and film) to submit their ideas to the *Journal*. We expect to include in the *Journal* essays which are not about particular films, but are about the very connections between religion and film.