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Teaching Religion and Film

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Teaching Religion and Film

Abstract
Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Tory give a brief overview of the course Film and Religion taught at the University of Wyoming. For further information to help teach this course and its movies yourself, see our more extensive essay in the Spring, 1998, issue of the Journal of Religion & Film.
The course Film and Religion taught at the University of Wyoming focuses on how film uses religion rather than on how religion uses film. We analyze how main-stream movies appropriate religious imagery and themes, rather than how religions use film to communicate their beliefs and practices. The course thus becomes a study of the role of religion in popular culture and the way in which religion becomes the vehicle for aesthetic, social, political and other cultural purposes. These two emphases influence the course in different ways. The ways film uses religion provide the course's organizing framework, while the cultural debates in which religion appears comprise the ultimate question of analysis.¹

Film has two main approaches to religion and so we divide the course into two sections. First, there are films on religious topics, which can be subdivided into biblical stories, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and religious stories, such as *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1973). Second, there are essentially secular films that use religious imagery and symbolism for a variety of purposes. These purposes include narrative structure (*The Rapture* [1991]), social commentary (*The Exorcist* [1973]), and political persuasion (*When Worlds Collide* [1951]). The films range from genre types--science fiction, horror, western--to groups defined in religious terms--millennial films and Christmas movies.
In the first half of the semester, we focus on films that depict biblical stories, such as *Salome* (1922), *The Ten Commandments*, *King of Kings* (1951), *Jesus Christ Superstar*, or *The Life of Brian* (1979). The main focus of this set of films is "Jesus movies," preceded by films selected to introduce students to the goals and questions of the course. In studying these text-based films, we emphasize two main issues. First, how accurately do films depict the text? Second, how does that depiction develop into a cultural statement?

In the first class, we teach *Salome*, a short piece based on Oscar Wilde's play. Here we start the students thinking about the film's relationship to the biblical text--what does it draw from scripture? what does it present differently?--assisted by analyzing Matthew's version of this story prior to viewing the film. These insights lead to a discussion of the film's interpretation of religious themes and symbols.

Two films we have used for the second class provide a basis for discussion of how film uses religion to discuss social and cultural issues. *The Little Minister* (1934) focuses on labor and class issues while telling a love story involving a Scottish minister and a supposed gypsy (played by Katherine Hepburn). *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* also debates class concerns and the place of "earning a living," while telling the story of Francis of Assisi.
The Ten Commandments provides an opportunity to bring the lessons of the first two classes together. This film enables both the analysis of the film's relationship to the biblical story and the examination of the film's use of scripture to take a position on an important political and moral issue of the time--the use of nuclear weapons. By drawing attention to the differences between Exodus and the movie, we point out how the film differs from the biblical story, even as it claims the text's authority and authentication. Those differences then lead to the cultural analysis in which we see the film arguing that the use of absolute power (God, nuclear weapons) brings salvation of a nation (Israel, USA).

The Jesus movies continue this dual emphasis; in class discussion we emphasize the films' use of religious symbolism for cultural purposes, while the assignments focus on how biblical themes and events are transformed into film. King of Kings, filmed a few years after The Ten Commandments, carries forward the earlier movie's concern with the impact of nuclear war. By this time, however, the USA no longer has absolute power, but shares it with the USSR's new nuclear strength; the film's paralleling of Jesus and Barabbas argues against violence and for peaceful interaction. Jesus Christ Superstar, by contrast, plays to several cultural debates. The portrayal of Judas as Black provides a clear link to the Civil Rights struggles, while the music and the actors' hippie character derive from the 1960's youth culture. Furthermore, the film's setting and the use of modern Israeli
and Palestinian images points to the Mideast Conflict. Finally, we show The Life of Brian following the midterm exam; it provides some relaxed viewing as well as some funny, yet provoking, political and religious commentary.⁴

The second half of the semester focuses on a variety of films drawn from different genres and religious topics which show the many uses religion receives in movies not overtly addressing religious themes.⁵ The following indicates the films we draw upon.

Science fiction films provide a wealth of material: The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951), When Worlds Collide (1951), E.T. (1982), and Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977).⁶ Indeed, science fiction (and horror) films often lend themselves for use in this course because their concern with representations of the marvelous, the supernatural, and, occasionally, the transcendent links them with the traditional products and discourses of the religious imagination. Our interest in the social and political implications of religious narratives often prompts us to use The Day the Earth Stood Still, which makes fascinating use of religious iconography and allusion to address the geo-political anxieties and hopes of the early Cold War era. That Klaatu, the alien visitor to this planet, is intended as a Christ-figure has long been recognized. We however focus more on his message's disturbing content. Klaatu's civilization has gained perpetual peace by creating a race of robots inalterably programmed to destroy any planet breaking the peace. When he tells the
people of earth that any exportation of aggression will be so punished, Klaatu's message sounds like a virulent version of Cold War containment policy. Thus "Christ" delivers and condones the application of terrific (i.e., nuclear) force in the service of peace.

Although several horror films use religious themes (e.g., The Omen [1976] and The Seventh Sign [1988]), we typically use The Exorcist (1973). The film fits our purposes well because it critiques modern religious belief (or, rather, the lack of it) by deploring the inadequacies of secular explanatory theories (medicine, psychiatry, the law). The possession of Regan emerges as a metaphor for the invasion of the modern psyche by materialist ideology. Thus Father Karras, the highly educated rationalist who is losing his faith, appears as the true victim of possession.

Closely allied to horror films depicting religious ideas are films that draw upon millennium and end-of-the-world themes (e.g., The Rapture [1991], Rosemary's Baby [1968]). Sometimes this is done in an obvious--if inaccurate--manner in a film like the Seventh Sign. Other times, the use of millennialist schema are buried, providing the story's narrative structure rather than its subject matter. This is true for Star Wars (1977), for which we often begin the discussion by asking why Han Solo's ship is called the Millennium Falcon.
Christmas films (*It's A Wonderful Life* [1946], *Scrooged* [1988], *Miracle on 34th Street* [1947]) and angel films (such as *Angels in the Outfield* [1994]) lend themselves to a similar analysis; they tend to treat religious elements without reference to religion. So Christian ethics, magical (i.e., divine) powers, and religious symbols (angels, spirits and heaven) are removed from Christianity and treated as stand-alone elements of the culture. Many Christmas films, of course, also lend themselves to the analysis of material vs. spiritual/human values, while angel films can lead to a discussion of the current "angel phenomenon."

Finally, a few general comments on the course are in order. We model Film and Religion on a literature course. Like the books in a novel course, the movies are the texts. Learning derives from discussion of them, and needs only a small amount of supportive further reading. The class meets one night a week for up to four hours; this includes introductory remarks and viewing time as well as discussion and analysis. Although this makes a long night, it enables discussion while the film remains fresh in the students' minds. Teaching the course this way, in our mind, gives instructors the best of the teaching experience. On the one hand, teachers must study the movie and work out their analysis beforehand. On the other hand, student discussion may lead in unforeseen directions and instructors must be quick to follow the students' lead and use the students' observations to unpack the place of religion and its themes and symbolism in the film.
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The Jesus Section provides the basis for the first major assignment, the goal of which is to get the students themselves to wrestle with how the films treat the biblical text and to work out cultural reasons that explain it. The assignment is simple. Part 1: pick a secondary character (e.g., Peter, Mary) or group of people (e.g., Romans, priests) in the gospels and describe how the gospels portray them. Part 2: after viewing the two movies, write an essay describing the similarities and differences between the gospels' depiction and the movies', and explain what cultural point is made by that treatment.

This section's main writing assignment (i.e., the final paper) is to analyze two movies (from a selected list) and to show how religion is used to discuss cultural developments.


For a study that shows how a story aimed against commercialism--Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol--becomes transformed into a film vehicle for consumerism, see Caroline McCracken-Flesher, "The Incorporation of A Christmas Carol: A Tale of Seasonal Screening," Dickens Studies Annual 24 (1996): 93-118.

We assign passages from William R. Manchester's The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974) to provide a general idea of the cultural issues. Of course, we also have students read the bible.