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Religion and Film: The Basics

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Religion and Film: The Basics

Abstract

This is a book review of *Religion and Film: The Basics* (Routledge, 2021).

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Solano, Jeanette Reedy, *Religion and Film: The Basics* (Routledge, 2021).

As anyone who has taught a course on religion and film knows, there is not just one way in which to introduce new students to this field. The field is relatively young, but broad. It brings together an array of perspectives on material that includes everything from silent films to Bollywood musicals, heavy Bergman dramas to Hollywood action adventures, and auteur perspectives to viewer responses. This great variety is enticing and is no doubt part of what makes the field so fascinating—there are few limits to the films, traditions, and perspectives you can choose to engage with—but this broadness can also be overwhelming: where do you start? Thus, getting in your hands a book that offers to provide the basics of the field awakens a great deal of interest. What can be argued to be the basics of religion and film? What are the tools young scholars need to be able to take on this field? Where is the field today and where is it going?

Jeanette Reedy Solano's *Religion and Film: The Basics* starts where many introductions, companions and readers to the field start (see for example John Lyden's edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* from 2009), with a short historical introduction to the field. However, history is not the main focus of this volume; providing tools or ideas with which to start analyzing religion and film is. Thus, the historical discussion is kept short and the second chapter dives into a much more interesting subject: the question of methodology. Already here one of the strengths of the volume appears; it provides a variety of viewpoints. Four approaches are presented: theological and biblical lenses, religious studies approaches, cultural studies and reception studies approaches, and films studies approaches. No approach is argued to be better than the other, as it all depends on what you are after. There is also no need to be exclusive, and Solano rather encourages bricolage. You also do not need to be an expert; the book instead challenges scholars to dare to be creative and open to trying out new methods. Solano here clearly follows an argument that has long been present in the study

of religion and film: that you need to engage films from different viewpoints and with films as films (see for example J. Melanie Wright's *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, 2007), but rather than trying to force this point, she presents it as an interesting task.

The following three chapters continue offering different perspectives and viewpoints from which to engage with the field of religion and film. Chapter three exemplifies how one can explore world religions through film. Here the previously presented approaches are put into practice. Each tradition is viewed via two films. As with the book overall, the films too are chosen with the aim to express broadness. The book engages with films from around the world and thereby also challenges the often-noted Anglo-American focus of the field. The chapter thus engages with Indian comedic satire, films by the Coen brothers, an Israeli independent film and a Bengali drama, among others. Key in the analysis of these films are aspects of lived religion. Film can of course also offer perspectives on religious institutions and official doctrines, but often the most interesting narratives are those that allow us to explore how religion comes to life and is practiced in the everyday lives of people. With this focus on lived religion, Solano's book is very much in line with other studies of religion and popular culture (see for example Diane H. Winston's *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, 2009).

Chapter four looks at religion through a genre lens. Quite suitably I would say, Solano starts out with science fiction, a genre rich with references to religion, myth, and existential questions more broadly. The chapter continues with explorations of comedy, horror, and drama and concludes with pilgrimage/quest/road trip and documentary film. This chapter is very much in line with some of the perspectives brought forth in John Lyden's *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (2003), which also looks at genres, but it also brings forth some new viewpoints. Personally, I find Solano's discussion of documentary film the most thought provoking in this part of the book. As is often discussed in studies of documentary film (see for

example Patricia Aufderheide's *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, 2007) the questions of choice and perspective are essential when trying to comprehend and critically engage with this genre. The claim to present reality of much documentary film is a challenge for religion and films scholars who have to take a step back and explore not just what is being shown, but also what is left outside of the frame. Who is allowed to tell what story at the expense of whose viewpoint?

The following chapter continues looking at recurring ways of portraying religion in films, but this time through tropes such as those pertaining to evil and suffering, gender roles, and reconciliation and death, among others. A scholar in the field of religion and film can no doubt think of other tropes worth exploring here, such as power and religion, but the point of the chapter is of course not to cover everything but to open readers up for notable perspectives. Here too the varied films chosen by Solano bring a lot to the analysis and highlight a variety of possible viewpoints and perspectives. Though there is perhaps a dominance of Christian ideas being brought forth here, concepts such as karma are also explored.

In the concluding chapter Solano continues the dialogue with previous research that was started in the introduction and to some extent goes on throughout the book. The current state of this scholarly field is explored, but Solano also looks ahead. Though the field has developed well during the last couple of decades there is of course more that needs to be done. As noted, scholars have long argued for the need for studies of religion and film to understand film and engage with film as film. This is a point that it does not hurt to reiterate, as Solano does. However, what is also clearly needed is a greater understanding among filmmakers of religion. Many of the films that are discussed in *Religion and Film: The Basics* do show that there are filmmakers out there that seem to “get it.” They engage with religion and expressions of lived religion in challenging and moving ways. Still, many films provide us with nothing more than

flat images and stereotypes. Contemporary viewers demand more, Solano argues, and this is a point I think many can agree with.

As already touched upon above, this book has many strengths. First of all, it is a clear resource book. It provides concrete examples of ways to engage with religion and film, opens the reader up to a great variety of films and offers examples of further viewings and readings. Solano is also clearly up to date with the field and continuously engages with earlier works, bringing these to the reader's attention as well. Second, the book offers a thought out take on the field of religion and film. The arguments in the book do perhaps not come across as new, and the film analyses are often short, focusing on certain perspectives. However, this basicness and brevity is perfectly in line with what the author aims for, to provide a starting point or points from which one can begin to engage with the field. This is thus a simple but rich introduction that feels very up to date. It does not aim to say everything, but opens doors in many fruitful directions that allows you, the reader, to take the next steps. Third, the book is a very easy read. The language, though professional and not shunning away from an academic vocabulary, feels light and transparent, inviting the readers in rather than shutting them out.

Overall, I warmly recommend this volume. It is a workable introduction for any reader wishing to know more about the field of religion and film. It can also very well work as a course book and can help structure an introductory course in religion and film. This book thus offers a creative and thoughtful approach to the basics of religion and film that will no doubt inspire many future essays, analyses, and other forms of scholarly work.

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