'Why Study "Religion and Film"?'

At a time when church attendance has seen a swift decline in recent decades and the entire efficacy and value of religion is called into question by exponents of the New Atheism, most vocally by Richard Dawkins, this might seem like a strange time to be looking at a 'secular' entertainment medium for religious meaning or potential. But, this is what many current theologians and religious studies scholars are doing. Dawkins' views on religion as being a virus and a delusion are well known, but it is questionable that Dawkins' tendency to see everything in binary terms – whereby religion is unequivocally bad and science is wholesome and good – adequately explains how religion should be conceived in the world today. A topic that many of those who study religion are more interested in is whether secular media have in some way challenged traditional religious institutions and even taken on their functions.

What we need to do is come to a more mature way of understanding how religion functions in the world. Dawkins takes it as a given that religion is synonymous with the belief in a God who does not exist. Yet, in sociological terms, religion is bound up more with community. Emile Durkheim, for instance, was not interested in whether God actually exists. What mattered is group solidarity, to the point that religion is more about social rituals than asking whether the theological or philosophical claims held by religious people are true or false. For Durkheim, religion is created by society as a means of expressing its ideals and unifying itself.

Durkheim speculated that modern societies would need to develop new rituals and symbol systems in an age when traditional religion declined. He even saw this as vital in that a society without religion would fail unless there is another force for creating social conscience in its place. Although Durkheim proposed nationalism, ceremonial activities (such as coronations) and the celebration of humanist or political values as fulfilling the role of traditional religion due to their capacity to bring people together, in the modern day we often look to the media to perform such roles. We might think of the internet, for example, as a type of 'virtual' community. We talk about 'visiting' a web site, and through interactive activities such as blogging people can be brought together by common interests rather than simply by where they (geographically) live.

It can be the same with film. If people are finding that films are offering a space for them to reflect on moral, philosophical and religious questions then some theologians, notably Clive Marsh, have said that a theological dimension is thus at work. If films have the ability to move us to the core of our being and if they invite us to ask questions about ultimate meaning and value, then it is hard to completely separate out the sacred from the profane. As Marsh sees it in his book *Cinema and Sentiment*, for some people going to the movies may be part of their life structure, along with working, eating, sleeping and socializing, and so may be functioning in a religious way. This is also the way the Oscar-

winning filmmaker Martin Scorsese sees it. For Scorsese, who was torn when he was young between wanting to be a priest and making movies, rather than see the two as being in conflict, the church and the cinema are both places where people can come together to share a common, spiritual experience.

There is certainly some truth in this. Both are places where dreams are projected and where we can enter and participate in the creation of other imagined worlds, even allowing our secret desires to be fulfilled. Architectually, also, it is not uncommon for churches and cinemas to inhabit the same buildings. In 1928, the Lambeth Methodist Chapel in London was converted by the Revd. Thomas Tiplady in order to accommodate a cinema, thereby widening church participation through Cinema Evangelism. In recent years, many churches similarly made block bookings in local cinemas in order for their congregations to experience *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Further, following the release of *The Da Vinci Code* in 2006 Ellen E. Moore has undertaken research in Illinois which has shown that not only did a number of evangelical churches screen the film to their congregations, but they even made their websites resemble images from the film and created 'code breaking' games to play on church grounds.

To this end, we have come a long way from those attempts when film was a more fledgling medium to criticize the movies for being the antithesis of what religion is all about. Writing in his 1947 book *Movies and Morals*, Herbert Miles went as far as to denounce movies as "the organ of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral cancer of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ" (qtd in Johnston 2000: 43). In the early twentieth century, the police in the heavily Roman Catholic city of Chicago were even authorized to confiscate any films that they thought were immoral, and after the formation in 1934 of the Catholic Legion of Decency films were not allowed to question marriage as an institution or to portray sex outside of marriage as being attractive. Even today, a vicar in Aberystwyth recently made the headlines when he resisted any attempts to overturn the ban that was enforced on the town in 1979 on *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* because the film was deemed to be mocking Christ. We also often come across criticisms by Christian groups of the *Harry Potter* series for what is thought to be their promotion of witchcraft and for being a passageway for children to learn about the occult and to worship Satan.

But, in order to properly understand from a scholarly point of view how the contours are changing, we need to ensure that our definitional and methodological tools are sharpened. We might all have some idea of what we mean by a 'religious film'. Biblical epics are an obvious case in point. When films such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) or *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) attempt to re-tell the Jesus story on celluloid, there is an obvious sense that what the filmmakers are doing has important theological connotations. But, it does not follow that the theology that is being presented on the screen is fruitful. The films themselves may be muddled, overly reverential, ponderous, or, as the debates surrounding the perceived anti-Semitic and overly violent nature of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* have recently demonstrated, ethically questionable. Do such films inspire faith, or do they detract from it? Audiences may be shocked, for example, at the representation of Jesus, as when Scorsese's fictionalized account of Jesus' story, *The Last*

Temptation of Christ (1988), based on the early 1950s novel by a Greek Orthodox writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, emphasized the human aspect of Jesus over against his divinity, thereby breaking away from previous more pietistic depictions.

Yet, even the more faithful Jesus films raise questions of historicity, as when Max von Sydow's Jesus in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* quotes from St. Paul's ode to love in his letter to the Corinthians – scripturally, a very important text, but St. Paul was writing some two decades after Jesus' death, and so Jesus could not have uttered these words. These films really tell us more about the filmmakers and the society they inhabit than they do about the first century prophet from Judea. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that such films can polarize opinion. *Last Temptation*'s critics ranged from those on the conservative end of the spectrum who saw it as a work of blasphemy which must be destroyed to those liberal voices for whom the film represented a challenge to the American Constitutional protection of freedom of religious expression.

Films do not need to be about religious leaders, or made for confessional or evangelical purposes, in order to be religiously important. When in *The Religious Experience of Mankind* Ninian Smart famously proposed that religions can be identified by their composition of seven dimensions – the ritual, experiential, narrative, doctrinal, ethical, social and material – it is not hard to see how 'secular' films can also conform to this paradigm. Let us consider:

- The practical and ritualistic aspect of going to the cinema, in which many of us make a weekly pilgrimage to our local multiplex, buy the quasi-sacramental common food, the popcorn or the hot dog and the fizzy drink, that is dispensed;
- The emotional or experiential dimension to watching a movie, in which we are caught up and transfixed by the film's worldview;
- The narrative or mythical component to a film, whereby a particular story or mythology is being espoused – films even create a mythology of their own, as *Star Wars* has proven;
- The doctrinal or philosophical worldview of the film – no-one exists in a vacuum, and filmmakers have their own agendas (to make us happy, to aggravate or frustrate us, to convert us to a particular way of thinking, whether politically, ideologically or in terms of a particular 'religious' worldview, which may be Christian, Buddhist, or Scientology-based);
- Related to this are the values of the filmmakers which we may or may not passively hold, such as that redemptive violence in a Western or gangster film has any merit;
- The social and communal aspect of cinema-going, which brings disparate people together for a shared experience;
- The material tie-ins that often attend a film, whereby we can purchase a Buzz Lightyear toy or an *Expendables* burger after we have consumed the film.

It is not therefore important whether the film points to a transcendent or divine order. Whether God exists or not does not matter in and of itself. It is not the *substantive*, or substance-based, dimension of religion that is the only thing that matters. Rather, it is the

functionalist understanding of religion that counts – that is, the function that film can engender. The fact that a movement called Dudeism has been generated around the Coen Brothers' movie *The Big Lebowski* (1998) is a case in point. The Official Church of the Latter-Day Dude has a website (http://dudeism.com) which advertises itself as "an ancient philosophy that preaches non-preachiness, practices as little as possible" and refers to itself as "the slowest-growing religion in the world". It also invites adherents to become Dudeist priests, and claims that there are over 80,000 such ministers worldwide. Indiana University Press even published a book containing 21 articles related to the film and the movement in 2009, and there is an annual festival originating in Kentucky called Lebowski Fest where bowling alleys have become congregation sites for members.

While this may be tongue-in-cheek, there are serious implications. In England and Wales in the 2001 census some 390,000 people claimed to be adherents of the religion of Jediism, based on the *Star Wars* movies, whose co-founder, Daniel Jones, threatened to take a supermarket chain to court in 2009 after he was asked to remove his Jedi hood while in one of their North Wales stores. Jones claimed that he was being victimized over his religious beliefs. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Jones explained "We have a Jedi code that we get from the films. We follow that" (www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1808595,00.html).

So, is Jediism a religion? If so, should it receive charitable status in the way that the controversial Church of Scientology is considered a religious organization in the US for tax purposes and, according to a BBC investigation in September 2010, the Church of Scientology has received £1.4 million of tax breaks and business rates relief in the UK because it is classed by some local councils as a non-registered charity that is beneficial to the community (http://news.bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_9038000/9038529.stm)? Where do we draw the line?

Conclusion

If institutionalized faith is on the decline – we learn that in 2005 only 6.3% of the UK population attended Church on a Sunday – we need to ask whether we are entering (or have already entered) some sort of post-Christian society where non-traditional forms of religion and spirituality have taken on the function previously occupied by churches. It is too simplistic to draw from this, however, that simply because around 80% of the UK population goes to the cinema at least once a year and 25% of us go once a month that people have transferred their allegiance from the church to the cinema. It may be that people are no longer as interested in institutional structures in the way they once were, and that what binds us may be something more eclectic in which, as Gordon Lynch has argued, the self is increasingly a form of sacred object.

We must also concentrate on whether it is precisely when films are challenging us, rather than preaching to us, that something identifiably theological is taking place. After all, violence may be a major component of many films, but it is just as important to note that violence is hardly incidental in religious traditions either – the Cross in Christianity and

the origins of Yom Kippur in Judaism are hardly blood-free. Why do we enjoy violent films so much? Perhaps in asking this question we can come to a better understanding of how religions themselves function, and how it is that a film as laden with violence as *The Passion of the Christ* was considered by many conservative Christians to amount to an edifying and profound religious experience.

Similarly, why are so many films about the afterlife – such as *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) and *Ghost* (1990) – interested more in our earthly lives than in the hereafter? Why is the afterlife by no means the main focus of these films? What can such films teach those who study religion about the very earth-bound and terrestrial nature of so much of our religious thinking?

Rather than replacing religion, therefore, we might want to consider how films have the capacity to make us rethink exactly what we think we mean religion to be, leading to a potentially very exciting – if uncertain – scholarly journey.

References and further reading

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