
Book Reviews

Wright, M. J. (2007) *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris. ISBN-10 1850438862

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When *The Da Vinci Code* (Directed by Ron Brown) opened in 2006, it continued the controversy that had been initially caused by the publication of the bestseller, written by Dan Brown. The premise on which this book was based is not new and had, in fact, been the basis of a television programme (later a book by Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, 1982). This last was discredited as it was based on a hoax perpetrated on the authors. Religious films have caused controversy since the very beginning of film – one of the first religious films being made as early as 1897 when the Lumière Brothers made *The Life of the Christ*. Religion is integral to the lives of those with a faith and thus it is relatively easy to cause hurt. More recently, one only has to think of the kerfuffle caused by, for instance, Scorsese's 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*; Monty Python's (1979, Dir. Terry Jones) *The Life of Brian*, Mel Gibson's (2004) *The Passion of the Christ*, not to mention films such as *Priest* (Dir. Year). However one pitches a religious film it is likely to upset someone – either because it is too critical, or not critical enough – too saccharine or too bitter.

The Cambridge Academic, Melanie Wright, who is the Academic Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations and a Fellow of Girton College, has written several previous books on religious themes. At a time when movies were still silent, it was better to use stories that were already known to the audience and, in a less secular age, Bible stories were an obvious source. As Wright suggests 'religious films' too frequently are critiqued from particular confessional perspectives and textual fidelity; the film's worldview or its use for ministry or mission purposes are often questioned. Wright makes an attempt to broaden the scope of her book, both by arguing for a holistic approach (which she suggests has so far been lacking in academia) and by adopting work from cultural studies and

religious studies in addition to film studies. Economically, film is important. Each week, 65 million people see a film in India. India produces more feature films than any other country (over 800 a year), nearly 8 times as many as Hollywood produces. Last year, Indian films earned more outside India than inside, partly because of the Indian diaspora, but also because Bollywood movies are increasingly popular outside the subcontinent, where cinema tickets are more expensive. In 2002, 176 million tickets were sold to UK cinemas (Wright: 1), around 50% of the number sold per capita in cinemas in the USA. DVD and video sales also increased this income.

One of Wright's major achievements is looking at films from more than one confessional group and from international sources. Film can demonstrate the invisible, can embody the divine. As she highlights (4), film may 'assume a sacramental quality'. In what we are continually told is a 'secular' Western society, there are those, particularly in the cynical academic arena, who seem to be almost frightened to portray religion. However, In Chapter VIII, Wright demonstrates how showings of Vijay Sharma's (1975) *Jai Santoshi Maa* resulted in audiences engaging in devotional acts. There is a need for the portrayal of the religious in film that many confessional groups do not attempt to address professionally. Too often, the groups' media products seem amateurish when compared to the professional media with which the audience is used to engaging. Religious groups, if they are enthusiastic to act against the secularism that is seen as being rife, even if the *London Evening Standard* (4/12/06) reported that Anglican Churches in London are having to add more Christmas services because the congregations are up by 50% in recent years, could and should learn from the professionals. Mel Gibson's 2005 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, seems to have caused delight and hate in about equal quantities, but it was a professionally made film that sold enormous numbers of cinema tickets. In addition it created discussion on religion, created a discourse, as no other film that I can remember has done. The only equivalent effect seems to have been caused by the Funeral of John Paul II, the images of which were transmitted to more than 220 countries. Both events caused articles that filled newspapers, were shown on our TV screens and heard on our radios.

The beginning of this book discusses Wright's approach to interpreting religious films. She also outlines some of the trends present in contemporary analysis and highlights the differences in analyses coming from different fields of academic study. Her contention is that writings on religion (or theology) and film still do not address some very basic issues sufficiently. For my own part, a definition of what exactly a 'religious film' is would be a good start. Many films that are not overtly religious actually deal with religious topics. Are these religious films, then? At what point do ethical and religious topics converge, for example?

In the analytical chapters that follow this theoretical background, Wright analyses in a detailed way a number of films. Her method in choosing these might not stand much study; it seems that she has chosen films because they were easily available on DVD or video. She suggests that we have an enhanced relationship with film now that we are able to view and review constantly our favourite films. From my own experience, I know that having the film to be analysed available on DVD or video does make the analysis much, much easier.

The films discussed all have religion as a dominant or significant feature. Wright goes so far as to say that it is almost impossible ‘to conceive of a narrative film devoid of *any* trace of the religious impulses that underpin the cultural construction of feelings, institutions, relationships, and so on’ (7) and notes, wisely, the impossibility of a really comprehensive analysis of the discussed films, since everything cannot be included. Here, however, she has included Hollywood movies, art (or Second Cinema) films and some from the ‘Third Cinema’, independently made movies with political content and practice. The films she analyses are drawn from an unusually wide cross section of the filmed *oeuvre*: from Dreyer’s 1928 *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, through the cult movie *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), recently remade starring Nicholas Cage (LaBute, 2006), de Mille’s (1956) *The Ten Commandments*; Prasad’s 1997 British film, *My Son the Fanatic*, Norton’s (2000) comedy *Keeping the Faith*, to the extremely popular Indian film *Lagaan* (2001), as well as others. Despite this breadth, one always has personal views about films that might have been included, but nobody can be expected to cover every suitable film in such depth – where would they find a publisher who could handle this?

Dr. Wright deserves congratulations on this interesting book. Its 203 pages cover such a wide spread and, with its extensive notes and bibliography, it would be useful to anyone who is working in this area. It would be a good, readable book from which to start teaching students. I would agree with Wright that the book (except for its first theoretical chapters) might have appeal outside the academic community and within the community of the film buff.

I would plead that confessional groups who are thinking of producing their own filmed materials might take note of some of her comments, which might enable them to produce a better product.