

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Cinema, culture and social debate

'Culture' can be defined as 'the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively' and 'the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people' (*OED*). It is important in theology and film for two reasons. First, films are part of human culture: they belong to the realm of human creativity and reveal something of human achievement in a given place and time. Second, it has been claimed that they reflect the culture from which they emerge. In other words, they both constitute and comment on human culture.

Theology and film is not primarily concerned with demonstrating the truth or otherwise of these two points. Indeed, the field tends to take them for granted. Instead the question which needs to be asked is: how does theology relate to culture? Or, in a slightly different way, what, if anything, does theology gain from culture?

[Although not mentioned in this lecture, it is important here to begin with the fact that theology draws on culture largely because of the doctrines of creation and incarnation. The former speaks of God creating human beings in his image. As a result, human creativity reflects, in some small way, divine creativity. The latter suggests that God manifests himself through involvement in creaturely and material forms.]

Richard Niebuhr classified approaches to culture into five classifications: Christ against culture, Christ in agreement with culture, Christ above culture, Christ in paradox with culture, Christ the transformer of culture. However, Niebuhr's typology says more about the range of possibilities than a definite theological understanding of culture. For theological views of culture, we look to Paul Tillich and Karl Barth.

For Tillich, religion was concerned with the 'depth dimension' in life. It was largely existential, but it could only be conceived of theologically when it reflected 'ultimate concern' and not any old human concern. 'Religion' was manifest in all aspects of life, including what Tillich termed 'high art'. Taking his argument and altering it slightly, film, as a product of human culture, can

at times be seen to manifest religion (in this understanding of it), though Tillich is unlikely to have believed this to be the case.

Conversely, Barth recognised a fundamental separation between God the Creator and his creation. As a result, culture could not reveal God unless God has willed it to do so. Yet because God manifests himself in the incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) who is simultaneously separate from and involved in creation, it becomes possible to claim that creation may unwittingly point towards its creator. For Barth, this occurs when music is allowed to be music, when art is allowed to be art and when literature is allowed to be literature.

Taking Barth's view to its logical conclusion, we could claim that theology and film works best not when it seeks deep meaning in any film but when it allows film to be film. This opens the way to seeing theological meaning even in entertainment.