

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Jesus of Hollywood

Despite the availability of four gospel accounts, we actually know very little about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet Jesus has remained a 'leading man' in the cinema almost from its very inception. Two significant points arise from this. First, cinema emerged as a primary form of entertainment at the very point in history when biblical scholarship was assessing the 'quest of the historical Jesus' (Schweitzer, 1906: ET, 1911). Schweitzer concluded that it was impossible to construct an accurate biography of Jesus and that attempts to do so tended to reveal more about the author than about the Nazarene. While subsequent New Testament scholarship has been less pessimistic, it remains the case that those who tell the story will often colour the portrayal of Jesus' life with their own agendas. Second, it can be claimed with a fair degree of confidence that modern culture has assimilated the Jesus story more through the cinematic portrayals than through the gospels themselves. In other words, modern people will know more about Jesus from the cinema than from the Bible.

There may be some theological justification for this. In order for Jesus to 'live' in the present, he must in some way 'speak' to and from the society in which we find ourselves. If the risen and ascended Lord exists as a living presence in the church, there can be little doubt that he can be understood according to modern categories and his significance can be outlined in modern terms. However, this has tended to give rise to the idea that a distinction should be made between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus who has become a cultural icon (Pelikan). The latter belongs to the wider culture, to those of faith and those of none, and it is the portrayal of this icon that the cinema seeks to accomplish.

Some of this can be refuted. Jesus only exists as a cultural icon because he initially became the object of faith. He would not have been known in the wider society at all unless he had first been known as saviour in Palestine among the disciples and in the church. Yet some of this must be confirmed. If Jesus is the redeemer of humankind then humankind in all its fulness must in some senses be redeemed in him. This includes aspects of culture. And if the Jesus story is shown to take on new relevance because it is able to engage

with the concerns of a particular time and place, then this may simply reflect the fact that he continues to act as the redemptive figure.

No portrayal of Jesus is value-free or indeed devoid of interpretation. The gospels do not seek merely to outline his life. Instead, they seek to say something about him. The question which arises from the cinematic portrayals does not revolve around their historical accuracy – we can never be entirely sure about the details of his life as only the bare bones of a biography have been included in the New Testament. Instead we must ask what it is that the cinematic portrayals wish to relate about him. When we have discerned this, we can then go on to ask whether or not it is compatible with what we know about him from the gospels and from tradition as the redemptive figure who inaugurates the Kingdom of God.