

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Christology of Film

The Christ figure has become a virtually ubiquitous presence within discussions of theology and film. Indeed, it is now possible to claim that virtually every main character in a film is to some degree a Christ figure in as much as he or she (and occasionally it) demonstrates suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom or redemption.

In Christ-figure films, the character or the narrative must have characteristics which resonate with the biblical story such as mysterious origins in reflection of the Virgin Birth; attracts a group of followers in reflection of the disciples; commitment to justice or other aspects of Christ's teaching; miracles as signs of the coming utopia; conflict with authority mirroring conflict with the Jewish authorities; sacrificial victim redeeming or saving humankind; a close or mystical union with God; outcast, despised, rejected; resurrection of some kind.

For some, the Christ figure emerged in the cinema as a result of the failure of the biblical epic, in the 1960s, to make effective and meaningful contact with audiences. The biblical epic, they claim, requires that audiences have some background knowledge of the scriptures and the theological tradition. Without these, the Jesus films convey very little that is meaningful. On the other hand, films which concentrate on relationships, love, self-sacrifice and themes such as redemptive action are able to strike a chord even when the narrative presents morally dubious characterization and plot (James Wall).

Some qualification needs to be made here. Earlier films, such as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), can be claimed to demonstrate a Christ figure, while questions ought to be raised about the meaning of such a category in the case of *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and more so, perhaps, in the case of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

The problem is one of definition. To have any real theological significance, the Christ figure must in some way shed light on the person of Christ himself. Indeed, most commentators who use the category would claim this to be the case. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of many of the characters thus

identified means that little light is really shed on the person and work of Christ.

If this is the case, any link with Jesus is one that does not arise naturally from the characterization and narrative itself but is in fact imposed on the film by those with a prior knowledge of the Jesus story. When it works well, the Christ figure does not reveal something new of Christ but instead shows something about what it means to follow him. As such the Christ figure reveals something of the embodiment, in faltering, failing and even sinful lives, of what it means to take up one's cross (Mth. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23). When it does not work so well it merely becomes a technical category within theology and film which is ultimately divorced from its roots in Jesus of Nazareth and is thus devoid of meaning except as a useful means of categorization and identification.