

TRDL6021: JESUS THROUGH FAITH AND CULTURE

The Quest of the Cinematic Jesus

Given the predominance of religious subjects in so-called 'high art' (often, in previous ages, the result of ecclesiastical patronage) it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Jesus has been a 'leading man' in the cinema virtually from its inception (though the Church has rarely been involved in sponsoring mainstream cinematic portrayals). The first Jesus film was the no longer extant French production *La Passion* (1897) and between its appearance and the production of Cecil B. De Mille's classic *The King of Kings* (1927) there were at least thirty-nine films about the life of Jesus. Portraying the Jesus story and other biblical narratives promised to legitimize the cinema as an art form, but in this early period religious sensibilities remained sufficiently strong to ensure that the portrayal was reverential and, indeed, Jesus' presence was banned from the screen by early censorship bodies (including the British Board of Film Censors which was established in 1912). Thus, says, one commentator, 'He did not make any explicit appearance during the '30s, '40s and '50s' (Malone, 1990: 29).

The 'Jesus film' reappeared in epic form in the 1960s, with the emphasis once again placed on reverence. This was the style of Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and George Stevens's epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), while Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) demonstrated that the Jesus story could be confined to the account of a single gospel and could be accomplished with a degree of critical acclaim without Hollywood glamour and glitz. There followed the 'musical Jesus' in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Godspell* (1973) which seemed to herald the demise of both the reverent portrayals and the epic style, particularly with the latter portraying Jesus as a clown. Nevertheless, reverence and epic proportions were both resurrected late in the decade with Franco Zeffirelli's highly acclaimed made-for-television *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) and John Heyman's less eminent *Jesus* (1979), based loosely on Luke's gospel. The most controversial of all Jesus films followed in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Conservative Christian groups objected to the film's final dream sequence where Jesus leaves the cross in order to settle

down with a wife, raise children and live into old age, and doubtless the controversy which surrounded its release contributed to a hiatus in production of films about Jesus in the mainstream cinema. The controversy missed the point; though Scorsese's handling of the issues was hardly subtle. The hiatus was broken on the eve of the new millennium with the strangely compelling Jesus of animation in *The Miracle Maker* (2000), while further controversy was the order of the day with Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

While not a frequent topic for cinematic presentation, the regular turn to the Jesus story suggests that even in the early twenty-first century, and in societies apparently gripped by secularism where the Christian church appears to be in terminal decline, there remains sufficient interest in Jesus to make a commercial success of films which portray his life. Indeed, Mel Gibson's film quickly made it into the top ten all-time North American box office receipts and appeared top of the list for an 'R' (or '18') rated film. This was probably due to the support of professing Christians, particularly those who advocate a substitutionary understanding of atonement, rather than the ability to make contact with the unchurched masses. Nevertheless, the fact that a Jesus film, which (despite any faults it may have) certainly locates him within a theological context, can achieve such a level of popularity suggests much about Christian adherence in the western world and its interaction with cultural forms. Jesus remains a figure who can attract popular interest and one who continues to court controversy, both of which he succeeded in doing if the gospel accounts are to be believed.

Silver Screen Gospels

For Douglas Mikkelsen, these cinematic portrayals can be categorized as 'Silver Screen Gospels' when they conform to three criteria. First, 'the film's main focus is to present a dramatized biography of Jesus in his historical time and place'; secondly, 'the film is based on one or more of the New Testament gospels'; thirdly 'the film has been released as a major motion picture or a major television movie' (Mikkelsen and Gregg, 2001: 9-10). For Mikkelsen, the Jesus film, when ultimately based on scriptural accounts, stands as a similar kind of 'text' to the canonical gospels offering to its audience a valid representation of Jesus' life and indicating to them his historical significance. However, like the written gospels, they tell the story of Jesus in such a way

that the theological significance has to be explained. Indeed, Mikkelsen has produced commentaries on these 'silver screen gospels' (see also Mikkelsen, 2004). These are rather descriptive accounts which do not need to enter into technical debates surrounding original languages and they tend to avoid many explicitly theological claims either about the subject or about the way in which the film presents and constructs the story. Nevertheless, the existence of these commentaries demonstrates an irony in the field of theology and film. The Jesus film, based on the written accounts of the gospels, itself becomes the subject of a written commentary with the implication that the film itself is not enough. In order to understand it, its meaning must be explained. But how significant is Mikkelsen's claim?

The written gospels have particular purposes that are sometimes explicitly stated (as in Lk. 1:1-4; Jn. 20:31) and sometimes can be implicitly discerned as the collection of stories and sayings, the emphasis on particular teaching and the presence of particular groups all suggest the original audience for whom each evangelist wrote. What seems clear, however, is that none of the evangelists sought to produce a neutral account of Jesus' life, even if such an account were possible. Rather, they each sought to say something *about* Jesus who, following the report of his resurrection from the dead, was rapidly becoming the object of faith. Indeed, this leads to the basic problem facing anyone attempting to construct a life of Jesus. What we know about him has been recorded not in order that we may possess a detailed biography but that its readers might *believe* in him. The canonical gospels do not provide us with biographies, at least in the modern sense. They are proclamatory documents intended to be didactic, persuasive or apologetic. Of course, this does not mean that they are intentionally misleading. Indeed, the evangelists were probably keen to ensure that what they said of Jesus was accurate and would stand up to scrutiny (Bockmuehl, 1994: 20). But this also means that none of them is without at least an implicit Christology. In other words, they were not written simply to record sayings and events but they were written because the author thought that there was something special about Jesus, something which ought to be committed to writing not in order to preserve a historical event but in order to keep that event alive. Thus there is no straightforwardly historical information available (if such a thing is in any case possible). It is all interpreted and interpretive. From the perspective of the gospels, there is no cultural or historical Jesus who is not also a theological Jesus, and *vice versa*.

Furthermore, there is no single story available outlining his life and teaching. Rather there are a plurality of approaches and this is something with which the tradition of faith has happily sat.

The question is, then, what is it that these films proclaim about Jesus, given the acknowledged belief that no account of his life is neutral? In short, the significant question raised by the Jesus film is that of Christology – how is the person and work of Jesus portrayed in the film?

The Cinematic Portrayals

On the surface, at least, Jesus films have attempted to bring to life the bare bones of Christ's historical life. They are cinematic representations of a historical event. Their tendency, particularly from the 1960s, to find a desert location, to place the actors in recognizably historical dress, and even the attempt to synthesize the accounts of all four gospels into a single, seamless narrative about Jesus' life, teaching and actions, all conspire to suggest the quest for at least the approximation of historical accuracy, which may be the best which can be achieved. Each film, including the more imaginative ones, follows a basic pattern of biography from birth, through temptations and baptism, to teaching and healing and final condemnation and crucifixion. This may appear to be an unremarkable statement. Yet it demonstrates that there is a general consensus about what can validly be described as the content of his life. The presentation of Jesus' life as historically accurate in such films as *King of Kings* (1961) and *Jesus* (1979) is based on this consensus. But historical accuracy has never been the sole criterion for filmmakers. Their films also reflect wider concerns which had arisen in the context in which they were produced.

Film is a popular and cultural medium which, ordinarily, is not given over to ecclesiastical use to advance the message of the gospel. Furthermore, it is not considered primarily to be a means of producing accurate accounts of historical events. Though probably not devoid of ideological motivations, the Jesus films have not, on the whole, been made in order to evoke faith in the saviour of the world, the one in whom God was reconciling the world to himself. It is likely, too, that historical accuracy (even if it could be achieved) is not the foremost concern. Rather, we see the celebration or exploitation of a historical and cultural icon. The Jesus of the cinema belongs not to faith and

the church. Instead, he is the common property of all men and women of good will, the result of the way in which, for a variety of reasons, Jesus has been assimilated into western culture.

It is, then, the history of culture which is apparently encapsulated in the cinematic portrayals. As a result, so Richard Walsh claims, the cinematic portrayal of Jesus is coloured by the concerns of those producing it, and those concerns are inevitably cultural rather than straightforwardly theological.

Filmmakers present Jesus according to their personal ideological perspectives. Griffith advocates pacifism and attacks social engineering. DeMille supports American capitalism and the middle-class. Pasolini speaks for Italian peasants versus aristocrats and bourgeois regimes. Jenson and Greene reflect the counterculture and oppose the multi-industrial complex. Ray is open to secular humanism (Walsh, 2003: 8).

Interestingly, then, the cinematic accounts of Jesus' life suggest the same phenomenon as was outlined by Albert Schweitzer at the turn of the twentieth century, a period during which the cinema was emerging. Of the nineteenth century lives of Jesus Schweitzer concluded, 'Each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live'. Furthermore, 'each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character. There is,' he maintained, 'no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus' (Schweitzer, 2000: 6). Schweitzer put his finger on a crucial point, namely the fact that in order to 'make him live', Jesus must speak into, as well as out of, the contemporary situation and not just as a disembodied voice speaking from a distant and sometimes dim past. A life of Jesus is usually constructed, he claimed, with this playing a governing role. But it is the personal outlook of the author which is clearest. New Testament scholarship subsequently gained more trust in its ability to identify historical truths about Jesus from the gospels (Bockmuehl, 1994; Tatum, 1999). Despite this, a generally agreed historical pattern, each Jesus film reveals something about the society from which it emerged and also something of the director whose vision it was to bring it to the silver screen.

While it is important to remember that film is an artistic medium which inevitably enables contemporary cultural concerns to be expressed, it must also be emphasized that, in the case of the Jesus films, it is no easy task to make a distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of culture. In his celebrated discussion *Jesus Through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan turns from 'the history of the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ for the faith and teaching of the Christian church' to 'the other half of the story: his place in the general history of culture' (Pelikan, 1997: xv). *Prima facie* this suggests that a claim can be made on Jesus without any supplementary theological baggage. The Jesus whose name is known (and often profaned) in contemporary western culture is the property of that wider society even when it is ignorant not only of any special theological claim about him, but when nothing is known of the details of his historical life as they have come to us in the scriptures. Pelikan seems to record this when he calls Jesus 'the man who belongs to the world'.

Nevertheless, Pelikan's book demonstrates that it is no easy task to differentiate between these apparently distinct iconic figures, the Christ of faith and the Jesus of culture, for his assimilation into culture is not completely divorced from theological considerations. Indeed, the Jesus who has impacted on western culture is the Jesus who is the focus of faith, even when the former wishes to demythologize him or to interpret him according to liberal or secular (or any other) values, or even when it seeks to ignore him completely. For the wider culture, when it has taken him seriously, has associated him with titles and images that have profound theological resonance and are in any case deeply embedded in the faith tradition. Pelikan himself outlines the cultural significance of such titles as Rabbi, Light of the Gentiles, King of Kings, Son of Man, The Prince of Peace, The Liberator, all of which find deep resonance in Christian teaching. It would seem, then, that any attempt to divorce the Jesus who is the object of faith entirely from the Jesus recognized in culture would be theologically dissatisfying but also intellectually misleading. The latter simply would not exist without the former.

Faith and culture

It is this rather ambiguous relationship between faith and culture which makes the Jesus films intriguing. Although willing to redefine 'religion' according to contemporary understandings of civil religion, spirituality or merely in terms of a quest, Richard Walsh has written persuasively about this relationship between culture and faith as seen in film.

If we think of religion in terms of its modern forms, then, we have little reason to condemn the Jesus films as religious failures. They function as part of American civil religion (DeMille, the 1950s epic). They justify expressive individualism (Jewison, Greene) and invite a private, internalized, some even provide alternative – if not prophetic – critique (Pasolini, Monty Python, Scorsese, Arcand). What they do not do is provide theologically correct statements of orthodox Christology – an invention of the fourth and fifth centuries – or provide an unassailably accurate Jesus of Nazareth (the so-called historical Jesus) – the project of the Liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth century.

For Walsh, the fact that the Jesus films are neither concerned with expressing Christian faith nor merely cultural constructs enables them to occupy a liminal space in which mythic (or religious) interpretation becomes possible and can affect the way in which the audience perceives life and seeks to live it. 'While this is not classical transcendence,' he writes, 'in these gaps and incongruities we can create meaning' (Walsh, 2003: 13).

This has three major consequences. First, Walsh demonstrates that the figure of Jesus is assimilated through film into contemporary culture in order to meet perceived religious or spiritual needs. Jesus, however he might be understood, is associated with the spiritual even if this is understood in unorthodox terms or according to the claims of a civil religion. Even when it is not orthodox Christology that is served, the Jesus film demonstrates how Jesus' story can be appropriated within the lives of modern people. It may not proclaim the gospel to them. It may not convert them to Christianity. But it can effectively portray to them a redemption effected in Christ. In one sense at least these films can convey *good news*.

Secondly, the very fact that it is deemed appropriate to relate the Jesus story in a way that is appealing to, as well as evolved from, contemporary culture may point to a more profound claim about Jesus' place in human history. Walsh's apparently dismissive statements about Christology and, indeed, the quest of the historical Jesus, are slightly misplaced. For without the significance of both the Christological and the historical there would be little point in telling the Jesus story at all. Jesus is only a redemptive figure in contemporary culture because he was, first, a redemptive figure for his disciples in Palestine and, secondly, saviour of humanity in the proclamation of the church. Without these specifically theological definitions, he simply would never have become sufficiently known to permeate a common, cultural psyche.

Thirdly, Walsh's statement shows us that the objective of the Jesus film is existential. Neither historical accuracy nor theological orthodoxy are important. Rather the film speaks from and to the culture from which it has emerged. Even the Jesus film, then, is the product of the turn towards existentialism, the move from religion as a historical, structured and doctrinal entity to that of an experienced, practised, personal entity (Warner, 1993: 1044-1093; Hoover, 2006). At best it demonstrates a gospel claim that, in Christ, true light is shed upon the major questions of existence. At worst the Jesus story too becomes merely a means of expressing existential angst.

Bearing these issues in mind, we turn to consider the 'screen Christologies'.

Screen Christologies

On the whole, Jesus films have been directed not to the community of faith but to the general population, the result of which, according to Adele Reinhartz, is that they 'tell the story in a way that is designed to appeal to and be comprehended by viewers no matter what their background and education' (Reinhartz, 1). However, sense is only made of something when experience gained through one's 'background and education' are brought into some kind of dialogue with current images and sensations. Clearly, in order that a film will make narrative sense to its audience, a similar imaginative process is required. But this only becomes a theological investigation when theological expectations and knowledge are brought into conversation with

what is viewed on the film. Unless one is expecting to see Christology – however that is expressed – one will not see it at all.

Having admitted (with Richard Walsh) that there are different cultural considerations revealed in each Jesus film, it remains the case that there are also numerous Christological interpretations to be found in the cinema. These films have provided a myriad of portrayals of Jesus. W. Barnes Tatum, one of the New Testament scholars who has made a study of the Jesus film, has listed the following:

Jesus has appeared as a man of good deeds, *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912). He has appeared as victim *Intolerance* (1916), and as healer *King of Kings* (1927). He has appeared as crucified redeemer, *Ben Hur* (1959), and as messiah of peace. *King of Kings* (1961) Jesus has also appeared in more contemporary idiom as ‘superstar,’ *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and as ‘hippie,’ *Godspell* (both 1973) In more traditional characterizations, Jesus has appeared as the incarnate Word, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), as suffering-servant messiah, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and as the unique person, *Jesus* (1979). But, contrary to these traditional portrayals, Jesus has also appeared as reluctant messiah, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) (Tatum, 1997: 195-6).

As Stern et al point out, each successive film is not a reaction to the one immediately preceding it, but there remains a ‘discernible rhythm or trajectory’ in the development of the Jesus film. ‘From the very traditional emphasis on Jesus’ divinity in *The King of Kings*, we move to a countervailing emphasis on his humanity and struggle toward social consciousness (in the Hollywood production of *King of Kings*) to a small-scale and more angry, rugged and radical view of Jesus (*The Gospel According to St Matthew*), back to a major motion picture emphasizing Jesus’ divine nature (*Greatest Story Ever Told*) without quite returning to the piety of De Mille’s *The King of Kings*’ (Stern, et al, 1999: 131-2).

William R. Telford agrees that there has been a variety of portrayals, though he categorizes them differently. He has suggested that there were seven types of screen Jesus, the ‘patriarchal’ (*The King of Kings*), the ‘adolescent’ (*King of Kings*), the ‘pacific’ (*King of Kings*), the ‘subversive’ (*The Gospel According to*

Matthew), the 'mystical' (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*), the 'musical' (*Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*) and the 'human' (*The Last Temptation of Christ*). He continues, 'the screen image of Jesus has varied with the shifts and currents of society itself, in line with its changing social, political and religious perspectives and values' (Telford, 1997: 138), confirming that the Jesus film is a response to the ascendance of the existential.

Conclusions

The conclusion which we can draw from this is that the cinematic portrayals are the work of the imagination. This is not to say that they are imaginary works which merely play to the fantasies of authors and directors (which on occasion they have been) but rather that they have all been produced as the result of the imagination's ability to draw together various disparate aspects and shape them into a coherent whole. Generally, the Jesus films have drawn together the canonical gospels in order to form one, seamless narrative. From the time of De Mille's *The King of Kings* (1927), directors have drawn on the synthesizing and reverent precedent of the European Passion Play in order to present a single, coherent story of Jesus as if there were no possible deviation from it.¹ Although some have been able to link different films with different gospels,² it remains the case that Ray's *King of Kings*, Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* and, indeed, Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* all draw on sayings and stories which can be found exclusively in any one of the four canonical gospels.

But the director's imagination is not restricted to this synthesizing aspect alone. There is a further sense in which the films draw on other sources in order to translate the story from the barest of facts into a cinematic narrative, such as the need to entertain, reverence for the theological tradition, the perceived needs of the age and the desire felt by the director to convey something powerful from this most intense of stories. As such they can still be

¹ There is, of course, a long tradition of attempting to synthesize the gospel accounts into one basic story. Tatian's *Diatessaron* did this in the second century; Augustine attempted it in the fifth; Calvin did so in the sixteenth and Thomas Jefferson did so in the nineteenth, though Jefferson's account is characterized more by what he omitted and his attempt to portray Jesus as a man of the Enlightenment than by fidelity to the New Testament.

² *Jesus of Montreal* with Mark; *Godspell* with the teachings of Jesus (Q); *The Gospel According to St Matthew* with Matthew; *King of Kings* with Luke; *The Greatest Story Ever Told* with John.

perceived as attempts, however faltering, to understand the significance of the person of Christ for our age, though they can also be seen as the dressing up of Jesus in the clothes of contemporary culture which result in obscuring him and keeping him hidden while the vicissitudes and the existential questions of a particular age (or even a particular director) come to the fore. They may help to answer Bonhoeffer's question 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?' Nevertheless, they may also emphasize the contemporary to the detriment of the historical and the theological. The result is that the character becomes removed from what we know of Jesus Christ. Rather than an interpretation for our times, such films run the danger of recreating Jesus so that he is no longer 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) but a mirror image of the director himself, a result of which Schweitzer warned over a century ago.

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