

TRDL6021 JESUS THROUGH FAITH AND CULTURE

The Search for the Cinematic Christ

Despite the fact that many of them contained aspects that went beyond the biblical accounts, the Jesus film undoubtedly played a major part, during the twentieth century, in assimilating the gospel stories into western culture, and they were probably the principal means by which most modern westerners came to any knowledge of the Jesus story. Nevertheless, the mixture of culture, theology and attempted historicity makes each Jesus of the Jesus film in some degree a Christ-figure where the major themes of the Jesus story – suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, redemption – are given prominence in a variety of ways. This is particularly true of Scorsese's Jesus, for example, though Pasolini's skewing of his film in favour of his Marxism might suggest that even the Jesus of *The Gospel According to St Matthew* is in truth a Christ-figure. However, because each of these films clearly focuses on the figure of Jesus, even when the scriptural dependence is loose and traditional theological considerations are absent, these are not generally recognized as *Christ-figures* but the figure of *Jesus*. The Christ-figure tends to emulate these themes, but he, she or even it, remains separate from the figure of Jesus himself. As such they belong to a liminal, imaginative realm between images of Jesus and the image of the character portrayed with the intention of bringing light to bear on both.

If the literature is to be believed, then the Christ-figure has an almost ubiquitous presence in modern cinema. For some, this is the result of the explicit failure of the Jesus film (McEver, 1998: 2; Baugh, 1997: 109). Writing in 1970, as one of the first commentators on the theological interpretation of film, the critic James Wall accounted for the failure of George Stevens's hugely expensive epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) by suggesting that it required the audience to know too much about the gospel. Rather than effectively and meaningfully convey the story of Jesus, the film had taken for granted that its audience would be *au fait* with the gospel accounts. Rather than simply convey meaning, the film only became meaningful to those who could make a connection between what they saw on the screen and what they

already knew from scripture. Those unfamiliar with the gospels would simply have been left floundering. While the film possesses its own narrative integrity and audiences would have understood the story of a good man who taught and performed miracles, was executed and subsequently raised from the dead, it certainly fails to portray the significance of any of this. Even though it placed the story within the context of the prologue of John's gospel, there is nothing in the film to suggest that Jesus' life was in any sense redemptive, or indeed why redemption was necessary. Stevens's film was, Wall said, 'the most carefully made, well-intentioned biblical film ever produced' in the United States (Wall, 1970: 51), but because of its dependence on the audience's specific religious and biblical knowledge, he believed that it could well be 'the last overtly religious film made for a mass commercial market' (ibid., p. 52). Even a church member, he wrote, could 'attend the showing of a film like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and fail to find any authentic religious content in it. But he can see a film like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and witness a revelation of love that provides him with insight into his possibilities and needs' (Wall, 1971: 25; cf. Wall, 1970: 109).

Some qualification needs to be made here. There have been other overtly religious films made for mass audiences since that of Stevens, with the epic genre being transferred at least once to the television for the remarkably successful *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). Others have met with controversy such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and while few and far between, they have at least suggested that a degree of interest can still be aroused at the box office as witnessed by the commercial success of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Furthermore, Wall's comparison with *Midnight Cowboy* is not unproblematic. For while the story concerns two apparently mismatched and down-on-their-luck men who strike up a relationship which develops into a close friendship, the sub theme of prostituted sex might, for some, obscure the more virtuous message of the film. Of course, for Wall the viewer's ethical stance is supposed to be left behind and the film's narrative appreciated within the boundaries of its own integrity. The characters can be seen to possess virtue even though their lives are plagued also with vice. But would it not be rather too much to ask that audiences see its religious significance without making some kind of moral judgement, especially when the provision of morality is one of the main functions of religion? Perhaps, too, his argument was contradictory. Are those who see the virtue displayed in the

plot and characterization of a film such as *Midnight Cowboy* merely reacting to what is portrayed on the screen, to the integrity of the film as it was conceived and produced, or are they, too, dependent on a prior knowledge, attitude or even world view? That having been said, Wall's criticism points to the possibility that 'meaning' and even theological significance can be found by audiences in films that are, to all intents and purposes, not specifically religious, while those that take specifically religious themes may in fact prove to be meaningless.

It is this that gives rise to the Christ-figure film, though a further word of warning must be voiced, for Wall's point hardly points to the significance of the Christ-figure. For Wall, 'religion' is present in a film such as *Midnight Cowboy* because it reveals love as it develops and grows in human relationships. In many ways his view reflects that of Tillich regarding religion as the 'depth dimension' in life. While Christ-figures may reveal such depth, Wall does not appear to be particularly interested in them. For, even more than the Jesus film, the Christ-figure requires that audiences have a prior knowledge which can be used to make the right identification.

The Christ-figure

Ronald Holloway suggests that 'The Christ-figure in allegory follows the main thread of the Christ story, while disguising it through a surface narrative and relying on the viewer to provide the necessary continuity. The figure is strong enough to exist by itself, but points to a meaning far beyond this existence for its ultimate truth' (Holloway, 1977: 187; cf. Baugh, 1997: 109). It may be that such themes as sacrifice and redemption draw out the deepest of emotions and reactions in an audience. Nevertheless, to identify this with Christ requires the knowledge of Christ in the first place. Even if, as John Knox contends, 'the Christ' includes the 'complex salvific events surrounding Jesus' life and death, and to the early Christian community within which new dimensions of life and freedom were being experienced' (Kaufman, 1981: 124) so that it encapsulates theological ideas as well as the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, we are still left with a specific view of salvation which is connected with him and with the understanding of that salvation as it developed among his followers. In other words, it is not self-evident that sacrifice in itself should be salvific. The idea is more specifically related to the atonement effected in Jesus' death and resurrection. The Christ-figure may

well have become a popular category, but its meaning is specifically related to the figure of Jesus even if commentators have tried to divorce the two.

History

It seems that the first person to utilize the idea of the Christ-figure was Theodore Ziolkowski, though he did so in relation to literature rather than film. He contended that the theological liberalism and accompanying biblical criticism of the nineteenth century had freed Jesus from ecclesiastical control. The result was that he reappeared in various forms, transfigured into various characters in literature. It was Neil Hurley who first applied this to film, though he spoke not of 'Christ-figures' but of cinematic transfigurations of Jesus (Hurley, 1982: 61). For Hurley, the distinction was to be made between the Christ of faith and the 'universal cultural symbolic value of the Jesus figure' (ibid., p. 66). We see here the way in which aspects of the Jesus story have been assimilated into the very heart of western culture. Hurley is specifically drawing attention to the way in which sacrifice and martyrdom are generally associated with salvation or liberation in western culture because of the assimilation of the Jesus story, even if the associations made make no specific reference to the gospel. This undoubtedly accounts for most identifications of the Christ-figure in the modern cinema.

A further possible definition has been suggested by Peter Malone who differentiates between the 'Christianity of faith' and the 'Christianity of culture'. 'The former is lived Christianity, commitment (however minimal), belief and an acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and Savior, usually in a church community. The latter is an understanding and use of the tenets and stories of Christianity that does not necessarily involve any personal commitment. Filmmakers generally use aspects of the Christianity of culture' (Malone, 1997: 59; Malone, 1990). In this definition, the Christ-figure must be recognized first and foremost to be a cultural construct, the result of a residual knowledge of Christianity which is devoid of any personal commitment. On one level at least, the Christ-figure is simply a term of reference within theology and film. It does little more than identify one whose life and action has some kind of analogous relationship with that of Jesus. It does not necessarily tell us much about Jesus or God or salvation or religion but it does reveal something about our culture and its fascination with themes of redemption, suffering and liberation.

Hurley wrote in the early 1970s in a period coloured by the existential concern of the previous decade and the shift from theocentricism to anthropocentricism. Yet these common themes of suffering and liberation have a longer history in the cinema than that. Indeed, while it is anachronistic to apply the terminology to it, there was a clear attempt to establish a 'Christ-figure' (or perhaps a 'proto Christ-figure') in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916)¹ in which the director presents four different stories all of which revolve around the identification of victims of injustice. Most significantly, Griffith juxtaposes scenes from Jesus' trial before Pilate with the trial of a young man ensnared in a world of organized crime who is framed for murder and only narrowly saved from the gallows (Malone, 1990: 2). Given the fact that scenes from one story intersperse scenes from the other, there can be little doubt that Griffith intended them to be read as similar occurrences in order for the one to throw light on the other.

However, what is not so clear is what kind of conclusion he expected his audiences to reach, either about Jesus or about the young man. Is Jesus merely the victim of a miscarriage of justice, one who loses his life to the intolerance shown towards the nonconformist by governing powers? Even at this level, Jesus remains a rather different figure from that of a young man, caught up in the activity of gangsters, who is wrongly convicted of a capital crime and ultimately escapes the fate which awaits him. Unless the 'Christ-figure' is merely a technical category, a shorthand to identify a victim or to emphasize suffering which has a redemptive quality, then, as this example shows, it becomes rather difficult to offer a more precise meaning to the term. While it could be that the Christ-figure becomes meaningful because he or she inhabits that liminal position between similarity and dissimilarity with Christ, a degree to which there is a parallel in the life of Jesus, and a clear distinction between the two, it still leaves us wondering what meaning we could give to the 'Christ-figure' as he can be identified in Griffith's film.

Definitions

¹ Some viewed this film as an apology and even as penance for the criticisms leveled at Griffith's earlier work, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) which had apparently glorified racism and the Ku Klux Klan. See Keyser and Keyser (1984: 6-7).

Perhaps some light can be thrown on to the dilemma from the variety of definitions offered for the Christ-figure. Peter Malone, for example, warns that: 'The Christ-figure is any purely fictional character who resembles Jesus significantly and substantially. This emphasis on significance and substance is necessary to avoid trivializing the Christ-figure. Thus not every Mexican who is named Jesus is immediately a Christ-figure or every Mafioso who desperately signs himself before being massacred' (Malone, 1997: 69-70). He advises against *eisegesis* where meanings are read into the film. This may, he says, be 'a commendable exercise of piety', but in order to discern the Christ-figure, exegesis is more appropriate where the 'text' and 'texture' of the work is analysed. Thus, 'The Christ-figure is a way of being led back to the Jesus of the Gospels, a way too of clarifying and enhancing our understanding of Jesus figures' (ibid., p. 70).

Malone's definition is suggestive, but not unproblematic. He claims that the Christ-figure should act almost iconically through which the viewer is led back to the Jesus of the gospels. Clearly this method would work for Griffith's film, where the very juxtaposition of the two stories may lead the audience to contemplate Jesus' life afresh in light of the story of the miscarriage of justice. However, his assumption that the Christ-figure is an objective category which can arise from observation of a film ultimately disqualifies the example from Griffith's *Intolerance* because the young man's suffering is not in itself redemptive. Without this wider significance to the life of Jesus it is difficult to see why anyone else's life and death could act iconically to lead audiences back to contemplate him afresh. In other words, why would an audience contemplate Christ simply through the portrayal of the miscarriage of justice? Indeed, the Christ-figure in much contemporary comment has ceased to act in this way. Instead, it has become more of a technical term to identify someone who is seen to suffer unjustly or voluntarily with the secondary characteristic of bringing some form of redemption. The Christ-figure is not a retelling or a new portrayal of the Jesus figure, but the incarnation of what John Hick terms the 'non-historical or supra-historical Christ-figure or logos' (Hick, 1985: 18). It is the logos that is at work within individuals of religious predilection or otherwise and is the source of salvific transformation. The presence of the logos in these characters enables those with whom they come into contact to experience transcendence, hope and salvation.

Once again, this categorization of characters as Christ-figures is the result of the assimilation of Christ into culture as an 'archetype'. Of this David Gerrold writes: 'He came into the world with superior powers and insight. He was misunderstood. He saved the souls who trusted him and believed in him, he was betrayed by someone he trusted, and he was punished by the authority he challenged. But he left the world changed for the better for having passed through it. So, of course, any tale that echoes that one is going to have enormous resonance among its audience' (Yefferth, 2003: 2). Nevertheless, in practice, the term has divorced the cinematic character from the figure of Jesus, and definitions such as that of Matthew McEver appear most appropriate. He speaks more broadly about its function as the 'Messianic figure', which suggests 'a formula in which the central character is a non-conformist or unlikely redeemer who transforms lives and ultimately undergoes martyrdom' (McEver, 1998: p.1; cf. Baugh, 1997: 112).

For the Christ-figure, then, actions speak louder than words. It is the character who appears to follow the narrative of the Jesus story either in detail or in outline who can be identified as a Christ-figure. It concerns the work of Christ rather than his person. Perhaps the best definition is that of Barnes Tatum who sees the Christ-figure as telling 'a more contemporary story [than that of the gospel accounts] in which characters, events and details recall – but do not narrate – the gospel stories of Jesus' (Tatum, 1997: vii).

Conclusions

Most of the literature is satisfied with merely identifying and categorizing the Christ-figure and thus tending to depreciate the need to demonstrate its theological value apart from its vague recollection of Jesus which potentially assists in gaining clearer understanding of his person and work. If it has any real resonance it is likely that this will be found in encouraging reflection on what discipleship can truly mean. This would disqualify those who reflect the imagery of the Jesus story but possess little virtue in and of themselves (such as Hannibal Lecter and Dracula). Christ-figures are, of course, not salvific. Nevertheless, they reveal what it could mean to walk in Christ's way and, in as much as they succeed in doing so, they offer a glimpse of Christ himself. Those films which include a Christ-figure in their narrative do not proclaim the gospel. Rather they prepare the way.

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