

'The developing field of religion and film is very new and encourages a wide range of different interests and approaches, as Melanie Wright rightly acknowledges in this substantial contribution to film and religion studies. The whole area has not yet developed very far, is something of a hodge-podge, and to a certain degree we do not yet know what we are doing. By selecting a particular systematic approach to religion and film – which incorporates an analysis of narrative, style, content and reception – Wright makes a great step forward for the whole field. Her cultural studies approach to the topic proposes a clearly defined solution to the subject's fragmentariness: a challenge that is long overdue. Moreover, the account she gives of each film that she considers is thorough, fascinating and enlightening.'

William L Blizek

**Professor of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and
Founding Editor of *The Journal of Religion and Film*.**

'Many in religion and film studies do little more than use filmed stories to illustrate religious pieties. Melanie Wright is different. In this admirably informed and wonderfully fluent book, she argues for a cultural studies approach to religion and film which attends as much to the production, visual grammar and reception of a film as to its story. For it is only when we understand a film in its structure and cultural contexts that we can begin to understand its many meanings, including the religious. This book is both an excellent introduction to religion and film – to religion in film and as film – and a much needed challenge to a facile use of film by theologians unversed in film studies and cinematic cultures.'

Gerard Loughlin

Professor of Theology, Durham University, and author of *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*.

'Melanie Wright's scholarship, ease of language, and depth of knowledge make this an insightful, useful, and thought provoking read that examines both religion and film without privileging one for the other. It is an award winner for people who are tired of the low-budget B-movies that litter the field.'

Eric Michael Mazur

**Book Review Editor, *Journal of Religion & Popular Culture* and Associate
Professor of Religion, Bucknell University.**

'Melanie Wright not only provides fascinating discussion of a range of important movies, but also moves the fledgling field of 'religion and film' to the next stage by drawing attention to concepts, questions and themes that undergird this exciting interdisciplinary endeavour. Religion and Film: An Introduction is a must-read for anyone interested in the integral relationship between religion and film in Hollywood and beyond. It will also prove an indispensable text for undergraduates and their teachers.'

Adele Reinhartz

**Associate Vice-President of Research, and Professor of Religion and
Classics, University of Ottawa**

RELIGION AND FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

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Some Trends in Religious Film Analysis

Opening Shots

Conversation relating to religion, theology and film is far from new, but the past ten years or so have witnessed a remarkable growth in scholarship predicated on the religion–film interface. In Britain and North America, many of the outward markers of disciplinarity – college courses, conferences, publications, and so on – are now in place. Yet close reading of the literature suggests a more diffident attitude on the part of many practitioners of ‘religion and film’ (and of practitioners in the related field of ‘theology and film’) than this flurry of activity might at first be thought to imply. Book introductions regularly contain an apologia, justifying a writer’s decision to stray from the territory of more ‘respectable’ study; they reference the fact that his or her scholarly credentials were earned by prior successful engagement with more conventional subject matter. By implication, the disciplinary model operating (be it that of religious studies or theology) is one that places film work at the periphery, rather than at the centre, of serious enquiry. In other words, religion and film (and theology and film) work, with few notable exceptions, has some way to travel before it is securely established as an independent field of credible, critical investigation.

This chapter explores the contemporary *modus vivendi* of academic work in religion, theology and film, its motivations and limitations (and, sometimes, its merits). Although rooted in the tradition

of religious studies rather than in a particular faith community, the discussion will also reference examples of work produced by Christian theologians and other religious adherents. This two-fold concern, signalled by the chapter title, has been adopted for various reasons.

First, as outlined in Chapter I, from a religion-studies perspective different religious positions (including those articulated by professional religious adherents, such as academic theologians) are not the starting points of theory but are themselves data that must not be neglected.¹ Thus the use – including academic ‘use’ – of film by religious adherents is a topic of enquiry within the field of religious studies. Second, perhaps because film work is a minority interest within the wider fields of theology and religious studies, there is considerable contact between differently motivated practitioners. For example, the essay collection edited by Martin and Ostwalt takes a religion-studies approach but one of its three sections, ‘theological criticism,’ contains pieces by authors writing from positions of religious commitment. Conversely, Marsh and Ortiz, and more recently, Christianson, Francis and Telford include a small number of contributions influenced by religious studies within what are largely theologically driven volumes.² Such boundary crossing is inevitable, as scholars grapple with new subject matter and questions. Moreover, if done with care it can be appropriate, since both religion and film and theology and film conceive of themselves as interdisciplinary practices.

In addition to reviewing existing studies this chapter will suggest ways in which the area of religion and film might develop, arguing that recent trends in religious studies and film studies possess the potential to move towards an approach that strikes a balance between, on the one hand, sensitivity to the medium of film, and on the other, critical regard for the content and concerns of religious traditions and their adherents. Remaining chapters in this book develop the argument by modelling the approach in their treatment of a range of films.

Motivations to Religious Film Analysis

Before analysing the literature, it is important to contextualise it: what lies behind the contemporary enthusiasm for film? Arguably,

for academic practitioners, two sets of factors bolster the current surge in interest.

The first grouping is what might be called pragmatic motivations. Academic practitioners of religious studies and theology are conscious of the fact they find themselves in a marketplace. Many teach in institutions hit by funding cuts. Moreover, they typically work in small departments within larger schools or faculties; they most likely compete for promotion or sabbatical leave with colleagues in other, larger (more financially ‘successful’) subjects. Some institutions lack a single-honours programme in religion – courses are offered as part of a wider arts or humanities menu, and need to be attractive and intelligible to students with increasingly diverse educational and cultural backgrounds (this holds true despite the recent, striking increase in the numbers opting for A and AS level Religious Studies in English and Welsh schools). On both sides of the Atlantic, theology and religion-studies teachers are parties to an unending struggle to secure what one writer gloomily describes as ‘a little piece of the diminishing pie.’³

In a context of competition and insecurity, introducing film into the curriculum is partly a strategic move in the attempt to appear legitimate in the eyes of university administrators and external agencies. Film is – or is perceived as – both ‘popular’ and ‘relevant’; it appears less esoteric and more ‘fun’ to study than, for example, textual criticism of the *Assumption of Moses*, or advanced Sanskrit. And it *can* provide a route into the study of religion for students who cannot be assumed to be religiously literate, or to share a common cultural background. Whilst these external pressures are rarely cited as a motivation for research, several authors do position their work vis-à-vis the contemporary higher education system. For Martin and Ostwalt, ‘popular films’ are ‘the films college students are likely to view and know.’ Scott speaks of being motivated to develop a hermeneutic of film by the realisation that ‘some of my students thought differently than I did.’ The interests of ‘the humanities faculty’ and the ‘undergraduate student body’ are also associated closely in a review essay by Williams, and a recent piece by Weisenfeld.⁴

Market forces are not, however, the sole or major determinants of academic inquiry. Interest often stems from recognition that the

cinema offers a 'rich harvest of films which are of interest from a religious [studies], biblical or theological point of view'.⁵ As will already be apparent, the nature of this interest varies considerably. Drawing on Durkheimian or functionalist definitions of religion, some critics see film as a site of religion in modern and postmodern societies. That is, they explore the ways films manage dissent, celebrate the collective and ultimately promote social cohesion through the articulation of commonly agreed values, roles and obligations. (This kind of approach underlies Deacy's study of *film noir* as a site of redemptive activity, and Lyden's book on film as religion.⁶) Alternatively, as touched on later in this book, they may focus more broadly, looking not just at film texts but also noting the structural parallels between cinema-going and religious rituals. Both activities may be understood as distinctively patterned behaviours that take place within spaces specially constructed for their performance (see Chapter IV).

Other commentators who prefer substantive definitions of religion (those giving more weight to the 'content' or 'object' of religious activity), and who may write out of more avowedly confessional positions, wish to subject the voice of film to that of particular theological or doctrinal positions. The task then is to explore film as an example of God's presence in everything, including the products of human culture – to look at how films raise and handle questions of meaning, and in doing so prompt particular religious adherents to think about 'the spirit of the age', and hence the relevancy (or otherwise) of their articulations of the truth as they perceive it.

Forays into film may, then, be variously motivated (the positions described above are just some of the many possible), but are they academically defensible? One Christian theologian writing on film suggests that:

like the rabbits in the coal mines in nineteenth-century England that were used to sniff out poisonous gases, movies can smell the currents in our society, exploring dimensions of reality that are there for us as well, but which we [i.e. Christian theologians] have not fully perceived.⁷

The implication of this simile is that (like the expendable lagomorphs to which it refers) films exist to provide the theologian with yet more grist to his or her mill. Such a statement would strike most film scholars as cavalier (on account of its sheer instrumentalism and seeming disregard for film per se) and naive (in its confidence about film's ability to 'sniff out' the issues of the day).

Much of what follows will suggest that these responses are, generally speaking, well-founded. But a reasonable case *may* be made for work in this field; the kinds of boundary-crossing activity described in this chapter are not without precedent. As Thompson Klein's work on interdisciplinarity highlights, some disciplines have traditions of being more open than others; more eclectic than purist in their conceptions of themselves. In particular, the addition of the term 'studies' (as in 'religious studies') in a discipline's title often signals a shift away from the notion of the discipline as a discrete set of activities and towards a pluralist approach that is problem- or phenomenon-oriented.⁸ (Thus classical studies applies a range of tools to the study of the ancient world; Holocaust studies seeks to describe and explain in historical, philosophical, sociological and other terms the attempted genocide of Jews during the Second World War.) In this vein, religious studies has always practised methodological and theoretical pluralism. It uses insights from a range of fields, including anthropology, art history, economics, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology, to further its goal of producing both an informed account of religious experiences and expressions and, sometimes, a degree of reflection on what gives rise to them in the first place. It follows, then, that a religious-studies approach to film will quite reasonably want to take account of film and cinema studies. This takes the discussion beyond the question of motivations to film analysis, to an examination of the *nature* of contemporary engagement with film. What is being done on the religion–film interfaces, and is it being done well?

On Dialogue

The notion that doing religion and film or theology and film should be an act of dialogue and interdisciplinarity is widely trumpeted by

those working in the fields. Arguably, however, there are few writings that live up to this goal or consider seriously what might be entailed in trying to do so. A journey that begins with a personal enthusiasm for film may find its destination in classroom usages, or in print and online discussions, that foster disregard for the practices of film studies and the medium of film itself.

Much work in the fields of religion or theology and film lacks firm foundations. There is, for example, often little critical discussion of the principles that have informed either the selection or the analysis of the films under consideration in a given study. This contention is not made for negative–destructive reasons. The following discussion is as much an exercise in self-assessment as it is an interrogation of others, and it is written out of a desire to see an increased sense of critical depth develop within religion (and theology) and film.⁹ New publications in these fields are still regularly hailed as pioneering works, despite the fact that serious writing on the religion–film interfaces began in the 1920s, with critics like Jean Epstein.¹⁰ This constant heralding of the new happens partly because writers rarely engage one another to a sufficient degree. Yet without the more secure infrastructure that forms as a result of critical debate, activity in the field of religion and film is vulnerable to retrenchment. Practitioners need to come together – in agreement, and in friendly, robust dispute – to move the conversation forward.

Film Selection

In numerous religion (or theology) and film books, the choice of subject matter appears to be fairly random. In simple terms, this diffuse approach seems to be underpinned by the assumptions that: (a) films are about ‘life’ and its meaning; (b) religion is about ‘life’ and its meaning; ergo (c) all films are ‘religious,’ or are amenable to some kind of religious reading. This position has its weaknesses. As a hypothesis, it is effectively meaningless – so broad that it can be neither proved nor disproved. By declaring any secularism to be merely apparent, virtually nothing of substance is added to an understanding of either religion or film. Moreover, some kind of selection process clearly *is* operative, and in the absence of a serious

account of the decisions made, it can seem (perhaps inaccurately) self-indulgent and trivial. Films are chosen because, ‘they are the ones we like the most.’¹¹ One solution to this problem would be to concentrate only on films with overtly religious themes or agendas. (Coates’s *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy* does this well.¹²) However, even assuming that such works are readily identifiable, such a response would be very restrictive in its definition of suitable subject matter. The task instead is for practitioners of religion (or theology) and film to develop broader, yet discerning, approaches.

In much academic discourse on film, discernment is associated with ‘taste,’ and the discerning film viewer perceived to be someone with a preference for ‘art’ or ‘alternative’ cinema (the Second and Third Cinemas introduced in Chapter I). Writers on religion or theology and film sometimes select films on this kind of basis.¹³ For example, Holloway’s 1972 study of the religious dimensions of film focuses on ‘art’ directors or *auteurs* Carl Theodor Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Bresson. ‘Popular’ films are dismissed, a priori, as incapable of bearing the weight of scholarly criticism. Their very success is seen as indicative of the passivity of the modern cinema audience and the stifling, pernicious influence of American ‘movie moguls.’¹⁴ But the notion of culture or ‘taste’ as a minority preserve no longer rules unchallenged in the humanities, and with few exceptions the 1990s marked a widening in the interests of religion and theology and film professionals. (Bucking this trend, May privileges ‘great films’ that are ‘noble in vision,’ but his definition of these categories remains elusive; Coates studies ‘works in which the intelligence and feelings of the filmmakers, and hence of the audience, are most fully engaged’ – seemingly confident both of his ability to identify such films, and of a congruence between the attitudes of director and spectator.¹⁵) This more inclusive position is, for example, that of Jewett (a Christian theologian) who claims precedent for his approach in that of the apostle Paul:

Paul’s method was to place himself where other people were... If we wish to follow Paul’s cue ... it is essential that ministers, teachers and laypersons interested in the impact of the faith should begin to take more seriously the growing cultural force of the movies.¹⁶

Marsh and Ortiz also concentrate (not exclusively) on popular films, as do Martin and Ostwalt, and studies by Scott, Miles and Stone each suggest that there is a correlation between the viewing figures for a film and its significance as a vehicle of popular mythology.¹⁷

It is important to question these strategies. Running parallel to the development of religion and film, and theology and film, is film studies' own growing interest in reception. The work of Staiger, Klinger and Kuhn, for example, has demonstrated the extent to which audiences are active and engage critically with films. Box office receipts are not an index of significance; moreover, we cannot assume that the meanings viewers take from what they see in the cinema are encoded in a film's textual organisation.¹⁸ More fundamentally, it is not clear that the distinction between 'mainstream' or 'popular,' and 'art' or 'alternative,' cinema is tenable or even helpful. It seems inappropriate to dismiss all mainstream films simply by virtue of their corporate roots. Conversely, it would be unwise to celebrate uncritically all 'alternative' cinema. What is really going on when a film is named as 'art' or 'popular' is sometimes less about studio finances, or about the values the film espouses, than it is to do with product placement. Defining a film in one way rather than another may be part of an attempt to generate enough interest to turn a profit at the (carefully identified) box office.

If the accepted wisdom on the art/popular distinction sometimes looks like received foolishness, is there some other basis on which film selection can proceed? As neither religion nor film is characterised by stasis, it is impossible to work with rigid criteria. Moreover, the different goals of those working in theology and film, who (I deliberately polarise here) are approaching the subject from an 'insider's' position of religious commitment, and others (in religion and film) who want to tackle religions analytically from an 'outsider's' or non-adherent's perspective, will point towards different methodologies. However, the unlikelihood of resolution does not legitimate a failure to debate.

In two recent essays Telford deploys a taxonomy of the types of films that he believes offer scope for study. These are films which either:

- (1) make use of religious themes, motifs or symbols in their titles;
- (2) have plots that draw upon religion (broadly defined to include the supernatural and the occult);
- (3) are set in the contexts of religious communities;
- (4) use religion for character definition;
- (5) deal directly or indirectly with religious characters (e.g. the Buddha, or angels), texts, or locations (such as heaven or hell);
- (6) use religious ideas to explore the experiences and transformation or conversion of characters; or
- (7) address religious themes and concerns, including ethical issues.¹⁹

This scheme needs some clarification. When trying to identify films that present indirect treatments of religious characters (a subcategory of (5) above), over-interpretation is a very real danger, as Telford admits (see also the discussion of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* in Chapter III). Similarly, some critics have seen *all* Hindi films as being rooted in the Sanskrit epics. One might make analogous claims regarding *sharia* and Iranian cinema, in which (for example) the wearing of *hejab* is essential for adult female characters. (Neither of these cinemas are well represented in Telford's lists.) Number (7) appears as a kind of catch-all category, which could leave the way open for a re-emergence of the random or arbitrary approach discussed earlier. Finally, the emphasis on story, character and setting imply, arguably, a concentration on film narrative, in contrast with trends in film studies and theoretical conceptions of 'the religious film,' which typically emphasise aesthetic practices (see later, and Chapter III).

However, Telford's survey is suggestive of bases upon which future conversations about the shape of religion and film studies might proceed. The next step is for these categories (or other schemes) to be refined, and brought into dialogue with focused research questions. The criteria by which films are selected for analysis must be explicitly relevant to the problems in hand. Hence, the selection criteria for this book were determined by several factors, including a need to fit with the project's overall aims (see Chapter I). In keeping with its wider goals, the definition of films in which religion is 'dominant or

significant' is determined with reference to aspects of film narrative, but also the important issue of whether or not religious qualities may be located in a given film's visual style is discussed further in this chapter, together with the audience's role in constructing film as religious.

Methods of Study

If film choice is sometimes accidental, on occasion the interpretative strategy or method deployed by some religion (and theology) and film writers is similarly free, and might be termed 'association,' moving towards allegory or typology.²⁰ The problem with these approaches is that they are limiting – they address films with a set of presuppositions that close off other routes to understanding. Energetic and exhilarating for the practitioner, these methods may allow for a tendency to see resonances between the film and other texts that are simply not there, except in an individual interpreter's mind.

Consciously advocating a postmodern position, Aichele and Walsh are unusual in admitting that the connections their contributors draw between films and biblical passages may exist only for the writers themselves. Such honesty is refreshing, and may indeed shed light on the 'mechanisms of myth and ideology,' as they hope.²¹ What is less clear is how this hermeneutic can help the authors prevent their discipline from becoming an isolated intellectual exercise, distant from and irrelevant to the ways that those outside the Academy make meaning from and with the cinema. The interiority of such practice seems, strangely, to run counter to the populist impulses that are purportedly behind it.

Whilst some writers are turning to post-(or even pre-)modern forms of interpretation, Jewett's work exemplifies a different strategy; that of bringing the film medium into conversation with a recent trend in biblical studies. Thus his 1999 book takes as its starting point the claim of Bruce Malina and the Context Group that ideas about 'honour and shame' were fundamental to the ancient Mediterranean world, and therefore provide the hermeneutical key to the New Testament, particularly the Pauline corpus.²² Since the honour–shame model is the key to Paul, it is also, Jewett says, the

lens through which Christian theologians should read film. Leaving aside questions about Malina's theories, it is clear that this method leads to reductionism. It is an entertaining exercise, offering readings of such delights as *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995) and *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), but whether it ultimately reveals much about film or about Pauline theology seems questionable.

Jewett's study is an example of an approach to film grounded in a theological context, rather than a religious studies one. However, it illustrates a more general tendency to concentrate on certain aspects of film at the expense of others. Typically, the narrative dimension of the films being studied is emphasised, with little attention to *mise-en-scène* ('what is put into the scene'), cinematography, editing or sound: 'The nature of film *is* story,' claims one writer.²³ But as Maisto observes:

The conflation of story with film, or of techniques of literary interpretation with approaches to film, is typical of many efforts in Religion and Film ... in some cases, treatment of the film and the story combine so seamlessly that it is difficult to tell which is being discussed. This has the effect of denying the particularity of each form, and erroneously equating the two media [i.e. literature and film].²⁴

This over-concentration on narrative is understandable. Most practitioners of religion and film and of theology and film trained originally in theology or religious studies. Although religious studies is a less tightly structured field, both disciplines have historically privileged literary texts, or more accurately, certain kinds of literary texts, over other media. Until recently, as Kassam observes, scholars of religion discussed Islam's textual tradition 'without any reference to how Muslims in different parts of the world actually expressed their faith in everyday life and practice'; Strenski speaks of religious studies' traditional neglect of the world of 'things.'²⁵ The problem is that reading a literary text is a quite different experience from 'reading' a film. A written text draws on verbal sign systems; in film a multiplicity of different signifiers (aural, visual, verbal) are contained within the space of a single frame or series of frames. Engaging with a written text requires us to visualise and subvocalise words printed on

the page, whereas film presents images and sounds, making different demands on its audience.²⁶

When scholars focus on dimensions that film and text have in common (narrative elements) to the exclusion of aspects that distinguish film *qua* film, limited analysis results. To rephrase the point, film's basic building blocks are the shot (the photographic record made when film is exposed to light, or its digital equivalent) and the editorial cut (the transition between shots, made in the pre-digital age by splicing the end of one shot to the beginning of another) but little religion (or theology) and film work explores these fundamentals. This raises questions about what is really going on in discussions that purport to bring the worlds of film and religion into dialogue. Could it be that – despite the growing bibliography and plethora of courses – *film* is not really being studied at all?

A Proposal

Which way now? Work in religion and film and theology and film has some way to travel before it can be regarded as a credible field of enquiry. Fundamentals need to be reviewed and perhaps overhauled; it is important to think seriously about what is involved in doing interdisciplinary work. Without firmer foundations, particularly an ability to engage film *qua* film, the survival of religion (and theology) and film cannot be assumed. Film work has, for example, failed to secure its place as a topic for routine coverage in many of the longer-established periodicals in theology and religious studies. It is more often the subject of a 'special issue' – positioned as something urgent, but ultimately marginal to mainstream scholarly discourse. Without sounder underpinnings this will not change, and worse still, the work itself will continue to offer sometimes interesting but frequently irrelevant and inadequate readings of arbitrarily selected films.

Addressing the limitations of current work in religion and theology and film requires a willingness to listen to and debate with others engaged in serious writing on the cinema. As the tendency to elide film meaning into narrative illustrates, few writers on religion (or theology) and film address theoretical questions. Some ignore mainstream writing on film; others address it inconsistently. (For example,

Marsh and Ortiz includes an introduction to film language, but the issues raised are not really followed through into actual analysis.²⁷) Amongst some scholars there is open resistance to film studies. In confessionally grounded writing this is occasionally born of a desire to see theology re-throned as the 'queen of sciences.' Alternatively, it can stem from the recognition that contemporary film studies, with its roots in Marxism and psychoanalysis, often dismisses or devalues the place of religion in contemporary society: 'It is almost as if the discourse of cutting-edge film criticism is designed to exclude attention to religion,' complains Martin.²⁸ (Film studies' handling of religion will be discussed further in Chapter III.) However, this perception does not provide a warrant for those in religious studies or theology to reciprocate poor practice.

A decent course on film within a theology and/or religious-studies programme should regard familiarising students with key areas of film-studies practice as one of its aims. After all, students who want to progress in other areas are expected to develop a challenging range of competencies. Drury lists as follows the demands placed on Bible students: 'knowledge of at least two ancient and two modern languages, of textual criticism and of testingly obscure episodes in history, of religion in its popular and philosophical manifestations, of a vast and sometimes barely readable secondary literature.'²⁹ Not teaching the skills needed to address film texts and their audiences implicitly devalues the medium of film, and adds credibility to the position of those who regard the study of mass cultural forms as simply the hors d'oeuvre before the 'real work' of theology and religious studies begins.

There is of course a potential danger hidden in the suggestion that religion (and theology) and film must attend to film studies. Such a move could see one 'tyranny' simply replaced with another (that of film or cinema studies). I am not advocating a wholesale or uncritical adoption of film theory, although achieving the goals of dialogue and interdisciplinarity will impact on the subject, processes and products of research.

Noting that both individual scholars and the institutions with which they engage (including employing universities, and political

and funding bodies) are often unsure about how to judge interdisciplinarity, Thompson Klein suggests that the focus should be on two dimensions. The first of these is 'depth,' which she defines as competence in pertinent knowledges and approaches to the subject matter; and the second is 'rigor,' in the form of an ability to develop processes that integrate theory and knowledge from the disciplines being brought together. According to this model, creating a truly interdisciplinary approach to religion (or theology) and film requires much more than either a simple extension of the subject matter of religious studies, or ad hoc borrowings of tools and concepts from a neighbouring discipline. It mandates a high degree of self-reflexivity, since it is necessary to learn and reflect on how the disciplines involved characteristically look at the world. And it requires the cultivation of a spirit of enquiry, coupled with a willingness to check repeatedly the accuracy and validity of 'borrowed' material and ideas.³⁰

I am not advocating that scholars and students of religion and theology start mimicking their peers in film studies. There is already a body of people who do 'straight' film criticism well; it is more sensible to develop approaches to film that will play to the distinctive strengths of religion specialists. Moreover, although ambitious, religion (and theology) and film's oft-stated goals of dialogue and interdisciplinarity are laudable, and cannot be achieved if the insights of religious studies (or theology) are simply cast aside. Film studies, too, is beset with its own debates and difficulties – several of which will surface throughout this book. According to some, it faces a crisis of relevance.

In a piece of 'shameless polemic,' Miller castigates contemporary film studies, arguing that for the most part, it 'doesn't matter': it has little influence over discourse on film, public policy, or commercial or not-for-profit film-making practice.³¹ Interestingly, similar charges could be levied against religion and film. There are many films handling religious or spiritual themes and topics. The turn of the century saw a number of films dealing with supernatural themes and spiritual questions, like *Dogma* (Kevin Smith, 1999), *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999) and *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999); the past few years have seen the appearance of further popular features,

as diverse as *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005), *The Man Who Sued God* (Mark Joffe, 2001) and *Millions* (Danny Boyle, 2005). Moreover, some of the most controversial recent features have handled religious subject matter. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) is one obvious example, and Martin Scorsese's 1988 *The Last Temptation of Christ* another. Describing the former's significance as a marker of (certain kinds of) contemporary Christian identity, *The Economist* went as far as to suggest that, 'The 2004 [US Presidential] election could well turn into a choice between Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*.'³²

However, few religion and film (or theology and film) specialists are party to public debates about film. The most prominent participants in the controversies surrounding the production of *The Passion*, for example, were those who wrote or spoke as interfaith activists and New Testament scholars. They judged the film to be in violation of academic consensus about the origins and purpose of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, and of post-Vatican II guidelines governing Catholic presentation of Jews and Judaism in preaching, teaching and dramatisation. These interventions proved largely ineffectual in persuading Gibson away from elements of the film that some feared might inflame antisemitism – in part because they demonstrated little insight into the specific challenges facing those who try to *film* the life and death of Jesus. In a telling illustration of this gap in understanding, the most vociferous scholars based their initial arguments on their *reading* of the screenplay, whilst Gibson's canny and successful response was to organise screenings that allowed people to *see* a rough version of the film.³³

Miller's proposal for film criticism is that it achieves relevance through a more extensive integration with cultural studies. He is not alone in making this suggestion: cultural studies has transformed film studies in the past decade. A cultural-studies approach to film does not imply a rejection of previous film theories, but rather a building on older agendas and methods. Traditional film studies emphasises the analysis of individual film texts, their methods of production and associated technologies. Cultural studies looks additionally at film

distribution, exhibition and reception. It involves a widening from an interest in the production and interpretation of a film 'text' to an interest in the interrelation of 'texts, spectators, institutions and the ambient culture.'³⁴ In other words, it is a means of avoiding the twin poles of auteurism and reader response (of regarding either the filmmaker or the film viewer as an exclusive, determinative influence). It traces the ways in which films acquire meanings by triangulating between film 'texts', contexts and audiences.

Like traditional film studies, cultural studies approaches are interested in gender, 'race', and queer theory, and in ideas about post-colonialism, post-structuralism and materialism (several of these are discussed in this book). What is particularly relevant for conversations about the future of religion (and theology) and film as a subject area is that proponents of this approach (or family of approaches) to film acknowledge that their practices are multi- or anti-disciplinary, that they are subject to ongoing contest and debate, and that they draw inspiration from anthropology and the study of religion as much as from literary analysis and cinema studies.³⁵ That is, cultural studies provides a way of examining film that on occasion professes a link to the academic study of religions. (In this respect it may be compared and contrasted with auteurism, discussed in Chapter IV, which dominated 1960s film criticism and is sometimes loosely associated with theology.)

Unsurprisingly, the relation of cultural studies to film studies is itself a subject of debate. As Stam notes, the name 'film studies' implies attention to a single medium, and 'cultural studies' points to wide interests.³⁶ Culture may be defined in extremely broad terms as referring to all human production, including concepts and social structures as much as objects or artefacts. And as a cultural form that is produced by mass industrial techniques and is ultimately marketed for profit to consumers, film may be likened to a host of other things including television, music CDs, clothing, the microwave or the bicycle. In this way, cultural studies may be perceived as a threat to film studies' founding principle: the distinctiveness of film. But others see cultural studies as an organic, necessary development of film studies, pointing out that much traditional film theory, with its

positing of ahistorical, decontextualised film viewers and concern with the production of signifying systems (see Chapter III), was becoming alienated from its object of study.

Further objections are raised by those sceptical of the willingness of cultural-studies proponents to look at not only high art but also popular films, and the surrounding culture of fandom (discussed in Chapter V). For Willemsen, known for his work on Third Cinema, this risks the de-skilling of the profession: film studies may slide into popularism, losing its critical edge and traditional concern for aesthetic value.³⁷ In response to this, the limits of the art/popular distinction have already been discussed, whilst Chapter VIII questions the Western Academy's ability to determine aesthetic value. It is also a mistake to hold that cultural studies does not analyse film 'texts', or that a study of the popular necessarily implies popularism.³⁸ Nevertheless, these cautions about cultural-studies approaches to film are pertinent.

I suggest, then, that the territory of cultural studies, into which much of film studies has been shifting, offers a discursive space in which the oft-touted dialogue between religious (or theological) studies and film studies is perhaps newly possible. For religion specialists, there is an opportunity to engage with film criticism in a way that does not imply a subordinate relationship, in which the exchange of insight is not a one-way process *from* film studies *to* religion (and theology). Crucially, cultural studies too rejects the kinds of totalising (and atheistic) explanations that earlier ways of theorising film, such as Marxism, structuralism and psychoanalysis tended to espouse.³⁹ It is inherently dialogical and does not automatically assume secularism as a given, nor does it exclude the possibility that those with an expertise in religious studies (or theology) may bring to film competencies and insights that are both distinctive and worthwhile.

The movement towards establishing some kind of common ground is not confined to developments within film and cinema studies. Ever-omnivorous, religious studies shows increasing interest in cultural studies. One of the leading British advocates of this approach, Nye, has argued that the study of religions should in fact be reconceptualised and renamed as 'religion and culture', observing

that 'what we think of as "religious studies" is, in many ways, a form of cultural studies, or at least there is much in cultural studies that those in the study of religions need to be aware of'.⁴⁰ Why is this? On the other side of the Atlantic, Ochs notes that 'more scholars of religions are now acknowledging what religious or spiritual people worldwide ... have long known, from observation, lived experience and intuition: that material objects – things made by people – are vessels that create, express, embody and reflect sacredness'.⁴¹

This approach argues that religion is embedded and enacted in material culture and artefacts. It contends that the material (including books, films, or art) has no intrinsic meaning of its own, and that it cannot be 'read' without attention to historical context:

Meaning ... is not given in some independently available set of code, which we can consult at our own convenience. A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure out what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires.⁴²

In short, it brings to the study of religion(s) a heightened focus on the material dimension and on occasionality – the details of the conditions in which religious meanings are re-created and expressed. In the growth of cultural studies' approaches to film, and concern on the part of proponents of religious studies for the enacting of religious ideas and beliefs in the material world, we can begin to see how a way of doing religion and film might develop that strikes a balance **between respect for film and film studies, and a regard for religious traditions and their adherents. There is potential** here for the fields to grow towards each other, creating an interface of theories and subject matter – the kind of genuinely interdisciplinary work that has rarely happened to date.

What might religion and film studies look like if conducted in this way? What would it tell us? In her 1998 study, Miles models one way of using cultural studies to explore the presentation of religion and values in popular film. She is interested in the social and political matrices within which films are produced and distributed;

her starting point is to see each film as demonstrating one or more social problems and proposing a resolution. Miles also takes an interest in reception, although this is principally in the form of press reviews, and she does little to flesh out her suggestion that 'most filmgoers ... will see and discuss the film they watch in relation to the common quandaries of the moment'.⁴³ Although this book evolved independently, it might be viewed as developing Miles's in several respects. In particular, it seeks a more consistent engagement with scholarship in and around cultural studies, and it recognises that cultural studies is more deeply implicated in the current practice of film studies than Miles allows (notwithstanding her brief observation that cultural studies does not reject other approaches to film). Acknowledgement of this strengthens the account of films as cultural products with specific histories of distribution and exhibition, and facilitates a more extensive dialogue with film theory, particularly in the areas of aesthetics and reception.

The discussion of each film addresses four areas: narrative; style; cultural and religious context; and reception. Film narrative has been discussed earlier in this chapter, and includes in this instance the characters populating films, as well as story and plotting. Style embraces aesthetic and audio-visual dimensions, including *mise-en-scène* (the staging of shots), cinematography, editing and sound. As already noted, it is often in style that the few film critics who have shown an interest in such matters have located a given film's spiritual or transcendental qualities. Cultural and religious context has been touched on briefly in the general discussion of cultural-studies approaches to film. Finally, reception (sometimes termed 'secondary production', because of the active role that cultural studies attributes to film audiences) tries to chart the ways in which a film has been interpreted. It is difficult (particularly when dealing with older films) to map all the variations of interpretation: 'the film *we* saw is never the film *I* remember'.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it is possible to explore the forms (reviews/fan activities/industry, government or other agency documents) that articulate a range of possible responses to a film.

In order to demonstrate this approach more clearly, Chapter III is quite densely written and discusses *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* under

these four broad headings.⁴⁵ The subsequent chapters divide along less pedestrian lines: replication of a method does not guarantee its value. In several instances I try to model in more detail particular strategies that can be deployed, and questions that can be asked, when adopting a cultural-studies approach to religion and film. For example, the chapter on *The Ten Commandments* looks at analysing trailers, and at genre, and that on *The Wicker Man* considers fandom.

The overall goal of this multi-dimensional approach is to offer a richer account of the films concerned, which develops an appreciation of their nature and functions as film 'texts' operating within – and constructing – particular contexts. Looking at film in this way makes it possible to gain a sense of what 'film' is, both as a series of images projected onto a screen (large or small) and as a social artefact. Just as today in film studies, 'the aesthetic and the cultural cannot stand in opposition,' so in order to deploy film effectively in the study of religions, it is possible and necessary both to 'see more, and reflect more upon that seeing'.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested ways in which religion and film analysis could be enhanced by focusing on the verbal, visual, distributional, promotional and other dimensions of the film experience, in addition to the narrative or textual ones. Specifically, it has argued that cultural-studies approaches to film have much to offer. A willingness to take on board findings and perceptions from those working in a variety of fields means that cultural studies is integrative of a range of strategies used by specialist film critics. That same openness allows for conversation with the particular specialist knowledges and methodologies that practitioners of religious studies (and theology) can bring to film.

Doing religion (or theology) and film well does not entail a rejection of previously held assumptions, competencies and passions. Nor does it mean that one should seek to do everything in an account of a film or films. What is instead called for is a focusing in on one or

more of the religion–film interfaces, coupled with an awareness of what is being undertaken elsewhere. If we can do this then we will not just have created a dialogue, we may also find ourselves working in that rarest of fields, a discipline that (to evoke Miller's phrase) *really matters*.