

Encyclopedia of Religion and Film

Eric Michael Mazur, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011. 644 pp. \$85.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780313330728. eISBN: 9780313013980.

A study of the relationship between religion and film has been a subset of both film studies and religion and theological studies for a number of years, and courses on film, religion, and culture can be found at a number of seminaries and universities. The use of media in worship has increased the attention to the many levels of meaning that can be found in film, and film reviews from a particular religious perspective can be found in sources such as *Books & Culture: A Christian Review* or *Hollywood Jesus*. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*, edited by Eric Mazur, professor of Judaic Studies and Religious Studies at Virginia Wesleyan College, strives to provide a survey of the relationship of the popular cultural phenomena of film with religious traditions and themes from a scholarly perspective.

According to the preface, the focus of the volume is “general topics related to religion and film” (xiii), and the list of entries is intended to be selective, as the encyclopedia is meant to provide “a starting place for an investigation of the interaction of religion and film” (xiv). As such, the encyclopedia does not attempt to list every movie about religion or every possible religious theme, but does include an appendix with a ninety-page filmography of over 1,500 films that are mentioned in one of the entries. In setting the parameters of the volume, the editor outlines a definition of film that is limited to narrative films for theatrical release.

While the preface shies away from providing a strict definition of what is meant by religion, the entries themselves provide the parameters for a definition. Mazur’s introduction touches on several aspects of the relationship between religion and film that the overall choice of entries tries to address: explicit religious themes in film; how specific religions are portrayed in film; and religion and the film industry around the world, with a particular focus on the U.S. film industry and the cultural influence of Protestantism.

The types of entries provide the scope for what constitute general topics. Categories of entries that are covered include directors, geographic areas, film genres, religious themes, and religious traditions. The encyclopedia is not attempting to be comprehensive geographically; for instance, geographic areas can be continents or countries, but these are included very selectively, presumably because religion plays a major role in films from these regions. Hence, “Russia” and “Britain” have their own entries, but France is included in the entry on “Europe.” However, the French film industry is also represented in entries on directors such as “Luc Besson,” “Robert Bresson,” and “Francois Truffaut.” Most entries on various regions address both the growth of the film industry in various countries as well as how religion is portrayed in the films in addition to religious themes in the films, even those not explicitly religious.

The guide to related topics at the beginning of the book helps readers explore the connections between the various topics and begin to familiarize themselves with the book’s broad survey approach. Each entry includes a brief bibliography with suggestions for further reading. See references also help make connections from broader topics to more specific ones by referring to related entries such as director “Akira Kurosawa” and “Japan,” both entries of

which reference traditional Japanese religion. The breadth of the cinema industry worldwide is represented with entries such as “Arab Film” and “Bollywood,” and the film industry in Nigeria, or Nollywood, is mentioned in the entry on “Africa.” In keeping with the goal of the book to be an introduction, rather than a comprehensive survey, not every religious tradition receives an entry, but many can be found in the index, which is thorough, and contains references such as Shinto and Sikhism.

The entries on directors such as Woody Allen, Luc Besson, and Akira Kurosawa serve as examples of the types of discussions about religion and film the encyclopedia is trying to address. The religious background of all three directors is touched upon, but the main focus of the articles is discussions of how their movies reflect on religious concerns such as the search for meaning in life and facing difficult ethical and moral decisions, and on reflections on topics such as God, good vs. evil, and the afterlife.

Many of the entries take a survey approach. This survey approach is often historical; for example, the discussion of the treatment of Islam in film, the portrayal of dystopian societies in the “Dystopia” entry, or the films and film industry of Latin America start with examples of the earliest films on their topic and move forward to the present. Besides surveying the oeuvre of various filmmakers, some entries provide a bibliographic essay, such as the entries on “Theology and Film” and “Film as Religion.”

The frequency of the appearance of some topics in films seems to have helped guide the selection of entries. While “Angels” and the “Devil” are included as entries due to their frequent appearance as characters, Mary the mother of Jesus does not have an entry. Instead, the variety of nativity films are covered in the entry on “Jesus” as part of the subgenre of Jesus films. Other religious figures and topics covered due to the frequency of their appearance in film include “God” and “Voodoo.”

In addition, entry choices also reflect the nature of the scholarly literature on religion and film. The entries on “Joan of Arc” and on the “Holocaust” are examples of the intersection of religious themes appearing frequently in movies and the state of the current scholarly discussion on religion and film. Other examples of entries of this type include “Sports,” which discusses the “mystical sports films,” or “Women,” which focuses more on spirituality than particular religious traditions, and help illustrate how the book has been shaped by the most prominent discussions about religion and film in the scholarly community. The selected bibliography at the end of the volume also serves to illustrate that the entries were chosen to correspond with topics within the ongoing discussions of film and religion in the scholarly literature.

Individual films are not entries as a general rule, though there are entries on the controversies surrounding the films *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The range of films represented in entries include explicitly religious films like *The Ten Commandments* and the various films based on the life of Jesus, to films with Christ figures like the *Matrix* trilogy, which also warrants its own entry, to the spiritual-but-not-religious category, such as Terry Gilliam’s *The Fisher King*. Even the musical *Brigadoon* is mentioned in the entry on “Mysticism.”

Some of the genres of film covered examine the interaction of Protestant culture and film in the United States, as reflected in entries such as “Bible Films” and “Missionary Films,” as well as areas of conflict, such as in the entry on “Censorship and Hollywood.” Such entries also touch on the complex relationship of Protestant evangelicalism to films and the film industry in the United States, as does the entry on “Protestantism.” These entries, as well as the entry on “Catholicism,” illustrate the complex relationship religious adherents in the United States have had with

films and the film industry, sometimes using the medium as a vehicle to promote their faith, while at other times finding the power of the medium to be threatening.

The volume provides a good overview of how various religions have been portrayed in film, and reviews the ongoing discussions about the religious content of film as well as contemporary conversations about exploring religious and theological themes through the lens of film. This book provides a basic but scholarly introduction to the study of religion and film, and does not assume prior knowledge of either film studies or religious studies. Though there are other guides to film specifically for selecting films that could be used for theology and film discussion groups, the many examples of specific films in this encyclopedia could serve as another source for identifying potential films for discussion. Readers looking to delve more deeply into the interdisciplinary work of scholars writing on film and religion can explore the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* for more in-depth analyses of religious themes across films and film genres. As a one-volume encyclopedia that deals with the most significant topics being discussed in the study of religion and film, this work is recommended for all academic libraries.

Lisa Gonzalez
Catholic Theological Union

