THE HOLY CINEMA: CHRISTIANITY, THE BIBLE AND POPULAR FILMS

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This is the second century of the “Age of Hollywood” where popular films have become “the lingua franca of the twentieth century. The Tenth Muse...[that] has driven the other nine right off Olympus – or off the peak, anyway,” and it looks like it will continue to dominate Western civilisation into the foreseeable future. Regrettably, this fundamental fact has not been given its due cultural recognition within contemporary teaching fields, whether secular or church-based. Yet, “Let’s face it! The entertainment industry – in particular, film – has changed traditional education and communication in profound ways, and the church had better take notice,” especially if it wishes to thrive in the postmodern, post-millennial, post-Christian and increasingly post-print period. Lest one be tempted to cast the first stone, this techno-cultural reality is not a function of poor parenting, lazy kids or unchallenging curriculums, but rather, it is the result of the industrial revolution and its never-ending quest forward.

If educational hierarchies do not make religion subjects relevant to our media-saturated world and its students media savvy, then the fears of Scripture scholar Bernard Brandon Scott might readily come to pass, namely that “my fate might parallel that of the dinosaurs. Our culture had passed over some great divide, and I was on the other side.” Scott saw a parallel between himself and the bygone era of orality, and it inspired him to explore New Testament (NT) themes in popular films “to lay a foundation for hermeneutics in an electronic age.” That is, to make commercial feature

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2Although there are real ontological differences between “film,” “cinema,” “movie,” “video,” “TV movie,” “CD-ROM,” “VCD,” “DVD,” “MPEG 4” etc., they are all audiovisual images and will be treated herein as essentially interchangeable.
6Scott, ix.
films a cultural and educational touchstone for our youth and society, and thus a contemporary focus for the study of religion in the pedagogic tradition of Arrandale, Johnston and Marsh.7 This techno-cultural shift is so pronounced that Todd A. Kappelman argued:

Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture in which we live than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series.8

One can only agree with him wholeheartedly. After all, “great movies are like incarnate sermons,”9 as evidenced by the indelible biblical epics of director Cecil B. DeMille, namely The Ten Commandments (1923), The King of Kings (1927), Samson and Delilah (1949) and The Ten Commandments (1956).10 Indeed, Melanie J. Wright used this latter Moses movie for interfaith dialogue purposes in addition to cultural studies, communication studies and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film studies (aka cinematic theology, celluloid religion, theo-film, film-faith dialogue).11

MOVIES AS PEDAGOGIC TOOL: A “SIGN OF THE TIMES” CHRISTIAN DUTY

Rather than just lament the existence of the “film-addicted generation,”12 it is more prudent for the profession to accept this sociocultural fact, consider

12Frost and Hirsch, 151.
the cinema as a valid, extra-ecclesiastical resource, and proactively employ it within the classroom, home and pulpit for its own instructional purposes, that is, to take Hollywood films seriously and not just as diversionary entertainment, student pacification devices or token visual aides that are otherwise ignored, unappreciated or under-utilised. Nor should one fall into the trap of automatically condemning, deriding or dismissing the popular cinema just because it is popular (i.e., not high art) or visual (i.e., not print-based).

Postmodern theology, religion studies and religious education fit for the post-millennial period requires the embrace of this medium (not its rejection), coupled with the loving exercise of discernment (not denial), whilst being proactively integrated into the contemporary teaching and preaching of religious discourse. In short, the reputation of “the movies” needs to be rehabilitated and taken to the forefront of studies in religion, and one way of doing this is to reveal the penetration, power and pedagogic possibilities of the holy cinema. Besides, popular films are contemporary “signs of the times” (Matt 16:3) that automatically warrant monitoring precisely because of their cultural dominance, especially in the honoured scriptural tradition of thinking about things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8).13

Positive discrimination is required simply because “not all movies are worthy of our time or attention, because all stories are not created equal.”14 As with all art, there are good and bad examples, relevant and irrelevant instances, and occasionally exemplars that are so profound that they linger in the imagination long after the flickering screens have died down. For Christian educators, there is also the additional obligation of respecting the weaker brother (1 Cor 8) and protecting him from potential harm due to aberrant philosophies and vain deceit (Col 2:8), plus the numerous sources of film fears that can generate flock shock.15

13The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout, unless quoting other translations.
14Godawa, 177.
Positive discrimination also requires that one not uncritically accept what is offered, and thus avoid becoming what Brian Godawa called a “cultural glutton.” That is, one “who consumes popular art too passively, without discrimination” in what is essentially an unwise act of cultural immersion. For example, many Christians praised The Apostle (1997, dir. Robert Duvall) starring the sincere but sinning Pentecostal preacher, Euliss “Sonny” Dewey, or as he was known in his second charismatic preaching life, the Apostle E. F. (Robert Duvall). Yet, as Mark Allan Steiner argued, “despite its authentic portrayals of evangelical faith performance – the film nonetheless subverts the evangelical faith by reductionistically misrepresenting its ontological, epistemological, and axiological imperatives,” thus character assassinating the faith and the faithful in the process. Also needed by the profession and public alike are critical screen studies skills, in addition to theological knowledge and the cultivating of a loving heart to facilitate the fair, accurate and judicious exercising of positive discrimination.

THREE PHILOSOPHICAL STANCES TOWARDS THE CINEMA

The popular cinema can be treated using one of three philosophical stances, namely, by exercising prohibition, abstinence or moderation. The first stance is the traditional anti-film response of advocating cinematic prohibition, which is unwise and pragmatically unenforceable in today’s image-driven society, even if potentially legal and desired by some anti-film religionists. In essence, this philosophical stance is the manifestation of an unenlightened attitude, especially if film is to be avoided because it is supposedly “inherently evil and detrimental to the Christian’s spiritual well-being.” If this were truly a valid argument, then the Good Book itself would be banned. As Godawa put it, “Since the Bible itself explores human evil with great depth and much detail, we cannot say that movies that do so are, without exception, exploitative. If we do, we run the risk of accusing the original Author of our faith of being exploitative himself.”

10 Godawa, 14.
11 Godawa, 14.
14Kappelman, 128.
15Godawa, 180.

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The second stance is to advocate cinematic abstinence, which is also an unsatisfactory response because it is essentially anti-progressive, unproductive and an act of cultural desertion that leads to socio-spiritual defeat, corruption, irrelevance and ultimately cultural alienation. Putting one’s proverbial head in the ground may be temporarily comforting, but it is anti-educational and undignified and leaves one dangerously exposed to all sorts of potential abuse.

The third and only viable philosophical stance left today is cinematic moderation, that is, not banning, avoiding or uncritically embracing films, but rather judiciously engaging them for knowledge and understanding. Indeed, to proactively engage popular films with a positive, critical attitude fulfils in principle the Apostle Paul’s advice about mentally renewing one’s mind (Rom 12:2), especially if done for the greater glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). As Bob McKinney advised his religious education teachers,

> Keep your eye on the entertainment and news media that is touching the lives of your students, and you will discover many opportunities to teach biblical truths... Learn to use the trends and current events displayed by media as resources for connecting faith with the real world and thereby teaching biblical truths. Develop the ability to see God at work *in all things* [including the cinema, TV, videos etc.].²²

**Consciousness Raising as Applied Cinema**

Educating young people to select their media choices, teaching people of all ages to evaluate media’s underlying values and, in general, promoting a media “consciousness” is the challenge for educators, activists and religious leaders who recognize that for our society to flourish into the next century, we must turn the closed, one way system of commercial mass media into a two-way process of discussion, reflection and action with each other and with the media itself. It’s time to begin.²³

One can only agree. Without basic consciousness-raising activities of the above-recommended sort, a valuable religious resource will be wasted, but more importantly, an equally valuable scholarly opportunity to re-


examine issues with fresh eyes will have been lost. After all, a commercial feature film must make explicit what is frequently implicit in the sacred text. Therefore, the filmmaker’s practical choices can provide new insights into old theological problems not considered beforehand precisely because of the exegetes’ past over-reliance upon written texts and their tiresome, if also traditional, explanations rooted in a print-based methodology. So surely the exciting potential for new discovery using a visually-based methodology is worth the price of admission. For example, in an interesting academic excursion Paul Teusner examined a selection of horror and science fiction (SF) films to tease out features of contemporary media culture and its relevance to theology.\(^24\) However, even more profound theological insights can be gained from an examination of the diverse religious material built into popular films, whether overtly or covertly (i.e., textually or subtextually) constructed. Doing so is a valuable act of applied cinema (i.e., putting movies to work and not just using them as relief from work) that is acceptable in a world wherein popular films are considered the “natural media.”\(^25\)

As a part of this pedagogically wise and professionally necessary consciousness-raising activity, the relevant critical film and religion literature was reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour), using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens.\(^36\) This film study methodology assumes that audiences are cultured, accept film and its various genres as fine art and have seen the movies under discussion. Focusing primarily upon the world inside the frame (as opposed to the world outside the frame), its main function is to foster discussions relating to contemporary cultural concerns, including the interpretation of motifs, symbols and themes, and its aesthetic evaluation employing traditional principles. This methodological focus makes it ideal for guided discussion purposes within the classroom, home or pulpit.

Since the popular cinema is brimming with religious content, only an introductory survey of a portion of this immense field is feasible herein. Consequently, the popular cinema was selectively scanned and three distinct but tangentially related religious categories were identified, namely: (a) sacred


\(^{26}\)T. Bywater and T. Sobchack, An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film (New York: Longman, 1989).
subtexts – Christ-figures; (b) subtextual biblical characters, themes and props; and (c) Bible-quoting. The following is a brief explication of each of these taxonomic categories utilising copious inter-genre exemplars to illustrate the penetration, power and video exegesis possibilities of the holy cinema.

Sacred Subtexts – Christ-Figures: The Cinematic Transfiguration of Jesus and His Sacred Associates

The cultivated ability to see God at work in all things, and the power to nourish faith through fiction applies especially to the analysis of sacred figures within popular films.²⁷ Of course, overt religion in the form of NT Jesus stories and Old Testament (OT) biblical epics are aesthetically acceptable, theologically valid, pedagogically serviceable and numerous.²⁸ However, their overtly religious nature is off-putting to some members of the public, especially atheists, non-believers or the religiously wounded. A more acceptable and far more prolific means of disseminating Christian holy stories, symbols and characters occurs within the overtly secular media via the phenomenon of sacred subtexts (aka holy subtexts; divine infranarratives).

What are sacred subtexts? In essence, they are hidden religious figurations built into films to add new layers of meaning to the storytelling, but they only become detectable once a viewer is consciously sensitised to them. The phenomenon has been described as “anonymous religiousness”²⁹ or the pursuit of “overtly religious themes in a secular ‘wrapper’.”³⁰ Ontologically speaking, subtexts exist because narratives have a dual nature, namely, an

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overt plot plus a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature. As Bernard Dick described this relationship: “the narrative and infranarrative (or text and subtext) are not two separate entities (there is, after all, only one film); think of them, rather, as two concentric circles, the infranarrative being within the narrative.”31 Through this interlocking arrangement, secular films can engage in religious storytelling without appearing “religious.” Moreover, a character needn’t be consciously aware of his shadings of the truth or the hidden meanings in his words or actions for there to be subtext or for us to become aware of it.32 Christ-figures are one of the most popular of the sacred subtexts “hidden” within the Hollywood cinema. They are not necessarily found residing within cinematic churches, organised Christianity or any other readily recognisable religious institution, although at a more advanced level, they can be artfully engineered therein.33 As Adele Reinhardt explained concerning their essential nature:

...Jesus is not portrayed directly but is represented symbolically or at times allegorically. Christ figures can be identified either by particular actions that link them with Jesus, such as being crucified symbolically (Pleasantville, 1998 [dir. Gary Ross]), walking on water (The Truman Show, 1998 [dir. Peter Weir]) or wearing a cross (Nell, 1994 [dir. Michael Apted]; Babette’s Feast, 1987 [dir. Gabriel Axel]). Indeed, any film that has redemption as a major theme (and this includes many, if not most, recent Hollywood movies) is liable to use some Jesus symbolism in connection with the redemptive hero figure.34

In fact, there are many structural characteristics of the cinematic Christ-figure that help signpost their hidden nature. These subtextual figurations are ontologically distinct from the cinematic Jesus-figure, which the public more easily recognises, particularly when Jesus is crafted as a "leading man," the archetypal superstar of the ancient world. Famous Jesus-figures have included Jeffrey Hunter in King of Kings (1961, dir. Nicholas Ray), Max Von Sydow in The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965, dir. George Stevens); Brian Deacon in Jesus (1979, dir. Peter Sykes and John Kirsh), Willem Dafoe in The Last Temptation of Christ (1988, dir. Martin Scorsese) and Jim Caviezel in The Passion of the Christ (2004, dir. Mel Gibson). In short:

"Jesus-figure" refers to any representation of Jesus himself. "Christ-figure" describes any figure in the arts who resembles Jesus. The personal name of Jesus (in line with contemporary spirituality, thought and practice) is used for the Jesus-figure. The title "Christ" -- the "Messiah," or the "Anointed One" -- is used for those who are seen to reflect his mission. In cinema, writers and directors present both Jesus-figures and Christ-figures.

Overall, the "idea of 'the Christ-figure' seeks to counter the straitjacketing of Jesus in physical correspondence to a stereotype. Instead, it seeks to show his essence revealed in action." Christ-figures "experience the kinds of things Jesus did or who personify the righteous, loving, self-sacrificing Christ. Christ figures in film can identify with Jesus' suffering, liberate people who are persecuted or enslaved, or rescue people from an evil force. The popular cinema is full of them, albeit, frequently unappreciated by the public. Nevertheless, the cinematic Christ-figure is a valid, living genre that grows in number, diversity and complexity each year."
These christic films (aka Christ myth films; Christ-event films) are so prolific because they can take on any genre, period or form. Their protagonists can wear any face, whether male, female, animal, human, alien, young, old, biological, synthetic, electromechanical or any hybrid combination of the above. Depending upon the inventiveness of the filmmakers and the narrative demands of the storyline, the correspondence between the Christ-figure protagonists and the biblical Jesus can be profound and extensive, as evidenced by the intergalactic refugee-cum-hero, Kal-El/Clark Kent/Superman (Christopher Reeve) in Superman: The Movie (1978, dir. Richard Donner) and Superman II (1980, dir. Richard Lester),\textsuperscript{41} or they can be minimal and iconic, as with the renegade replicant, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) in Blade Runner (1982, dir. Ridley Scott).\textsuperscript{42} They need only embody some essential elements of the Christian mythos and faithfully adhere to the logic of the christic hermeneutic therein to qualify as legitimate Christ-figures.


\textsuperscript{41}Kozlowski, “Superman as Christ-figure.”

\textsuperscript{42}Kozlowski, “From Holy Aliens to Cyborg Saviours.”
Consequently, a much broader, deeper and richer spiritual-biblical-theological vision can be achieved in this way as filmmakers cinematically transfigure their secular characters into mystical Christ-figures, that is, from the profane to the holy in the veritable twinkle of an eye. The American prison drama, The Green Mile (1999, dir. Frank Darabont), loosely based upon a Stephen King story of the same name, is a particularly good example of this transformational possibility.

THE GREEN MILE (1999) STARRING JOHN COFFEY AS A BLACK JESUS

Some critics considered this movie to be memorable only because it “must be the first non-animated film to feature a geriatric mouse,” which is true, and yet it also contained a profound subtextual Jesus that was no Mickey Mouse character. The film tells the tragic story of the African-American “death row inmate John Coffey (J.C., get it?): ‘Like the Lord, but spelled different,’ he’s Jesus too.” The “implications of the initials...is not lost on most of those who see this film.” Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) is a larger-than-life Black personality who was both physically and supernaturally imposing. Just like Jesus who was a larger-than-life personality and physically “outstanding,” especially if we accept the prophetic OT description of his physical lack of beauty (Isa 53:2-4), in addition to being mystically and spiritually exceptional. In particular, Jesus’ “eyes must have been remarkable. Time and again we are told that ‘He looked,’ and the look seems to have been enough,” just like Cecil B. DeMille depicted him (H.B. Warner) in his silent classic, The King of Kings.

Coffey-as-prisoner was described by the sadistic prison guard, Percy Westmore (Doug Hutchison) as a “dead man walking,” which was an accurate description of this soon-to-be-executed man; just like Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) in the eponymously named film Dead Man Walking (1995, dir. Tim Robbins). This descriptive phrase was also an accurate assessment of Jesus on his earthly mission. Not only did this Messiah have to die to fulfil the Scriptures (Matt 26:54, 56), but he was a willing sacrificial victim desiring

to redeem humanity of sin (Matt 1:21; Rev 1:5). For Tony Magistrale, this christic fact explained Coffey's puzzling and repeated cryptic mantra: "I took it back." Magistrale argued that: "Coffey wishes to do nothing less than 'take back' sin from the human world; he seeks to restore and redeem the wretched who have been tainted or suffer because of human cruelty or illness." The film's title, The Green Mile, referred to the floor colour that connected Cellblock E on death row to the electric chair room within the Louisiana Cold Mountain Penitentiary. Metaphorically speaking, this was Coffey’s Via Dolorosa leading to Golgotha, the place of a skull (Matt 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17), that ancient inhospitable execution site in Jesus' day.

Coffey was gentle, noble and guileless with miraculous healing powers of priceless benefit to humanity, especially via the laying on of hands. This mystical black man was unique among men, just like the mystical Jesus with his miraculous healing powers was unique amongst the suffering humanity of his day (Luke 22:51). In due course, Coffey’s supernaturalism cured the prison warden's "mad" wife, Melinda Moores (Patricia Clarkson), of a cancerous brain tumour that was previously deemed inoperable by her doctors. Coffey’s medical miracle was the equivalent of the healing of Mary Magdalene when Jesus expelled seven devils/evil spirits afflicting her and she returned to normal (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). Coffey also cured prison guard Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) of his urinary tract infection by placing his huge hand against his crotch, thus enabling him to urinate without pain and make love to his wife all night long. Most significantly of all, Coffey brought the cruelly crushed mouse, Mr. Jingles, back to life again, resurrection being the signature sign of the divine. Just like Jesus who brought back from the dead the ruler’s daughter (Matt 9:23–25), the only son of the widowed mother (Luke 7:11–15) and the world famous Lazarus (John 11:41–44).

"Like John, Jesus too was a gentle outcast shunned by his society, able to cure the sick, and eventually sentenced to death." Coffey was of course totally innocent of the heinous crime of which he was accused. He did not rape and murder the two little white girls whose mangled and bloodied bodies he was found clutching in the woods; instead, he stumbled upon them and was trying to heal them. However, his benevolent actions were misinterpreted and he was arrested, tried and unfairly sentenced to a gruesome death in

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48Magistrale, 141.
49Buehrer, 231.
the electric chair, nicknamed “Old Sparky” (the public death machine of 1930s Americans). Coffey’s fate was similar to that of Jesus who was also innocent but sentenced to a gruesome death by crucifixion on the cross (the public death machine of first century Romans). Melinda Moores noticed Coffey’s multiple whipping scars upon his body (presumably the result of violet racism), and although Magistrale suggested that “John Coffey bears the symbolic scars of the world, the wounds of humanity,” they resonated more strongly with Jesus’ scourging prior to his painful death (Matt 27:26; Mark 15:15).

Although pure and innocent, Coffey did not defend himself against the violent crime of which he was accused, just like the sinless and innocent Jesus in his day before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate and the chief Jewish priests and elders (Matt 27:12; Mark 14:60–61). Coffey-the-man-mountain certainly had the physical power, the supporters and the opportunity to escape his deathly fate if he wished it, but he deliberately chose not to. In the same way, Jesus-the-son-of-God chose not to escape his captivity-cum-deadly fate, although he had the power and the supporters and could easily have done so (Matt 26:53). Coffey resiliently, if somewhat apprehensively, accepted his unjust fate with a strong knowingness and faith in the future, and he went to his painful death bravely and willingly, just like Jesus who willing accepted his painful death with full knowledge, albeit, for a short time anxiously sweating blood-sized drops (Luke 22:44) before bravely doing his cosmic duty upon the cross.

It is this willing, sacrificial death of an innocent man that helps firmly signpost a Christ-figure, although Coffey’s reason of being “dogged tired” (i.e., personal exhaustion and resignation) is less noble than Jesus’ cosmic saviour motivation. As Magistrale noted regarding Coffey: “He wants to die. He has seen enough of depravity of man; even his massive shoulders are worn down by the weight and length of time he has had to assume the burden of humanity’s sins.” Alternatively, as Coffey described this burden, it is “like pieces of glass in my head all the time.”

Coffey-the-innocent was innocent, but he had experienced much trouble and evil. He is not “a divine idiot figure” who is “massively dumb,” “dull-witted” and suffering from a “mental deficiency” as Dana Heller suggested.

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50 Magistrale, 140.
51 Magistrale, 141.

194 Colloquium 38/2 2006
Sadly, the child-like innocence and simplicity of Christ-figures are often confused with stupidity, immaturity or psychological aberration. Heller at least acknowledged his uniqueness when she claimed: “This gentle idiocy combined with his miraculous powers of healing and salvation are what mark him as part of the tradition of divine idiocy.” 53 Moreover, “John Coffey is a character whose primary function is to redeem whites of their historical guilt for the crimes of racism. At the same time, he redeems the state for its commission of capital punishment against the wrongfully accused. The film crudely exploits the politics of race.” 54

To further signal Coffey’s Christ-figure nature, Paul Edgecomb approached defence attorney Burt Hammersmith (Gary Sinise) and read Coffey’s court transcript. At one dramatic point, Edgecomb instinctively cried out “Jesus!, Jesus!” to overtly acknowledge the horrific crime and to covertly tag Coffey’s subtextual divinity for those who had the eyes to see and the ears to hear (Ezek 44:5). In the course of their discussions, Hammersmith told Edgecomb that he could not find much information about Coffey’s background (analogous to the missing years of Jesus’ life between childhood and adulthood), so he suggested that Coffey must have just “dropped out the sky,” reminiscent of Jesus who was referred to as the “bright and morning star” (Rev 22:16) and had left his heavenly abode to come down to earth to live among humanity as one of them. Conversely, Jesus “was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19; see also Luke 22:69), but after John Coffey’s grizzly execution, he is not seen ascending into heaven. However, heaven references were made in the film via Coffey’s, and later Paul Edgecomb’s emotional reaction to the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers’ movie Top Hat (1935, dir. Mark Sandrich). The “soundtrack playing Astaire singing ‘Heaven...I’m in heaven’ come to symbolize for both men the glory of the afterlife and a peaceful conclusion to their mortal suffering.” 55

To make an even stronger Christ-figure film, the scriptwriters could have depicted Coffey in his own resurrection scene (e.g., a mysteriously missing body at the funeral home, a ghost figure floating around, a spectre speaking in a dream sequence, an ambiguous figure in the far distance who might be Coffey, passionate stories by reliable others of Coffey’s post-execution appearance around the country). Alas, the films’ correspondences between

53 Heller, 6.
54 Heller, 6.
55 Magistrale, 145.
Coffey-the-Christ-figure and Jesus are not 100% perfect, nor could they be, pragmatically speaking, given the complexity of Jesus' life and the innumerable interpretations, divergent readings and multiple images of the man whom nobody knows.\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless, there are enough signature signs of the divine to make The Green Mile a worthy addition to the Christ-figure genre and a suitable exemplar for further theological research. For example: What does John Coffey not teach us about theology? Since Coffey did not rise from the dead, how does the sin of one man redeem us all? If remaking the movie, what could the filmmakers do to make Coffey a more powerful Christ-figure? What are the limitations of the christic Coffey and who set these limits? What other insights into theology might we learn from this film?

\textbf{BUTTRESSING THE CHRISTIC COFFEY WITH SACRED ASSOCIATES}

To reinforce Coffey's christic nature, the characters around this black Jesus resonated with Christ's holy associates in ancient Judea. For example, the two death-row inmates, the mouse-loving Cajun, Eduard "Del" Delacroix (Michael Jeter) and the child-killing rapist "Wild Bill" Wharton (Sam Rockwell) were to be electrocuted for their crimes. They were the cinematic equivalents of the good and bad thieves who died alongside Jesus (Luke 23:32–33, 39–43). Furthermore, Brian Douglas considered that "the guards on the green mile are the disciples – sometimes doubting and sometimes full of faith."\textsuperscript{57} Beverley Bare Buehrer considered that the compassionate guard Paul Edgecomb was either an Apostle Paul figure or the Roman centurion who witnessed Christ's crucifixion and became a true believer (Mark 15:39). She asked: "Does Paul (an allusion to the disciple?) ask a question that really amounts to asking how God will accept his I-was-just-following-orders excuse for doing society's will? Is Paul nothing more than one of the Roman guards at the base of the cross?"\textsuperscript{58} And especially when he asked Coffey his most spiritually troubling question: "What am I going to say to God for killing one of his true miracles?"\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58}Buehrer, 231.
\textsuperscript{59}Buehrer, 231.
Prison guard Paul was instrumental in putting Coffey to death as per his job requirements (with Coffey’s approval). This functionally suggests that he is the Roman centurion-figure doing his assigned duty as the man in charge of the guards and prisoners, rather than an Apostle Paul-figure whose scriptural equivalent had no role in putting Jesus to death according to canonical Holy Writ. Nevertheless, Paul Edgecomb’s angst at “killing a miracle of God” was “akin to the universal burden of guilt associated with the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ.” Indeed, Paul’s extra long life because of his personal contact with Coffey-the-Christ-figure was more reminiscent of The Wandering Jew legend than the Gospel accounts. At least this suggestion is more in keeping with the religious subtext of the film than Magistrale’s linking of Paul with “Anne Rice’s existential vampires.” As such, it means that The Green Mile is also the first non-cartoon portrayal of a Wandering Jew mouse!

For Malone and Pacatte, Paul Edgecomb is also a “centurion figure,” but not the centurion at the execution site, rather, the in-charge centurion who petitioned Christ to heal his servant in Capernaum (Matt 8:3–13). As they put it: “Edgecomb works within a prison system where he says ‘Go’ and subordinates and prisoners move at once; he says ‘Come,’ and they come.” In the same way, the Roman centurion told Jesus: “I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it” (Matt 8:9). This suggestion is also more plausible than Magistrale’s “existential vampires.” Overall, the “earthly pain Coffey has borne is not in vain...His message of love and faith is the same as Christ’s even if Coffey, like Jesus, is helpless to check the hurt we do to one another.”

**Subtextual Biblical Characters, Themes and Props: Hidden Religion Out in the Open**

Sometimes, there are enough textual clues engineered into a film to suggest an alternative interpretation of the protagonist’s subtextual status. For

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60 Magistrale, 143.
62 Magistrale, 144.
64 Malone and Pacatte, 233.
65 Magistrale, 144.
66 Magistrale, 145.

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example, Magistrale argued that the Christ-figure John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile* could also be seen as a St. Christopher-figure:

After Coffey heals the warden’s wife, she presents him with a silver St. Christopher’s medal that Coffey wears around his neck for the remainder of his life. The choice of saint presents a particularly striking parallel to Coffey’s role in this film, for the legends surrounding St. Christopher suggest that he, too, was a giant who was persecuted and martyred. Furthermore, Christopher devoted himself to the service of others, performing acts of selfless charity, especially by carrying wayfarers over bridgeless rivers upon his strong shoulders. On one notable occasion, while ferrying a child across a river, Christopher staggered under what seemed to him a crushing weight. When he reached the other side, he upbraided the child for making him feel as though “I had borne the whole world upon my back.” The child answered him, “Marvel not, for thou hast borne upon thy back the world and Him who created it”...In *The Green Mile*, John Coffey bears the weight of the world – specifically, an intimate knowledge of its worst acts of sin and ugliness – upon his massive shoulders.  

Not surprisingly, the name “Christopher” is derived “from a Greek word meaning ‘carrier of Christ,’ used figuratively by the early Christians to indicate that they bore Christ in their hearts.” Equally unsurprising is how Jesus and St. Christopher are confused and/or intermingled in many popular films to enhance the protagonist’s religious status. For example, sometimes the physical word “Christopher” is partially blocked to give the visual impression of “Christ...” or “Chris...” which itself hints at the word “Christ,” as was engineered in the SF film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam). Its Christ-figure protagonist, James Cole (Bruce Willis), another named J.C., was wearing a top with “Chris” seen on it. That is, a named J.C. who was a Christ-figure wearing a “Chris” top who had been sent from another world to try and save this world for the benefit of all humanity. Filmmakers can be very creative in this multi-layered way.

Indeed, once attuned to this religious mindset, sacred themes and characters can be found everywhere and in the most unlikely places.  

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67 Magistrale, 141.  
example, Marjut Verbeek saw the trials and tribulations of its protagonist in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985, dir. Hector Babenco) "as a metaphor for the 'dark night' of the soul."69 Donald Lyons saw *Bad Lieutenant* (1992, dir. Abel Ferrara) as "a devil's parody of the Stations of the Cross."70 Kathleen Murphy saw Science Officer Ash (Ian Holm) in *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott) as an "android Judas."71 She also saw Clemons (Charles Dance) in *Aliens*3 (1992, dir. David Fincher) as a Cain-figure because "Clemons's neck bears a bar code, the mark of Cain signaling his culpability for many deaths. A sinner doing endless penance in Hell."72 Lloyd Baugh saw Sr. Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) as a female Christ-figure. Therefore, the executed Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) in *Dead Man Walking* was "analogous to the good thief" who "died christically, that is, saved or 'christified' by his contact with Jesus."73 Malone and Pacatte saw Luke (Paul Newman) from *Cool Hand Luke* (1967, dir. Stuart Rosenberg) as "a Good Thief-character, as well as a Christ-figure."74 Indeed,

Christian tradition loves the Good Thief and has invented a name for him, Dismas. Apocryphal stories about his life exist as well, including one about his saving the Holy Family during their flight into Egypt. Just as Luke's story was told and re-told by the prisoners, so the Good Thief's story has become part of Jesus' own story and has been told and re-told for two thousand years, giving courage to the fainthearted and strength to the weak.75

Baugh interpreted mundane scenes in the Russian SF film *Stalker* (1979, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky) as if imbued with theological mysteries. For example, he argued:

'Telegraph towers in the form of crosses mark the landscape, as a "sign of the spiritual and of hope," a crown of thorns suggests the christological mysteries of sacrifice and redemption; and mysterious rain showers allude

72Murphy, 20.
73Baugh, 286.
74Malone and Pacatte, 381.
75Malone and Pacatte, 382.
to divine grace. In a dream of Stalker [played by Aleksandr Kajdanovsky], Tarkovsky has us see, among other things, “a fragment of the [Van Eyck] alter-piece beneath the water... [and] around it swimming fish, a symbol for the Christ.”

Geoffrey Hill saw biblical references in the feel-good American angel film *It’s A Wonderful Life* (1946, dir. Frank Capra):

The biblical parallels in the narrative are fulfilled when George [Bailey (James Stewart)] exercises his role as the priest and good shepherd of the people. His priestly role is evident when he and Mary [Hatch (Donna Reed)] give bread, wine, and salt to the Martini family as they move into Bailey Park. The eucharistic symbolism of the body and blood of Christ is apparent, and salt is a biblical symbol of preserving the good in the land. Another sacramental element is George’s image of Mary swallowing the moon he has lassoed. The moon, viewed two-dimensionally, looks like a communion wafer. Mary metaphorically eats the body of Christ to be at one with the redeemer.

As Edward McNulty put it: “Without being overtly Christian, the film celebrates the values taught by Jesus – compassion and concern for others; courage in opposing evil; resolution in withstanding temptation; love strong enough to carry a cross.” Romantically lassoing the moon was also a strong plot feature of *Bruce Almighty* (2003, dir. Tom Shadyac), which the god-like Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) did to impress his girl friend, Grace Connelly (Jennifer Aniston). For McNulty, the female protagonist of *Erin Brockovich* (2000, dir. Steven Soderbergh) was

...following in the pathway of Christ and the Hebrew prophets who demanded justice for the poor and the powerless in the name of the God of righteousness. Erin [Julia Roberts], without consciously knowing it, is an instrument of God, a prophet in a miniskirt doing God’s will with such devoted passion that she is willing to allow her family and personal relationships to suffer for the greater good.

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76Baugh, 231–32.
79McNulty, 108.
Indeed, what vampire film is complete without the obligatory use of a Christian cross to dispel the unholy, fanged denizens of Hell? Although as Kim Newman pointed out: "in vampire movies made in non-Christian countries, the monster is not repelled by the cross – but might shrink from a statute of the Buddha or the aum symbol,\textsuperscript{80} that is, cross-cultural symbols of divinity. At least Christian-related vampire films can sink their teeth into concepts such as the fall, redemption and immortality in an interesting fashion.\textsuperscript{81} Overall, such theological imaginations can inform numerous mundane secular films with sacred import if only one were willing to proactively seek them out and analyse and discuss them.

\textbf{BIBLE-QUOTING: A WORD ABOUT THE WORD}

One does not have to search the popular cinema for too long to find examples of Scripture (or pseudo-Scripture) being quoted, used or abused. Indeed, characters quoting the Bible, prominently displayed Holy Scriptures, or disembodied voices reading sacred passages have been standard cinematic conventions for setting the religious tone of numerous popular films. For example, the ultra violent \textit{The Passion of the Christ} started with the quote: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His words we are healed. Isaiah 53, 700 BC.”\textsuperscript{82} Biblical providence was the theme of the non-biblical film \textit{Magnolia} (1999, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson), so it is not too surprising to find that “References to Bible verses occur throughout the movie. They are planted on billboards, whispered randomly by characters and even plastered on signs in a TV show audience. One is Exodus 34:7...The other is Exodus 8:2...The entire film is about characters suffering under the negative effects of the sins of their fathers.”\textsuperscript{83}


\textsuperscript{82}However, the KJV Bible rendered it as: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa 53:5). According to the NRSV Bible, it was: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” According to the NIV Bible, it was: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Regrettably, some commentators have not quoted Gibson’s on-screen text, but variations of these other Scriptures that approximated it.

\textsuperscript{83}Godawa, 66.
A particular on-screen favourite is the quoting of the phrase: “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3) to signal God-like delusions, amazement, power, authority or creativity. For example, in the SF comedy Dark Star (1974, dir. John Carpenter), the phrase was quoted by the rogue computer-bomb Number 20 who thought it was God before detonating with spectacular visual effect indicative of the birth of creation. In the British comedy Little Voice (1998, dir. Mark Herman), Ray Say (Michael Caine) used the phrase to indicate a miracle when emotionally overwhelmed by the incredible singing talent of LV – Little Voice (Jane Horrocks). In Batman & Robin (1997, dir. Joel Schumacher), the villainous Poison Ivy (Uma Thurman) used the phrase just as her evil henchman forced open one of Batman’s security doors.

In the American comedy Bruce Almighty, Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) used the phrase to light a bank of candles simultaneously, thus egotistically demonstrating his newly acquired divine omniscience. In Spider-man (2002, dir. Sam Raimi), Uncle Ben Parker (Cliff Robertson) repaired a broken ceiling light in his house and then proudly proclaimed: “And the Lord said, Let there be Light and voila there is light... forty soft damn watts of it.” In the colour version of the OT epic, The Ten Commandments, Cecil B. DeMille, the narrator behind the cloud-filled screen opened with: “And God said, Let there be light and behold, there was light. And from this light, God created life upon earth.”

An interesting example of distorted, obtuse and arcane Bible-quoting occurred in the psychological drama Nell. The feral child Nell (Jody Foster) and Dr. Jerry Lovell (Liam Neeson) went swimming naked together when, She embraces Jerry in the water, strokes his chest, and says tenderly, “Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah.”... Avid readers of the book of Joshua and Kings will know that Tirzah is not a person but a place, namely the Canaanite city (see Josh 12:24) which served as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel until Omri built Samaria (1 Kgs 16:24, 28; cf. 1 Kgs 14:17, 15:21, 33, 16:6). But there is no sign that Jerry (and with him perhaps most viewers) even recognizes the quotation. 84

Nevertheless, it provided a decidedly scripturesque feeling to the film that reinforced its underlying biblical theme of innocence corrupted. Similar fake Bible-quoting occurred in the crime thriller Pulp Fiction (1994, dir.

Quentin Tarantino) when murderous hit-man Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) berated his intended victim with a pseudo-Scripture blast. He did this with an authoritative voice that beset the OT God of vengeance prior to summarily executing his hapless victim. However, scriptural obfuscation was taken to a comic extreme in the satirical British film *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (1983, dir. Terry Jones). The school headmaster (John Cleese) quoted incoherent passages from the Bible to hide his apparent lack of knowledge whilst simultaneously creating an aura of inexplicable piousness and moral authority for both himself and his school. Biblical gobbledygook had been offered in place of theological knowledge, wisdom or relevance, and no one in the church even cared, whether students, staff or chaplain!

Similarly confusing and ultimately misleading biblical references were used in the spy thriller *Mission Impossible* (1996, dir. Brian De Palma) when the protagonist Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) received a cryptic email from Job@Job 3:14, which was lifted from a Gideon’s Bible. Yet, as Nicola Denzey pointed out: “The actual Job passage – ‘with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuilt ruins for themselves’ – apparently serves no narrative function whatsoever. But a Bible citation as secret code clearly has more cachet.”

A similar misleading plot device was used in the serial killer thriller *Red Dragon* (2002, dir. Brett Ratner). Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) was secretly in communication with the loathsome murderer Red Dragon (Ralph Fiennes) via personal ads “which feature a series of biblical references: Gal 6:11; 15:23; Acts 3:3; Rev 18:7; Jonah 6:8; John 6:22; Luke 1:7...[yet] the biblical verses are a red herring: Galatians has no 15:23; Jonah has no 6:8.” It turned out to be a code to decipher the lead investigator’s home address using the lines and words on page 100 from Lecter’s prison cell book *The Joy of Cooking*. “Both Red Dragon and Mission Impossible then, use a biblical citation merely as a device to mean ‘this is a code,’ pointing to something entirely other than what it appears to be.” Thus, confusing the public even further about the Bible, a book they already find confusing and hard to read or understand properly. The closest Red Dragon came to biblical accuracy was in the prologue with its fleeting glimpse of “Revelation 12:3.”

86Denzey, 2.
87Denzey, 3.
This scripture referred to "a great red dragon," which along with William Blake's biblically based watercolour entitled "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun," referred to within the film, inspired its title and underscored its devilish theme.

CONCLUSION

As evidenced above, feature films are filled with overt and covert Judeo-Christian references that will continue to shape the ideas, values and attitudes of Western society, including educators, theologians and the laity. Therefore, consciousness-raising surveys of the holy cinema to locate religious artefacts, attitudes and analogues is a necessary first step before embarking upon the more arduous task of understanding religious identity through film.\(^{88}\) Not only is this incremental strategy sound teaching praxis, but pedagogues, parents and preachers are duty-bound to employ the popular cinema within the classroom, home and pulpit to keep their charges culturally informed and up-to-date. As Jeffery Smith argued, "Believers may not accept the theology in motion pictures and religious institutions may not always appreciate the alternative sources of communication, but the history and culture of Hollywood indicate that the collision of creeds and popular culture is unavoidable."\(^{89}\)

It can also be great fun. After all, who said that theology and the Bible can only be studied through books, history and archaeology, or that "old fashioned,"\(^{90}\) "boring and irrelevant"\(^1\) religion studies, religious education or religious instruction has to be endured rather than enjoyed? Further research into video exegesis and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is warranted, recommended and certainly long overdue. It


is suggested that educators who design a celluloid religion program for their students will be amazed by the results; for if you build it they will come, as the God-like voice said to Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) in Field of Dreams (1989, dir. Phil Alden Robinson).

And once they have come and considered the cinematic fare on offer, educators can then embark upon a second tier of analysis by addressing the more difficult questions, such as: How exactly does film illustrate biblical material? How can film further expand theological insight? What does the specific genre of iconic visuality that underlies film mean for a historically text-based discipline like theology? After all, in any enterprise, it is always wiser to learn to walk before attempting to run, proverbially speaking. Not only are the research possibilities exciting, significant and well worth the effort, but as Jesus once commanded, albeit in a different context: “What I tell you in the darkness, that speak ye in light” (Matt 10:27)! This sage advice could easily become the official motto of the entire religion-and-film field.