

Melanie J. Wright. *Religion and Film: An Introduction*.

New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007

Reviewed by Kent R. Bean

Melanie J. Wright's *Religion and Film* would seem, on the surface, the perfect text for anyone with an interest in religion and the cinema, especially given that some critics, as she notes, link the rise of film to a decline in religious authority (2). Whatever the truth of that assertion, religion has learned to live with the new art form. Wright asserts, "Religion has not been displaced by a new medium: [religion] has colonised [film], and has found itself challenged and altered in the course of the encounter" (2). Indeed, while Christians are among some of the harshest critics of the cinema today, they also routinely use it as a vehicle for spirituality—consider our own faith's recent productions, such as *Legacy* (1993) and *The Testaments* (2000). Even Hollywood uses (or misuses) religion, as evidenced in the recent production of *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and the avalanche of commentary that followed in its wake (2–3), and the recently released film *Evan Almighty* (2007), which, though not technically a religious film, was marketed as family friendly to the religious community.¹ In a way, religion and film have a similar goal: both endeavor to make manifest the otherwise unrepresentable (4).

Relatively few studies try to engage the topic of film and religion systematically, and Wright's book is an attempt to correct that. Wright strives to offer "key concepts, questions and themes that can be applied more generally" (5–6). Film is often not taken seriously in religious or theological circles; it's relegated to a "special issue" that is ultimately "marginal to mainstream scholarly discourse" (22). Yet Wright warns that film and religion studies cannot merely mimic film studies; there are already film critics who do that well (24). Her hope is that *Religion and Film* can be the first stone in an avalanche of books and articles that take religion in film seriously as religion, not as an offshoot of some other phenomenon.

Wright chooses six films to examine, each in their own chapter: *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The*

Wicker Man (1973), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), *Keeping the Faith* (2000), and *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (2001). She chooses films accessible on DVD, films in which religion is a prominent feature, and films that suggest “the range of works that constitute cinema worldwide” (6–7). The films represent an interesting cross section of religious films, as they cover an art film (*La Passion*), a biblical epic (*Ten Commandments*), a drive-in exploitation movie (*Wicker Man*), a British issue-film (*My Son*), a simple Hollywood comedy (*Keeping the Faith*), and a Bollywood musical (*Lagaan*).

However, while Wright’s introductory material may be useful for the individual interested in the intersection of religion and film, her discussions of specific films may prove less useful. It was less so for me, and I assume it will also be less so for many readers of *BYU Studies*, who likely have a very specific notion of religion and what is meant by that term. Her discussion may prove more useful for someone who has no specific religious affiliation.

I agree with Wright in her quest to take religion on its own terms. In my research in culture studies, I have often been disturbed by the discipline’s tendency to break down religion into just a component of race, class, or sexuality, rather than approaching religion on its own terms. Folklorist Eric A. Eliason at Brigham Young University explains that much scholarship, influenced by culture studies, elides religion in favor of its own pet concerns:

Recognizing class, gender, ethnicity, nation, race, and sexuality as a limited set of sufficiently explanatory human concerns, cultural studies has failed to even acknowledge religion as a significant aspect of human experience and identity let alone provide any useful theorization of its operation. Cultural Studies has not moved far beyond Marx’s facile “opiate of the masses.” Without acknowledgment, religion and religion-like cultural forms tend to be marginalized and grossly misunderstood by scholars influenced by cultural studies.²

While Wright is not guilty of reducing religion to just another aspect of race, class, or sexuality, her discussion of religion never rises above the general. She does discuss religious dimensions in certain films, but it never becomes the specific type of religious discussion to which Latter-day Saints are accustomed. When she discusses *Lagaan*, she explains the nature of Bollywood (films made in Bombay), notes that such films cannot be analyzed using Western generic categories (143–45), and then explains how to understand the religion in the film that will, in all likelihood, not be familiar to the average American or British viewer (148–57). Yet her discussion does not go significantly beyond that.

Religions do not exist simply to be viewed as an object; they exist to be believed, used, employed, and deployed. Thus, it would make more sense for a believing Hindu or Muslim (both of which are represented in *Lagaan*) to analyze the film and explain how the film can be seen in the larger context of his or her worldview. Perhaps serious religious scholarship must perforce be *specific* religious scholarship. For example, how might Latter-day Saints use Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*? How does its pseudo-history become infused with traditional LDS interpretations of Old Testament history? How is the film used in tradition—is it viewed annually with family? Or in the case of the much less familiar *My Son the Fanatic*, could the message of a father's secularism leading to a son's religious fanaticism have relevance to our own context despite its Muslim characters? Are Mormons, like Muslims, "out of place" in their society, or have we found ways to accommodate? And if we have found ways, what has this accommodation cost us? Such dialogue with the films in question could be fascinating, but it would necessarily be specific to each person's faith community.

I do not mean to imply that every film should be translated into an LDS context, but films can be viewed interreligiously, as well as intrareligiously. Religion is in danger of being reduced to a subsidiary aspect of society—the tendency of much of modern-day scholarship—when it remains generic. In order to justify religion's existence as a prime mover in people's lives, as something that for many people is much more important than their status in society, we must speak of specific faith communities.

Near the end of *Religion and Film*, Wright notes that Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) "became at once a marker of Christian identity, a medium through which audiences could proclaim and mark their affiliation" (172). Perhaps the activity of viewing and owning a film is more important than any formalistic analysis of the qualities contained therein. Films, I believe, are particularly prone to be *used* by audiences, not simply viewed. Such use-value has only been compounded with the advent of videotapes, DVDs, video iPods, and cell phones that play movies. Despite Wright's best efforts, I do not think she ever truly uncovers anything particularly religious in her discussion of the six films; she merely talks around them. It would have been more valuable to discuss how the films are used by religious communities. It is not enough to discuss what film is; we must discuss what it does.

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1. Josh Friedman and Lorenza Muñoz report:

“It’s a really good launch to a film that’s going to be talked about with friends and family,” said Nikki Rocco, the studio’s president of domestic distribution. . . .

“The key to success of a movie like ‘Evan’ is to attract the faith-based audience while not alienating the secular audience,” said analyst Paul Dergarabedian of research firm Media by Numbers. . . .

Despite being a comedy, “Evan” is explicit in its religious references. Carell’s character, Evan Baxter, is awakened at 6:14 in the morning—a reference to the biblical passage in Genesis in which God commands Noah to build the ark. (Josh Friedman and Lorenza Muñoz, “Universal Prays amid Weak Launch of ‘Evan,’” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2007, C1)

2. Eric A. Eliason, “Celebrating Zion: Pioneers in Mormon Popular Historical Expression” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1998), 111.