

## Jesus in North America (9) Jesus in Hollywood

Many Christians attend movie theatres or watch films on TV. Are they aware how the American film industry deals with religion, especially Christianity? The way in which religion is treated dramatically underscores the superficiality of American popular films – and, by extension, the shallow, horizontal-secular nature of mainstream American culture in the 20th century. Hollywood movie characters are rarely shown to be regular devout churchgoers, except when the intention is to show their wholesomeness, primitiveness, or hypocrisy. Churches tend to appear only in the context of weddings or funerals. In other words, the American movie industry offers a generally shallow and glossy vision of the world, a vision that is effectively secular and materialistic. Yet, the movie industry has a fascination with the person of Jesus. He seems to be big news at the box office and a good money maker. During the 1950s and 1960s, the period of advances in wide-screen technology, popular novels about early Christians became splashy celluloid epics. There was a rash of Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben Hur* (1959), the 15 million dollar film featuring an exciting-nail-biting chariot race with Jesus as "supporting actor". These films were all trying to reconstruct the time of Jesus.

### King of Kings

The history of films shows a dramatic change in Hollywood's attempt to portray Jesus. The 1927 Cecil B. De Mille's silent movie classic, *King of Kings*, was an extravagant and very reverent portrayal of Jesus on film. It remained the most watched Jesus movie of all time until the 1970's. By 1958 de Mille boasted that over 800 million people had seen that film, and that he had introduced more people to Jesus through the film than anything else except the Bible. Stephen Prothero even claims that it had such an impact in the 1920's and 1930's that when Americans closed their eyes and prayed some likely conjured up the face of H.B. Warner, who played the lead role in *King of Kings*.

### Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell

By the 1970's the movie industry began to question Jesus' divinity. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* (1973) is the film version of the rock opera by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, who explore Jesus' humanity from the point of view of his followers. Judas Iscariot is its main character who complains that Jesus' followers have "too much heaven on their minds." It contains very little of Jesus' teaching, but follows the last week of His life, using particularly John's Gospel. After Judas has betrayed Jesus, he sings "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" in which he says that he does not understand who Jesus is or what is going on; he wonders whether Jesus Himself knows who He is and what He has sacrificed. Elsewhere in the opera Mary Magdalene sings a love song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," in which she says that Jesus is just a man, but in a way that suggest that she's beginning to think that maybe He's *not* just a man. When it opened in New York in 1971, many Christians considered it the ultimate blasphemy. But it seems, there is always someone who becomes enthusiastic by the latest idea about Jesus. For example, a minister at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City conducted a baptism "in the name of the Father, the Holy Ghost, and Jesus Christ the Superstar."

*Jesus Christ Superstar* has been revived for the stage. It was performed in April 2007 in DeVos Performance Hall in Grand Rapids. Ted Neeley, who has played Jesus Christ since 1971, commented: "Now it is used by churches as a teaching tool because they have discovered children respond to the music and the characterizations. We're sort of a spiritual 'Sesame Street'." But should churches use *Superstar* as a teaching tool? I believe it should be perfectly obvious to a discerning viewer and listener that *Superstar* is not portraying the Lord Jesus Christ of the Bible at all. Its omission of the resurrection is an insult to an already distorted confused, and defeated "superstar." *Superstar's* lyrics are a great contrast to Beethoven's work about the cross. *The Mount of Olives* ends like this: "Hallelujah unto God's Almighty Son... Man proclaim His grace and glory! Hallelujah!" Or compare it to *St. John Passion* by Bach, using music which reflects the triumph of Christ at the cross. Bach ends his work with a chorale, the listener's response to the Gospel: "And when from death Thou wakest me,/In bliss unto my eyes shall see./O son of God, Thy glorious face,/My Saviour!"

*Godspell* opened a few month's before *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was made into a film in 1976. The film reflects the Hippie culture of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It portrays Jesus as a jester and his followers as flower children. *Godspell* included a treatment of many parables taken from the Gospel of Matthew, with a great deal of "fun" and play.

Prosthero argues that *Superstar* and *Godspell* present different pictures of Jesus. He says that both portray Him as a hippie opposed to the hypocrisy of the religious establishment. But *Superstar* had its roots in the dark side of 1960s, while *Godspell* is a product of the 1960s bright side.

## **The Last Temptation of Christ**

One of the most controversial portrayals of Jesus was Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the best-selling Greek novel by the tormented Greek Orthodox, Nikos Kazantzakis. *Time Magazine* (August 15, 1988) called the movie powerful, eccentric, bloody, and filled with theological gaffes. Jesus has brief on-screen sex with his first wife Mary Magdalene and later commits adultery. Judas is a hero, the strong and best of the apostles. Paul is a hypocrite and a liar. Jesus is so dazed that, even on the eve of his crucifixion, he is still not quite sure whether to preach love or murder the Romans. In one grotesque scene, Jesus reaches into his chest and yanks out his heart and holds it up for his apostles to admire. In *Understanding Movies*, Louis Giannetti ridicules Christians who protested the movie as "All Christians believe in the divinity of Jesus, but most denominations emphasize the god rather than the man. Hence the fierce outcry from Christian fundamentalists about Scorsese's movie, which portrays Jesus as flawed, tormented with doubt." Critic, Scott Eyman, was even more abrasive in his criticism of Christian protesters. He said, "In daring to give us a Christ of flesh and blood, Scorsese has violated what protesters, in their mad, delusive certainty, believe to be their copyright on Jesus. But simply because their minds are most comfortable with, and are probably only capable of encompassing a dashboard Jesus, is no reason for those terms to define the limits of public discussion." So much for secular tolerance! If you dare to disagree with a movie that flagrantly attacks the Jesus of the Scripture, you are branded as "mad" and "delusive"!

## Conclusion

Films are more than a form of entertainment. They always promote a world and life view. Films like *King of Kings*, *The Robe*, and *Ben Hur* may well cause indirect harm and, in any event, can hardly be regarded as illuminating statements of Christian belief. Yet for many movie goers, this type of film is their only exposure to the Christian faith. In *Images of Man. A Critique of the contemporary cinema*, Donald J. Drew notes that American culture has little if any understanding of what biblical Christianity is. He argues that Christians themselves are largely to blame for their low image in contemporary films. He says that the greatest responsibility for this must be laid at the Christian's door. "The frequent unreality of a Christian's life and worship; his ignorance of what biblical Christianity is; his timidity in the face of social and political injustice; his inadequacy in the face of intellectual attack; his naivety concerning the nature of contemporary thought-forms and lifestyles; his lack of unconditional and steady love; and his failure to practice truth in love – all these severely militate against Christianity being taken seriously."

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