



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY
Volume 15 Issue 9 Version 1.0 Year 2015
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Applying Religion and Film to Islam

By William L. Blizek & Bilal Yorulmaz

University of Nebraska at Omaha, United States

Abstract- “Religion and film studies” is an academic field that includes a wide variety of activities and interests. In the early years, religion and film studies focused upon Christianity and Judaism in the movies, including a number of famous Bible stories. In the past several years, however, religion and film studies has widened considerably and now includes movies about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religions. As more movies about Islam become widely available, as more Hollywood films deal with issues related to Islam, and as more Muslim scholars turn their attention to film, we can expect an increase in Islam and film studies. The purpose of this paper is to draw an early picture of what religion and film studies will look like in a Muslim context.

The use of religion to interpret film will become more popular as filmmakers create more movies with Islamic subtexts. The use of film to critique religion will become more popular as a topic when more movies are made that critique Islam—its various branches and practices. And there will be an ongoing debate about when something is an attack on Islam and when something is a legitimate criticism. There also will be films that focus upon various themes from Islam. These themes will be different from the themes of other religions, but finding such themes in movies will become a popular activity. Some of those themes might include pilgrimage, prayer, fasting, or Ramadan.

Religion and film studies is beginning to take notice of Islam and this should make for a very interesting addition to the previous discussions of religion and film.

Keywords: *religion and film, islam, religious education.*

GJHSS-A Classification : FOR Code: 220499



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



Applying Religion and Film to Islam

William L. Blizek^α & Bilal Yorulmaz^σ

Abstract- "Religion and film studies" is an academic field that includes a wide variety of activities and interests. In the early years, religion and film studies focused upon Christianity and Judaism in the movies, including a number of famous Bible stories. In the past several years, however, religion and film studies has widened considerably and now includes movies about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religions. As more movies about Islam become widely available, as more Hollywood films deal with issues related to Islam, and as more Muslim scholars turn their attention to film, we can expect an increase in Islam and film studies. The purpose of this paper is to draw an early picture of what religion and film studies will look like in a Muslim context.

The use of religion to interpret film will become more popular as filmmakers create more movies with Islamic subtexts. The use of film to critique religion will become more popular as a topic when more movies are made that critique Islam—its various branches and practices. And there will be an ongoing debate about when something is an attack on Islam and when something is a legitimate criticism. There also will be films that focus upon various themes from Islam. These themes will be different from the themes of other religions, but finding such themes in movies will become a popular activity. Some of those themes might include pilgrimage, prayer, fasting, or Ramadan.

Religion and film studies is beginning to take notice of Islam and this should make for a very interesting addition to the previous discussions of religion and film.

Keywords: religion and film, islam, religious education.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Religion and film studies" is an academic field that includes a wide variety of activities and interests. These activities and interests run the gamut from using religion to interpret film and using film to critique religion, through expressing theological ideas through film and retelling religious stories and myths, to identifying cultural and ethical values in the movies. In the early years, religion and film studies focused upon Christianity and Judaism in the movies, including a number of famous Bible stories. In the past several years, however, religion and film studies has widened considerably and now includes movies about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and other religions. The purpose of this paper is to examine what religion and film studies will look like when applied to Islam. As more movies about Islam become widely available, as more Hollywood films deal with issues related to Islam, and as more Muslim scholars turn their attention to film, we can expect an increase in Islam and film studies. What

might we expect when religion and film studies brings its attention to Islam?

II. USING RELIGION TO INTERPRET FILM

One of the most popular activities in religion and film studies is to find religion (or religious concepts and themes) in secular movies or movies that are not overtly religious in nature. The Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), for example, is a science fiction/action movie that tells the story of one man's battle against the power of Artificial Intelligence. Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) is a description and condemnation of mental health care in the United States during the 1960s. *Platoon* (1986), the first of Oliver Stone's Viet Nam war trilogy, is a description of the American war against Viet Nam.¹ *Groundhog Day* (1993), directed by Harold Ramis, is seen as a love story in which the main character, a severe narcissist, learns how to participate in a meaningful relationship with someone else. Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) is the story of an alien being that lands on earth and finds that he is able to help people with his special super powers.

All of these stories (and many more) have been given new meaning or a new interpretation through the application of religion or religious ideas to the movies. For example, *The Matrix* has been reinterpreted as a Jesus story in which Neo is "The One." It also has been reinterpreted as an expression of Gnostic Christianity, in which Artificial Intelligence seems to represent the malformed deity that gives life to human beings. Other reinterpretations identify the two worlds of the matrix as representative of the Buddhist realms of suffering and enlightenment or identify Trinity as a Lakshmi-like character, making Neo a representation of Vishnu. (Flannery, 2001 and Fielding, 2003)

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest has been reinterpreted as a retelling of the Passion story, with R.P. Mc Murphy being betrayed, crucified, and rising from the dead. (Blizek, 2013) Oliver Stone's *Platoon* has been reinterpreted as the Christian story from creation to the end of days. (Beck, 1995) *Groundhog Day* has been reinterpreted as an expression of Karma, and *Superman* has been reinterpreted as a Jesus movie in which God's only son is sent to earth to offer salvation to humanity. (Desmarais, 2013 and Kozolvic, 2002)

Author α: University of Nebraska at Omaha Omaha, Nebraska U.S.A.

Author σ: Marmara University Istanbul, Turkey.

e-mail: bilal.yorulmaz@gmail.com

¹ The other movies in the Oliver Stone Viet Nam war trilogy are *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven and Earth* (1993).

Given this approach to religion and film, what might we expect when religion and film studies focuses upon Islam? The answer is that we can expect to find in movies that do not seem to be about Islam (secular movies or movies that are not overtly religious) some kind of Islamic subtext. This might be, for example, the telling of a religious story, or an expression of some religious theme from Islam, or the expression of some kind of Islamic theological concept, or even the presentation of an Islamic world view. Or, in the case of many popular American movies, it might mean that Muslims are shown to be terrorists. (Ramji, 2005)

For example, Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* (1997) is a movie about two siblings, Ali and Zahra. Ali loses his sister's sneakers. Afraid to tell his parents, Ali and Zahra share Ali's sneakers. Zahra wears the sneakers in the morning when she goes to school. When she comes home, Ali puts on the sneakers and races off to school so as not to be late. In order to solve the problem of sharing the sneakers, Ali enters a race in which the third place finisher wins a pair of sneakers. If Ali can just win third place, both he and Zahra will have a pair of sneakers. Since Ali has had to run to school every day, he is well trained as a runner. Since Ali is in such good physical condition, he wins the race, instead of taking third place. Although he does not win the sneakers, his father buys new sneakers for both Ali and Zahra anyhow. But, Ali does win a chance to attend a sports camp for one week and using what he has learned from the camp, Ali becomes a successful professional track and field athlete.

One can enjoy this movie as the story of two siblings who make a mistake, but are lucky enough to overcome that mistake, "living happily ever after." But there is an Islamic world view that says that some things may appear to be bad for us, but they turn out to be good for us in the long run. And, sometimes things that seem good for us or things that we like or want very badly turn out to be bad for us in ways that we did not anticipate. The Qur'an says: "It may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows, but you do not know." (The Holy Qur'an, 2:216)

The idea here is that Allah knows what is good for you and what is not, even when you do not know this yourself. And, Allah is watching over you to be sure that you get what is good for you and not what is bad for you. Ali and Zahra are, after all, "children of heaven." The loss of the sneakers turns out to be a good thing because it leads to Ali's winning the race and attending the camp and eventually becoming a professional athlete. This is an optimistic view of the world in which Allah has a plan for each of us and in which Allah ensures that his plan is followed. We should not be discouraged when we do not get what we want—it might not be good for us—.

As another example, consider the Emmy Award winning BBC documentary series, *Planet Earth*. Each of the eleven fifty-minute episodes features an overview of a different earthly biome or habitat, including mountains, caves, fresh water, oceans, deserts, plains and forests. The series easily could be interpreted as a world travelogue or as lessons on the environment. How, then can the movie be reinterpreted as an expression of Islam?

There are three things that introduce Allah to humankind. One of these is the Qur'an. Another is the Prophet Muhammad through the Hadith. The third is the universe itself, the world around us. In other words, when we experience nature, we are encountering Allah. When you see a flower, you are seeing Allah's artwork. When you see a mountain, you see Allah's creative power. When you see a mother bird feeding her babies, you are seeing an example of Allah's mercy—Allah is taking care of his creation. When you see the vastness of the universe you are experiencing the enormity of Allah. What might be seen as merely pretty scenery or a lesson on the environment becomes a religious text when viewed as an introduction to Allah through nature. (Yorulmaz, 2015)

III. USING FILM TO CRITIQUE RELIGION

We often think that the role of art in society is not merely to provide us with aesthetic experiences, but also to provide a critique of society. Samuel Shem's outrageous novel, *The House of God*, for example, provides a critique of medical practice in America. (Shem, 1978) Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, is a powerful critique of the Nazi's indiscriminate bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. And in the world of music, the enigmatic star, Prince, has just released a song protesting the killing of Freddie Gray by Baltimore police, a killing that sparked numerous riots in the city.

If we take film to be an art form, we might expect that one role of film will be to provide a critique of society. And, if we understand religion to be a part of society, we can see that films may very well serve to critique religion. Francis Ford Coppola's film, *The Godfather* (1972), for example critiques religion in the last scenes of the movie, where Michael Coreleone attends the baptism of his child, intoning all of the traditional religious language about belief in God and promising to serve God. At the very moment Michael is promising to serve God, we see that his henchmen are killing his enemies. The scenes of the baptism are interspersed with the scenes of the killing. The point of this critique is to show that claiming to be religious does not make one religious. Something similar can be found in Richard Brooks' *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977). Teresa's father wears a Notre Dame jacket while watching a football game, thereby identifying himself

with the Catholic Church. But her father is anti-Semitic, cruel to Teresa, and blind to the immoral behavior of her sister. He identifies himself as a Christian, but does not behave as a Christian should. The movie points out the possibility of religious hypocrisy.

Roland Joffe's *The Mission* (1986) is a movie critical of the Catholic Church for sacrificing its own priests and the native people they have converted to Christianity to the lust for political power. Something similar is found in John Duigan's movie, *Romero* (1989), where the Church abandons Archbishop Romero, in favor of good relations with a corrupt government. Archbishop Romero is killed in the end. Even the upbeat musical, *Going My Way* (1944), directed by Leo McCarey and starring Bing Crosby, is critical of the formality of the Church. Father O'Malley brings a breath of fresh air to a parish that is led by a strict, "do it by the book" priest. Under the old priest, the parish is losing members and going broke. Father O'Malley's flexibility and willingness to think outside the box save the day. The message is that the Church must be more flexible if it is to survive.

Not all critiques, however, are negative or critical. In Antonia Bird's *Priest* (1994), for example, the movie is critical of the wealth of the Church, the practice of celibacy, and the sanctity of the confessional, but it also extols the virtues of the Church's crusade for social justice, keeping one's vows, and offering moral guidance to the members of the flock. Early in Robert Duvall's movie, *The Apostle* (1997), we find Sonny evangelizing for his own glory. Later in the movie we find the Apostle E. F., as Sonny has renamed himself, ministering to the needs of the poor and downtrodden. The movie is critical of Sonny's egotism and lauds his humility after he becomes the Apostle E. F.

As religion and film studies directs its attention to Islam, we can expect to find similar critiques of Islam in the movies. In Mahsun Kırmızıgül's *New York'ta Beş Minare* (5 Minarets in New York, 2010) two of the characters are imprisoned side by side. One of the characters is Hadji Gümüş, the leader of a Sufi group in the state of New York who has been extradited to Turkey. The other character is Dajjal, the leader of a terrorist group operating in Turkey.² When the police chief comes to interrogate Dajjal, he tries to find out for whom the terrorist is working, from whom Dajjal takes his orders. Dajjal responds that he takes his orders from Allah. He tells the chief that he is waging a holy war on behalf of Allah. The chief responds: "What part of kidnapping and robbing Muslims, burying them alive, cutting off their heads is holy war? You piece of shit." Dajjal responds by saying that the Qur'an instructs us to do battle until everyone is Muslim. "The Prophet

Muhammed fought the enemies of Allah until his dying breath. We will do the same."

Hadji Gümüş, who has been listening to the exchange between Dajjal and the chief, then interjects a different view of Islam. "Allah instructed the Prophet to use persuasion and wisdom to spread God's word. Jihad is simply an invitation to tread the path of God while seeking the truth." Hadji also responds with verses from the Qur'an: "There is no coercion in religion." (The Holy Qur'an, 2:256) And, again, "Thou shalt not use force." (The Holy Qur'an, 88:22) When asked his opinion about Islamic terrorism, Hadji responds: "He who deliberately kills shall be condemned to Hell for all eternity." (The Holy Qur'an, 4:93).

These two characters represent two quite different views of Islam. These are not two view of Islam imposed by non-Muslims. They are two different view of Islam from members of the Islamic community. Since Hadji is found to be innocent and is released from prison, and since Dajjal remains in prison for this crimes, the message of the movie is that Hadji's view of Islam as a peaceful religion is the correct way to understand Islam and that Dajjal's appeal to violence is not the true religion.³

Another example of movies that critique Islam is the film, *Kelebek* (Butterfly, 2009), directed by Turkish directors, Cihan Taskın and Günay Günaydın. After 9/11, Yusuf seems to be living the good life. But he is challenged by a senior dervish regarding his past actions. Was Yusuf somehow responsible for 9/11? In flashbacks we see that Turkish youngsters opened a humanitarian and educational center in Afghanistan. Yusuf has been asked by his dervish to go and help them, but Yusuf discovers that his wife is pregnant and so he cancels his trip to Afghanistan in order to be with his wife. But, Yusuf feels guilty that he did not go because he might have taught those who participated in the humanitarian effort the true meaning of Islam. By teaching Afghanis the true meaning of Islam, Yusuf might have helped to prevent the 9/11 attack on the United States. While some characters in the movie praise Osama Bin Laden and other terrorists, Yusuf says: "May God save us from savages like Laden!" He also says: "My religion says killing one innocent person is like killing all humanity . . ." The Sufi dervish, with his humanitarian center, represents the view of Islam as a peaceful religion based on love of one's fellow man and the idea that we should all be helping our fellow man. Al Kaida in Afghanistan represents a different view of Islam, one that embraces violence and disregards the innocence of people. Because Yusuf feels guilty for not

² The name, "Dajjal," means "anti-Christ."

³ Since Dajjal means "anti - Christ," this element of the film also suggests that Hadji's view of Islam as a peaceful religion is the correct way to understand Islam.

going to Afghanistan, the message of the movie seems to be that the view of Islam promoted by the dervish—a peaceful and caring religion—is the correct view of Islam.

The Indian movie, *My Name is Khan* (2010), directed by Karan Johar, is another example of a movie about Muslims that offers a critique of Islam. Rizwan Khan, a Muslim from Mumbai, marries Mandira, a Hindu woman and single mother. After 9/11, Mandira's son (Khan's stepson) is killed by fellow students because they believe he is Muslim—he took his father's Muslim name, Khan. Mandira blames Khan for the death of her son and she tells Khan that she does not want to see him. Still in love with Mandira, Khan asks her when he can come back into her life. She tells Khan that he can return after he sees the President of the United States and tells the President: "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist." The remainder of the movie chronicles Khan's journey to meet the President. Khan becomes famous for undertaking this journey and when he finally meets President Obama, the President says to him: "Your name is Khan and you are not a terrorist."

On his journey, Khan stops at a mosque where he meets a medical doctor, Faisal Rehman. The doctor is telling a group of people at the mosque that he has no problem with people of other religions, except when other religions do not show the same respect of Islam that Islam show to them. When Muslims are not given the same respect that they give others, it makes Rehman's blood boil and he wants revenge. He tells the group that "It's our duty to let our blood flow for the cause of Islam. This is what Allah demands! This is what Islam demands!"

To this Rehman's call to arms, Rizwan calls him a liar. But Rehman, who is asking Muslims to make a sacrifice, responds: "Don't you believe that the Lord had asked for Ismail's sacrifice?" Rizwan then gives Rehman his mother's interpretation of the story of Ibrahim and Ismail. According to her interpretation, the story is an example of strong faith and belief. Ibrahim did not waver from his path of righteousness. He was sure that Allah would never allow the blood of his progeny to be shed and it turns out that he was right. In the end Allah saves the life of Ismail. Rizwan's mother tells him that the story shows that the path of Allah is one of love and not hatred or war.

Here, again, we have a movie that presents two different views of Islam. When the President tells Khan: "Your name is Khan and you are not a terrorist," the message of the movie becomes clear because Khan can now return to his wife. Islam is a religion of peace and love.

IV. RELIGIOUS THEMES: THE AFTERLIFE

While movies may be used to critique religion and religion may be used to interpret film, movies also

may focus upon one or another of many religious themes. One example is that of the afterlife. Some of the most famous movies about the afterlife include comedies such as *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry, Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988), *All Dogs Go To Heaven* (1989), directed by Don Bluth, and Albert Brooks' *Defending Your Life* (1991). Other famous afterlife movies are dramas, including such films as *Ghost* (1990), directed by Jerry Zucker, Tom Shadyac's *Dragonfly* (2002), *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), directed by Mitchell Leisen, and its remake, *Meet Joe Black* (1998), directed by Martin Brest. Other dramas include *What Dreams May Come* (1998), directed by Vincent Ward, and the conspicuously non-Hollywood film by Hirokazu Kore-eda, *After Life* (1998).

Muslims believe in an afterlife, in a heaven and hell. They believe that death is just a gate to the next life and not a final end. This life is temporary. The afterlife is eternal and the real life. If you are a believer and you have done good deeds during this life, then death is a good thing because you can enter the eternal paradise and see Allah.

According to Islam, believing in Allah is a requirement for salvation. If you believe in Allah you can enter paradise eventually. If you do not believe in Allah, you will go directly to hell and you will remain there forever. If you are a believer and have done more good deeds than bad deeds, you can go directly to paradise. If, however, you are a believer but you have done more bad deeds than good ones and you did not repent of your bad deeds, you will go to hell first and after suffering punishment for your bad deeds you will then be allowed to go to paradise because you are a believer.

Muslim views of the afterlife can be found in a number of movies. *Bab'Aziz – The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul* (2005, Tunisia and Iran), for example, is the story of Bab' Aziz, a blind dervish and his granddaughter, Ishtar. They wander throughout the desert seeking out a special reunion of dervishes. The reunion takes place only once in every thirty year span of time. With only faith to guide them, Bab' Aziz and Ishtar travel for many days through the massive desert with its barren landscape in search of the dervish reunion. Bab'Aziz feels that his death is coming soon, but he is not unhappy.

Bab'Aziz' last words show an Islamic understanding of death and the afterlife. He says: "If the baby in the darkness of its mother's womb were told, 'Outside there's a world of light, with high mountains, great seas, undulating plains, beautiful gardens in blossom, brooks, a sky full of stars and a blazing sun . . . And you, facing all of these marvels, stay enclosed in this darkness . . . ' The unborn child, knowing nothing about these marvels, wouldn't believe any of it. Like us when we are facing death. That's why

we're afraid. But there can't be light in death, because it's the end of everything. How can death be the end of something that doesn't have a beginning? Hassan, my son, don't be sad on my wedding night." For Bab'Aziz, death is not a dreadful thing. He thinks that death is a happy moment—like his wedding night. This metaphor belongs to the famous Sufi Rumi and describes the Islamic understanding of death.

Bab'Aziz thinks that people are afraid of the afterlife because they do not know what to expect. The afterlife, however, is a better life than our lives in the world. If you believe in Allah and have done more good deeds than bad deeds you will go to paradise and you can ask whatever you want of Allah.

Another movie in which the afterlife is a theme is *Garip Bir Koleksiyoncu* (A Strange Collector, 1994). Beşir lives on the grounds of a cemetery, where he serves as a guard. He is very afraid of dead people, so he tries to find another job, but he is unable to do so. So, he decides that instead of hating his job, he will embrace his work. He does this by collecting photographs of the dead and placing them in an album. He begins to talk to the dead and with their families. He talks about life, good and bad deeds, and the afterlife. His wife thinks that Beşir has gone mad and she seeks the help of a psychiatrist. As the psychiatrist talks to Beşir he discovers that Beşir is not crazy, but a wise man, taking the opportunity of his work to learn about life and life after death. As is often the case, this is a movie that is more about how to live a good life, than it is about the nature of life after death.

V. RELIGIOUS THEMES: SATAN

As a religious concept, we do not know much about Satan. We usually think of Satan as a fallen angel who now stands for evil, one who is now in a battle with God for the souls of human beings. But, little else is known about Satan and this makes Satan ripe for movie interpretations. In some movies Satan is a figure that enters our bodies and takes over our actions. This is the Satan or the Devil that we must exorcise. Probably the most famous of these movies is William Friedkin's movie, *The Exorcist* (1973). At the time of its release it was a shocking account of the devil taking over the body of a young girl. *The Exorcist* was followed by a number of sequels. But there are many other films in this genre, including *Amityville II: The Possession* (1982), *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *Teenage Exorcist* (1994), *Exorcism: The Beginning* (2004), and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

Other movies about Satan concern our willingness to make a deal with the Devil, to sell our souls for some momentary advantage. The idea of selling one's soul, or betraying oneself, is a common theme, whether the Devil is clearly identified or not. Some of these movies include *Oh, God! You*

Devil(1984), *Angel Heart* (1987), *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), and *Bedazzled* (both the 1967 and 2000 versions).

In other movies, Satan is the representative of evil itself. There is not more famous movie of this kind than *Star Wars* (1977) in which evil is represented by Darth Vader, the Jedi Knight who has gone over to the Dark Side. In many of these movies there is no one representing evil but evil has an intentional capacity. Yet other movies utilize the devil for comedic purposes, such as *Little Nicky* (2000) and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987). There are, of course, many other movies about Satan or The Devil, but it is difficult to categorize them.

In Islam, Satan is a "Jinn." All Jinns are created from fire, while angels are created from light. Jinns, including Satan, have no power over people. They do not possess people and no one is afraid of Satan. Jinns do have the power to tempt us and to lead us astray, to take us off the straight and narrow path. Indeed, Jinns enter the world only after human beings, showing that they are much less important. One story in the Qur'an has King Solomon using Jinns as construction workers, again, showing their insignificance.

More recently, however, in some Muslim countries Jinn's are seen as able to possess human beings and to do them harm. In these countries, Jinns have become part of the horror film genre, thereby giving them a place in the movies. Some movies that use Jinns are described below.

Büyü(Dark Spells), (2004, Turkey) is the story about a group of archaeologists who dig up a ghost town in order to find an old book. The archaeologists ignore the fact that the town was cursed some seven hundred years earlier and thus a Jinn comes to haunt the team of archaeologists. By possessing the archaeologists, the Jinn causes them to die—all but one of them.

Dabbe: Bir Cin Vakası (Beast: A Jinn Case), (2012, Turkey) is based on a so called true story. An angry Jinn is supposed to have harmed a father and daughter. The mother tries to help them but she is unable to get rid of the Jinn. No one believes what the mother is telling them, so she seeks help from the GATA Medical Faculty. So far, this sounds like *The Exorcist*. The medical faculty sets up a system of cameras in the house, so that can observe what happens to the father and daughter.

Dabbe: Cin Çarpması (Beast: The Jinn Possession), (2013, Turkey). Kubra's village is a cursed place and possession by Jinns is common. On the day before her wedding, Kubra is possessed by a Jinn. Kubra's family seeks the help of a professional exorcist. At the same time, Kubra's close friend, a psychiatrist, comes to help as well. The psychiatrist records the exorcism to try to better understand what is happening.

VI. RELIGIOUS THEMES: RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Islam includes a variety of practices that are important to the faith. Some of these practices include pilgrimage, prayer, fasting, giving alms, and others. These practices appear in movies, sometimes these practices are the focus of a film and on other occasions they appear in the movie but are not the focus of the film.

One of the best examples of a movie dealing with pilgrimage is *Le Grand Voyage* (2004, dir. Ismael Ferroukhi). Reda is a young Moroccan-French boy. His old father is a devout Muslim, but Reda is secular and does not know much about Islam. The father wants to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca before he dies. He wants to drive rather than fly, so he asks Reda to drive him on his pilgrimage. When Reda asks, "Why don't you fly to Mecca, it's a lot simpler?" the father replies: "The ocean waters evaporate as they rise to the clouds. And, as they evaporate they become fresh. That's why it is better to go on your pilgrimage on foot than on horseback, better on horseback than by car, better by car than by boat, and better by boat than by plane." Reda does not want to drive his father to Mecca because he has a secret lover in France, but he reluctantly agrees to act as chauffeur.

The drive is a long one, through France, Italy, Slovenia, Turkey, Syria and other countries before they reach Saudi Arabia. Along the way they face many obstacles, but the obstacles seem to bring the father and son closer together, even though there is a significant generation gap between them. The long journey gives them a chance to communicate. Reda learns about Islam and the father shows his mercy to his son. When they reach Mecca, Reda is amazed by the millions of believers who are involved in this great spiritual journey. While Reda waits in the car, his father joins other Muslims walking to the holy Kaba, as if they were raindrops falling into the ocean. But, Reda's father does not return, and Reda soon discovers that his father has died. When he goes to the morgue to see his father, he cries and hugs his father indicating how much he loves his father. Now Reda's father has completed his pilgrimage and Reda has completed his own spiritual journey, discovering his love for his father.

Another example of a movie dealing with pilgrimage is *Abu, Son of Adam* (2011, dir. Salim Ahmed). Abu and his wife are devout Muslims in their late 70s. Like many elderly Muslims, they have a dream of making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Of course the couple faces many financial obstacles—they must sell their cows and some jewelry and their jackfruit tree for lumber. But they also face the obstacles of traveling abroad—getting a passport, tickets, etc.—all made

more difficult by waiting in lines and taking buses to get to the places they need to go.

Just as they are ready to go, the man who bought the jackfruit tree tells Abu that it was no good and could not be used for lumber. Abu feels obligated to return the money for the tree and now they will not be able to go. Abu says that he cannot go with money that is not rightfully his. What this particular movie shows is how important the spiritual preparations are for the hajj, not merely the journey itself.

Çizme (Boot) is a movie about the importance of prayer. (1991, dir. İsmail Güneş) In 1931 the Turkish Republic banned the call to prayer (Azan) in Arabic and required that Azan be recited in Turkish. Many people were put in prison for reciting Azan in Arabic. When the people of a small village are finally given the opportunity to recite the call to prayer in Arabic, a very old and noble Imam, "Bilal Hoca," immediately goes to the mosque and starts to recite Azan in Arabic. The people of the village follow him. Before he can complete Azan, however, he dies of a heart attack. The message of the movie is that the heart attack was caused by the excitement Bilal Hoca experienced from reciting Azan in Arabic. He was filled with joy and happiness, and the excitement caused him to have a heart attack. The movie shows the importance of being true to one's faith.

Other movies that deal with prayer include *Minyeli Abdullah* (1989, dir. Yücel Çakmaklı), *New York'ta Beş Minare* (2010, dir. Mahsun Kırmızıgül), and *Traitor* (2008, dir. Jeffrey Nachmanoff). In each of these films characters are put in prison, but even under the worst of conditions the characters perform their prayers. In *Return to Paradise* (1998, dir. Joseph Ruben) the guards in a Malaysian prison, rather than prisoners themselves, are shown saying their prayers in the hallway of the prison. And, in *My Name is Khan* (2010, dir. Karan Johar) the main character, Rizwan Khan, is shown saying his prayers in a bus station where he finds himself shortly after 9/11. All of these scenes show the importance to Islam of saying one's prayers.

Without belaboring the point, in *Children of Heaven* (1997, dir. Majid Majidi) the protagonist's family shares their meal with their elderly neighbors, even though the family does not have much money, thereby indicating the importance of giving alms, and in *Fordson* (2011, dir. Rashid Ghazi), the importance of fasting is shown when the high school football team practices after sunset during Ramadan.

There are many practices and themes in Islam and many movies that treat these practices, whether the entire movie focuses on the practice or only some scenes in the movie deal with the practice. As more and more movies are made in Islamic countries, we can expect to see an increasing number of movies that deal in one way or another with Islamic practices and themes.

VII. USING MOVIES TO TEACH RELIGIOUS VALUES

One of the interesting questions that arises for Islam, religion, and film studies is the role of movies in religious education or the promotion of religious values. To date, *The Messenger* (1978, dir. Mustapha Akkad) provides a story of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the life of the Prophet is seen as an excellent example of how Muslims should live their lives. The Messenger is one of the most popular movies in the Muslim world, in part because it is the story of the Prophet.

The Messenger is similar to the Jesus movies that are so popular in cultures that we might identify as Christian in nature. The story of Jesus is very popular and people are given an example of how, as Christians, they should live. But, the issue of showing the Prophet on screen raises a problem for movies about the Prophet. If we cannot show images of the Prophet on the silver screen, then it is difficult to do much more than what has been done in *The Messenger*. There will be many more movies made about Jesus, because Jesus can be depicted in a wide variety of ways. The prohibition of showing images of the Prophet, however, may limit the number of movies made telling his story.

Also to date, there are some television cartoons that are designed to teach Islamic values. One of the most popular of these is the Malaysian cartoon series, *Upin & Ipin*. While the television series has been made into a feature length film, the television series seems to be the most popular form of teaching Islamic values. In America, the equivalent might be the computer animated films entitled, "Veggie Tales." The Veggie Tales use anthropomorphic vegetables to convey Christian values to children. Whether more movies are made for children espousing Islamic values, will depend on large measure how popular it will become to take families to the movie theater.

There also are some movies which have scenes that can be used to convey Islamic values. In this case it is a particular scene in the movie, rather than the movie as a whole, that provides instruction in Islamic values. Something similar occurs in many movies from Europe and North America, but the teaching of religious values in these cases generally requires a religious teacher to point out those features of the movie that convey religious values in a discussion setting. (Stone, 2000 and Johnston, 2000 and Vaux, 1999)

In the examples above, we have movies that have a didactic purpose, that is, a teaching purpose. This is different from movies that tell stories from which audiences can discern Islamic values without the "teaching" element or, as some might put it, the "preaching" element. When movies show Islamic values, rather than telling you what values are Islamic in

nature, the response of the audience is often quite different. While telling or teaching children what count as Islamic values may work, adults find the direct teaching more off putting. Adults are more likely to be attracted to movies because of the drama or romance or comedy. Once the story hooks its audience, the audience is subtly exposed to Islamic values.

In addition to the teaching or promoting of religious values, one way of dealing with religious values in the movies is to prevent non-religious values from appearing in the movies. This is, of course, the practice of censorship. The best example of this in the United States is the Catholic Legion of Decency. (Black, 1997) The Catholic Legion of Decency introduced a movie rating system that included the dreaded letter "C" (for condemned). If the Legion gave a "C" rating to a movie, this meant that Catholics were forbidden to see the movie. But, the "C" rating also kept non-Catholic religious people away from movie theaters. This meant that the Legion had considerable influence over filmmakers, production studios, and movie distributors. If you wanted a large audience, if you wanted to make money on a movie, you could not afford to get the "C" rating.

Filmmakers and studios could avoid the "C" rating, by deleting material objectionable to the Catholic Legion. Objectionable material included explicit sexual activity and sexual activity (like sex before or outside of marriage) even when such activity was implied, rather than explicit. Typical vices such as the use of alcohol and tobacco were objectionable, as were criminal behavior. If objectionable activities were a necessary part of the story, movies had to show that such the perpetrators of such behavior were punished in some way. In other words, movies could not glorify any of the objectionable behavior.

Making fun of or ridiculing clergy of any faith also was objectionable, as were activities like labor strife. Because labor strife and other social and economic activities were prohibited by the Legion, the Legion played a significant part in American politics, as well as the religious values of the culture.

The influence of the Legion of Decency diminished over the years. Eventually the rating of movies became the province of the Motion Picture Association of America. This is the system of "G" for "general audiences," "PG" for "parental guidance suggested," "PG13" for "parents strongly cautioned," "R" for "restricted, children un 17 require an accompanying parent or adult guardian," and "NC - 17" for "no one under the age of 17 admitted." The present MPAA rating system is much more liberal than that of the Legion of Decency and the MPAA exerts much less control over the movie industry than did the Legion.

The question of censorship also applies to Islam and film. The fact that movies cannot show

images of the Prophet is one form of censorship, promulgated by various religious institutions, often in conjunction with State governments. Some States, for example, forbid the showing of particular films anywhere in the country. What material is censored and who does the censoring will vary from one State to another and from one period of time to another. Censorship in a constantly changing landscape, but it is still an effort to teach or promote religious values by eliminating from movies those values that religions find objectionable.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As more movies about Islam become widely available, as more Hollywood movies deal with Islam and related issues, as more Muslim scholars turn their attention to religion and film, we can expect a significant increase in Islam, religion, and film studies. In the essay above we have tried to draw an early picture of what religion and film studies will look like in a Muslim context.

We can expect Islam, religion, and film studies to include elements popular in non-Muslim cultures. The use of religion to interpret film will become more popular as filmmakers create more movies with Islamic subtexts. The use of film to critique religion will become more popular as a topic when more movies are made that critique Islam—its various branches and practices. And there will be an ongoing debate about when something is an attack on Islam and when something is a legitimate criticism. Some of this debate will concern the “true” nature of Islam.

There also will be films that focus upon various themes from Islam. These themes will be different from the themes of other religions, but finding such themes in movies will become a popular activity. Some of those themes might include pilgrimage, prayer, fasting, or Ramadan.

And there will be an ongoing debate about who controls the motion picture industry or how much control Muslims should exercise over movie making—especially movie making by non-Muslims or secular Muslims. Much of this debate also will be about what counts as the “true” faith. We can expect this debate to differ from country to country, depending upon the extent to which governments are considered Islamic, and to differ from one version of Islam to another.

Make no mistake, although it may look different in many respects, religion and film studies is beginning to take notice of Islam and this should make for a very interesting addition to the previous discussions of religion and film.

REFERENCES RÉFÉRENCES REFERENCIAS

1. Beck, Avent Childress. 1995. “The Christian Allegorical Structure of Platoon” in *Screening the*

Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film. Ed. J. Martin and C. Ostwalt. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

2. Black, Gregory D. 1997. *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940 – 1975*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

3. Blizek, William L., Editor. 2013. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

4. Blizek, William L. 2013. “Using Religion to Interpret Movies” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

5. Desmarais, Michele M. 2013. “Karma and Film” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

6. Fielding, Julien. 2003. “Reassessing The Matrix/Reloaded” in *Journal of Religion & Film*. Ed. W. Blizek. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha.

7. Flannery, Frances and Rachel Wagner. 2001. “Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix” in *Journal of Religion & Film*. Ed. W. Blizek. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha.

8. ohnston, Robert K. 2000. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

9. Kesey, Ken. 1962. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. New York, NY: Viking Press.

10. Kozlovic, Anton. 2000. “Superman as Christ Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah” in *Journal of Religion & Film*. Ed. W. Blizek and R. Burke. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha.

11. Ramji, Rubina. 2005. “From Navy Seals to Siege: Getting to Know the Terrorist, Hollywood Style” in *Journal of Religion & Film*. Ed. P. Williams. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha.

12. Shem, Samuel. 1978, *The House of God*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company.

13. Stone, Bryan P. 2000. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

14. Sara, Vaux. 1999. *Finding Meaning at the Movies*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

15. The Holy Qur’an, Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:216

16. The Holy Qur’an, Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:256

17. The Holy Qur’an, Surat Al-Nisa, 4:93

18. The Holy Qur’an, Surat Al-Ghashiyah, 88:22

19. Yorulmaz, Bilal. 2015. *Sinema ve Din Eğitimi*. İstanbul: DEM Publication.