

On Religious Cinema

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With the ongoing rise and spread of movies and television series, the production of religious films follows this trend. The approach to depicting religious events on screen varies depending on the production entity behind them. As the “seventh art”¹ developed, the number of production houses multiplied, and cinematic technology reached levels close to the fantastic. Because religious matters are among the most significant fields of human concern, across religions and sects, it is natural that the dramatic arts would follow religious themes though for different reasons.

Like any art form, religious art is used for purposes of evangelization, education, documentation, and to promote the beliefs upheld by the producers. Neutrality is rare, especially in this field. In our times, both private and public institutions, even official bodies, compete to present this type of art because it attracts large audiences and stirs the emotions of the religiously inclined in general. Thus, it is now almost impossible to find a screen that does not occasionally present something that touches on religious themes, especially in these troubled days, when appealing to religious emotions has become widely popular.

Religion has always been cautious regarding the depiction of sacred scenes, especially those involving the founder of the faith or its principal figures. Depicting historical, intellectual, or artistic topics usually receives greater acceptance. Yet the dominance of imagery in modern culture, the ease of production brought about by technological advancement, the renewed tendency to look to religion as a solution for the sufferings of contemporary humanity, the freedom with which private companies approach religious topics, and the eagerness of people to consume visual productions as they are—without examination or discernment—have all combined to produce serious

¹ The term "seventh art" refers to cinema, which is considered an art form that synthesizes elements from the six previous arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance, and poetry.

problems, emotional reactions, and impactful (sometimes dangerous) stances, especially in religious societies marked by diversity of faiths and sects.

Cinematic portrayal often diminishes the spirit of reverence and devotion to which believers attach great importance. When a believer sees holy figures, whom he venerates and elevates, embodied by an actor (or actress), carrying the actor's features and personality, no matter how skilled, disappointment is almost inevitable, at least initially. Not to mention that the actor's image may persist in the believer's imagination and influence the purity of his prayer.

It is beyond doubt that learning about the personality of any prophet or messenger—and his teaching—through dramatic art does not allow the viewer to enter deeply into the authenticity and precision of that personality. The difference between encountering a world-renowned story through a book or through a film is immense. Describing emotions, situations, psychological analysis, motives, and the inner workings of the human soul cannot be condensed into approximately two hours of film, nor can they be conveyed with the richness that the writer's pen offers.

Dramatic art also requires sets, costumes, music, movements, excitement, and other elements intended to attract the viewer. When these are applied to a religious film, they inevitably serve the perspective of the producer or director. They may be inappropriate, inaccurate, or even falsified or fabricated. Watching a film is not the same as reading a book; the image remains imprinted in the viewer's mind, confined to the limited time of the screening, and plays upon the imagination in ways that can harm faith and spiritual disposition. Likewise, a wrong image can spread a distorted understanding of the religious doctrine portrayed.

Wherever images appear, whether in cinema, television, or modern social media, they form a vast field for implanting ideas that the producer wishes to promote through his work. Not all viewers can follow, notice, or discern these ideas, nor recognize their falsehood. Such implants are etched into the minds of viewers, who then believe them to be true, while they may be the exact opposite.

For example, in one film about the life of Christ, Joseph the Betrothed is shown as a handsome young man, whereas Christian tradition considers him elderly. The same film depicts the Virgin Mary dancing with him at their engagement celebration!

Cinematic production has become a widely used means to spread biased or incorrect ideas, forming false impressions and shaping public opinion about any subject political, historical, moral, and especially religious. Consider *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the uproar it caused. It is a cinematic rendering of a novel of the same name, written by a famous twentieth-century author who spent his life wrestling with the conflict between the sensual human being and the spiritual human being—between body and spirit. He projected his personal struggles onto the person of Christ—portraying Him merely as a man—while hundreds of millions of believers confess Him as God incarnate.

Believers today, living in an age overwhelmed by propaganda, must remain awake, alert, and discerning in all they see, lest they fall under the domination of the cinematic image and its potentially harmful influence on their faith.

Cinematic production in the West, in particular, has become extremely free, driven by various forces, and at times controlled by producers who are atheists, hostile to a particular religion, or intent on promoting a certain ideology. They insert into the film whatever images, words, music, or elements suit their aims. They may not hesitate to use deceptive methods to spread their ideas.

If we recognize the power that imagery has attained today, especially through modern propaganda, and acknowledge how difficult it has become to distinguish truth from falsehood, particularly in news media, then the necessary awareness becomes an urgent need.

In conclusion, dramatic portrayals of religious matters are often marred by inaccuracies—sometimes intentional, sometimes not. They must be approached with serious critical discernment, not watched naively or casually. You cannot protect yourself from falsehood by silencing the voice of others, but by growing in knowledge and continually seeking the truth.