

FAITH^{AND}FILM

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Theological Themes at the Cinema

Bryan P. Stone



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For Cheryl

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To my wife, Cheryl, who has watched more movies with me than she probably cares to admit or remember and whose ideas and good advice for this book I have tried to follow, I lovingly dedicate this book.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and
born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting.

Introduction

Cinema, Theology, and the “Signs of the Times”

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus chides the religious leaders of his day for their inability to discern the “signs of the times” (16:3). They had been trained in reading and understanding scripture, but they could not interpret the world around them. They failed to understand that history is itself a kind of text and that it is as important to understand the human predicament as it is to understand the word of God that is addressed to that predicament. In fact, it is doubtful whether we can ever adequately read and understand scripture, given an inability to read and understand the world.

A fundamental assumption of this book is that what is especially needed within the Christian movement today is vigorous and sustained thinking about both the gospel *and* the world, about scripture *and* human existence, about text *and* context. When we read the Bible but are not able to read the world, we risk reducing the gospel to either a *weapon* or a *toy*. In the first case, the gospel is hurled at the world like a spear, brandished like a sword, or wielded like a club. It is a clumsy and uninvited word—one that does not speak to us but merely stands over us and against us. It may sting, but it doesn’t heal. In the second case, the gospel is a plaything—an amusing distraction to be played with, fondled, and polished. It has no relevance or function in a world of corporate mergers, unemployment, and global commerce. It is little more than a topic on the Internet or a slogan on a bumper sticker. It answers questions few people are asking.

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We Christians sometimes forget that the gospel is virtually meaningless apart from the human projects, loyalties, and concerns that are the medium through which it is rendered both intelligible and interesting. One of our most important tasks today is to learn better to read the world along with the gospel—to hear more clearly the questions the world is asking and to provoke the world to ask new questions. This is the essence of Christian theology, not merely the study of scripture text but of worldly context. Theology always demands an intimate familiarity with both.

Given this double requirement of theology, it should not be too difficult to make the case that the cinema can be an important dialogue partner for Christians who are interested in thinking seriously about their faith. In a sense, the cinema is a source of revelation—not necessarily about the nature of God, the significance of Christ, or the path to salvation (though it certainly does illuminate those topics from time to time). Rather, the cinema is regularly and quite amazingly a source of revelation about ourselves and our world—about the “signs of the times.” The cinema reveals what we value as human beings, our hopes and our fears. It asks our deepest questions, expresses our mightiest rage, and reflects our most basic dreams.

Linking Christian faith and theology with the arts is not something entirely new, of course. Christians have enjoyed a rich history of leaning heavily on the arts in order to carry out the tasks of bearing witness to the Christian faith. Just think of the impressive cathedrals of the Middle Ages that attempted to express Christian truth through their stained glass, handsome murals, ornate ceilings, and soaring arches. Architecture, acoustics, the careful use of light and shadows, even the smell of incense—all these have served as media for the communication of the gospel.

But the role of the aesthetic has become diminished in the face of a rationalistic religion that reduced faith to dogma and truth to propositions. It would be no exaggeration to say that in recent centuries the printed word in theology has predominated over imagination, drama, myth, pictures, and storytelling. And yet few, if any, of our most fundamental Christian convictions can be reduced to words on a printed page. There remains in human beings a deep hunger for images, sound, pictures, music, and myth. Film offers us a creative language—an imaginative language of movement and sound—that

can bridge the gap between the rational and the aesthetic, the sacred and the secular, the church and the world, and thereby throw open fresh new windows on a very old gospel.

The Cinema: Mirror, Window, or Lens?

I grew up in a conservative Christian denomination that taught that it was wrong to go to the movies. The cinema was spelled *s-i-n-ema*, and Hollywood, we were taught, was an industry that was as opposed to Christian values as anything could be. Nothing short of absolute nonattendance at the cinema was understood to be the appropriate response of Christians to Hollywood and its values. My church's position was not intended to be a political statement, nor was it a strategy to bring about change in the industry such as a boycott would be. It was simply an expression of a fundamental desire on the part of its members to keep themselves unstained by the world. They had the idea that time spent in the cinema was not just harmless entertainment, but that through the power of images what is actually happening is that the mind is being shaped and transformed by the values, ideas, and desires of the filmmakers. My church had the notion that subconsciously and cumulatively, through repeated attendance at the cinema, what you saw was literally what you "got."

In junior high, my parents allowed me to slip by the rules and go on school field trips to see such movies as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Somehow sex, violence, revenge, and bigotry are easier to take when packaged in Elizabethan English. Films like these, however, began for me a love of the cinema that has grown stronger and stronger through the years. I still know a few members in my denomination who, even today, refuse to visit the cinema, but Hollywood has found alternate ways into their lives and homes through video stores and cable movie channels. It is the rare individual these days who is able to pull off total abstinence, not only of the cinema but also of HBO, Cinemax, and Blockbuster Video.

However difficult in practice it might be to maintain a consistent and thoroughgoing witness against the motion picture industry, we should be cautious about too easily dismissing such conservative Christian attitudes as simply quirky or fanatic. It may be that they, more than other Christian groups, were able to perceive accurately the awesome ability of film to shape our lives and culture. At least

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one of the things these Christians were saying was that it is naive to believe that film, either as an art form or a medium for communication, is somehow unbiased. The cinema may function both as a *mirror* and as a *window*, but it is primarily a *lens*. We see only what the camera lets us see, and we hear only what the writer has scripted. Movies do not merely portray a world; they propagate a worldview. A good illustration of this insight can be found in the 1976 film *Network*, when newscaster Howard Beale, the angry prophet of the airwaves, makes the following indictment against television (an indictment that could easily be extended to the cinema):

Right now, there is a whole, an entire generation that never knew anything that didn't come out of this tube! This tube is the gospel, the ultimate revelation; this tube can make or break presidents, popes, prime ministers... You're beginning to believe the illusions we're spinning here, you're beginning to believe that the tube is reality and your own lives are unreal! You do! Why, whatever the tube tells you: you dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube, you even think like the tube! This is mass madness, you maniacs! In God's name, you people are the real thing, WE are the illusion!

The cinema is a double-edged sword. It helps us see what we might not otherwise have seen, but it also shapes what and how we see. Perhaps my denomination was right! There is truth in its intuition that the industry as a whole and cumulatively *can* be antithetical to Christian values. But that does not mean—and here my agreement with the tradition ends—that wholesale abstinence is or ever has been the proper response of Christians to the cinema. The worldview and values propagated by the cinema—however subtly or implicitly this may occur—must be critiqued through a posture of constructive engagement rather than a silent standoff. And this critique must be rigorous and extended far beyond the narrow scope of values and behaviors typically critiqued by standard rating systems concerned only with whether a film features profanity, nudity, or violence. Today's Christian must also ask about the way in which Hollywood film conventions teach us to understand and relate to

difference in our society—the outsider, the foreigner, the gay, or the minority. And what about the way white culture continues to be made the norm in films? Or the way patterns of consumption and materialism are treated as normative? Or the way religious faith is trivialized and marginalized—the way it is reduced to a caricature? Or the way the role of women is perpetuated as one of scenery and as foil for the adventures of men? For all Hollywood's purported liberalism and loose morality, its standard film conventions are actually quite conservative. Hollywood does not tell us overtly that it is all right to be racist, sexist, or xenophobic, but by being repeatedly portrayed on screen such attitudes, behaviors, and values are reinforced as "natural" and "right."¹

There is no single person, entity, organization, institution, or power in our society today that even comes close to rivaling the power of film and television to shape our faith, values, and behavior. Learning to live and think as Christians in our time requires learning to engage media and culture as Christians. Together we must become aware of the power of images and find both the tools to explore and critique these images as well as the opportunities to shape that which so thoroughly shapes us. This means, among other things, that the relationship between film and theology cannot be solely a relationship in which theology merely uses film to illustrate or advance its own ideas. We must also become more responsible as Christians for engaging film theologically—for attending to its tacit faith claims and critiquing its implicit pretense of mirroring reality. The relationship between Christian theology and popular film is, in short, an interfaith dialogue.

What follows in this book is an attempt at just this kind of dialogue. True dialogue, of course, runs in two directions. In one direction, there are points where we will find that film is able to help us think more imaginatively about the meaning of Christian faith—to grasp its decisiveness for our own situation in fresh, new, and creative ways. In a worship service I attended recently, the congregation was being lulled to sleep in typical fashion by the pastor as he trudged along through his sermon. At some point in the sermon, however, he tried to illustrate his point by alluding to a recent film that had just started playing at the neighborhood theater. Never

mind that the pastor's name was neither Siskel nor Ebert. The entire congregation was suddenly interested in what the preacher was saying, and each person began to sit up in the pew, almost in unison. It was as if the man had begun using a magic vocabulary that enchanted, invited, and intrigued everyone within range of hearing. People love the movies! It is one of the central theses of this book that this love can be translated into a new opportunity for teaching, illustrating, and enriching Christian faith claims.

At other points in the following pages, however, the dialogue between theology and cinema must travel in the opposite direction. If popular film can shed new light on traditional Christian faith claims, the Christian faith also wants to shed some light on both the explicit messages and implicit assumptions of popular film. The underlying faith claims of film must be challenged. In some cases, they must be exposed as inadequate, false, and even dehumanizing. Even here, however, the cinema can serve to make our faith stronger as we distinguish the Christian faith from other inviting options.

The Apostles' Creed

Creeds are concise statements of what people believe. At their worst, they are constrictive, narrow hedges that box believers in and can even serve as a source of division, intolerance, and oppression in the Christian community. At their best, however, creeds can be useful devices for teaching and worship, and a way of connecting us with our past and with the best thinking of those who have gone before us. The most important creeds in Christian history were the product of prayer, contemplation, debate, controversy, and even intense political pressure. They did not drop from the sky ready-made any more than did the Bible. They developed over years of thinking theologically as a community of faith. What is known today as the Apostles' Creed is a distillation of much of what was taught by the earliest witnesses to Jesus. In fact, there is an ancient legend that each of the twelve apostles contributed a phrase to the creed.² More than likely, however, the actual words of the creed date back only to the early part of the third century, when they appeared in the form of a three-part question in the context of baptism. Some two hundred years after Christ, a Roman writer named Hippolytus detailed the profession of faith made by candidates for baptism, and it is here

that we find the beginnings of what would come to be known as the Apostles' Creed:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty?
And he who is to be baptised shall say:
I believe.
Let him forthwith baptise him at once, having his hand laid
upon his head. And after this let him say:
Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate,
And died,
And rose the third day living from the dead,
And ascended into the heavens,
And sat down at the right hand of the Father,
And will come to judge the living and the dead?
And when he says: I believe, let him baptise him the second
time and again let him say:
Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church, and
the resurrection of the flesh?
And he who is being baptised shall say: I believe. And so let
him baptise him the third time.³

Although the creed did not appear in its present Latin form until about the eighth century, a close relative known as the "Old Roman Creed" appeared in Greek in 340 C.E. Early on in the church, during Lent, the bishop would explain the creed phrase by phrase to new converts and to young people who were going through catechism and preparing to be baptized. They, in turn, would be expected to memorize the creed and repeat it back to the bishop. Thus, the creed served as a tool for instruction in the faith and as a common story or narrative that served as a point of Christian identification and unity.

Although the creed is not scripture, it has served for at least sixteen centuries as a short yet comprehensive summary of Christian beliefs. Many churches include the Apostles' Creed as a central part of their liturgy and worship or as a vehicle for evangelism and instruction, an instrument to help the faithful to remain anchored. In more than one instance it has even been set to music. That is not

to say that all Christians at all times have allowed their doctrine to be defined in terms of the creed or have used it as an instrument for distinguishing between orthodoxy and heresy. Traditions that are historically anticreedal, for example, have been especially wary of giving to this or any other creed any kind of dogmatic authority.

Certainly it is also the case that not all Christians have agreed with every phrase of the creed or interpreted each phrase in the same way. For example, the phrase “He descended to the dead” is troubling to some Christians who can find no clear scriptural support for such a journey, while others find in the phrase an important reference to the fact that Jesus came to save all people, including those who had already died. Some see in the phrase an affirmation that Jesus really did die a full human death and thus, in terms of the worldview of the day, did indeed sink fully to the realm of the dead.

Wherever we land on the matter of creeds, however, perhaps the Apostles’ Creed can still serve an important role for the church by assisting us to reflect on what we mean when we call ourselves “Christians” today. Perhaps the creed, regardless of whatever shortcomings it may have, has enough universality and longevity to teach us something about Christian faith and about the kinds of beliefs and loyalties implied in that faith. At least, that is the conviction and the prayer of this book.

The organization of the book is such that each phrase from the creed will be examined in the order in which it appears. This should not lead us to believe, however, that the several phrases of the creed are to be viewed as a menu of individual beliefs from which we might pick and choose. In fact, it is difficult to know how to break down the creed into distinct and separate articles of faith.⁴ It may be that the unity of the creed is viewed better as the single plot of a story rather than as a catalog of Christian beliefs. As Nicholas Lash says,

There may be many things which, as Christians, we believe, but we seriously misunderstand the grammar of the creed if we suppose its primary purpose to be that of furnishing a list of them. To say the creed is to say, not many things, but one. To say the creed is to perform an act which has one object: right worship of the mystery of God. To say the creed is to confess, beyond all conflict and confusion, our trust in

One who makes and heals the world and who makes all things one.⁵

The creed, then, is a way of affirming one thing, not a list of things. The creed is the expression of a singular faith in and allegiance to the God of Jesus experienced today through the power of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the creed does have a personal dimension and may even be considered to be autobiographical in nature. The creed is an affirmation of what *I* as a Christian believe. But the creed is also communal. We are sharing a larger story when we confess the creed. Indeed, the creed is an invitation to share a particular kind of life together. It provides Christians with a common language that binds us together and stakes out a common path that we agree to walk along. In a world where there is such confusion about what Christians believe, even among Christians themselves, perhaps the rediscovery of the creed can serve as a resource both for furthering Christian understanding and unity and for communicating Christian truth to a world that waits to hear it.

How to Use the Book

This book has been written for those who are interested in thinking critically about the Christian faith, whether as individuals or in small gatherings such as classes, congregations, study groups, or fellowships. I suggest that the best way to use the book is first to view the film before reading each chapter—preferably with others who can engage in dialogue about it afterward. At the end of each chapter I have provided questions for reflection that attempt to stimulate this dialogue and to initiate theological reflection on the films as a transition to the chapters themselves. Therefore, the discussion questions will be used most profitably after seeing the film, but prior to reading the chapter. The questions all typically receive some treatment within the chapter itself, so that reading the chapter first may tend to dampen or control a discussion that might otherwise occur. Furthermore, the chapters also include significant “spoiler” information that can be irritating to those who have not yet seen the film.

There is no science in knowing which films to interface with the various sections of the creed. Though most chapters focus on only one film, in many instances there are a number of films that

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could have been fruitful dialogue partners. In chapters 5 and 8 I treat a trio of films together, and if you are using the book in a small group, I leave to you the choice of which film to view. I might suggest, however, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* for chapter 5 because it is such an unusual and critically acclaimed approach to the story of Jesus, and *Powder* for chapter 8 because of its moving portrayal of a secular ascension.

At the end of each chapter, I have provided a list of related films that may also be of interest, and at the end of the book is a list of film summaries, including Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating, running time, and other information. Clearly some of the films are not suitable for all audiences, though it is virtually impossible to tie a film's MPAA rating to its value for theological dialogue. I have tried to use films that represent a variety of genres (comedy, horror, science fiction, biography, drama, etc.). A few non-English language films have been chosen as well. I have tried to use films that are more or less popular—almost all the films included did well at the box office. Whether we like it or not, popular films have the ability to register the hopes and dreams, fears and anxieties of a broad cross section of our culture. Why such films appeal to so many people is, in fact, a consideration worthy of investigation in its own right. Most of the films are relatively easy to find in a neighborhood video store, with the exception of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, which may be a bit more difficult to locate. Some libraries, especially college and university libraries, are good places to search for it, and I was even able to purchase a copy easily and cheaply through an Internet book dealer.

NOTES

¹Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 27.

²J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3d Ed. (Essex, U.K.: Longman, 1972), 3.

³Gregory Dix, editor, *The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 36–37.

⁴There is a long history of Christian thinkers who have attempted to divide the Apostles' Creed into various principal parts. Aquinas distinguished two sets of seven clauses, while Erasmus criticized such a division as departing from the traditional twelvefold schema with its roots in the legend of the Creed's apostolic origins. Luther, like many modern interpreters, emphasized the trinitarian structure

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of the creed so that there are really only three primary articles of faith—one pertaining to the Father (God the Creator), one pertaining to the Son (God the Redeemer), and one pertaining to the Holy Spirit (God the Sanctifier); cf. Bernard Marthaler, *The Creed*, 2d ed. (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1993), 11–13.

⁵Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles’ Creed* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 16.

“I believe”



*Contact*¹

In keeping with the trinitarian structure of the Apostles' Creed, the simple phrase “I believe” stands at the beginning of each of its three major sections: “I believe in the Father,” “I believe in the Son,” “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The two words remind us that to be a Christian is to hold a common set of beliefs—fundamental convictions shared by believers throughout the past twenty centuries. For the Christian, however, *believing* is far from just a mental activity. It is about loyalties, allegiances, and values. To believe is to hold deep convictions about the meaning and purpose of our lives and the very nature of ultimate reality, but it is also an active way of living together in the world. To believe is to *exercise* faith.

We begin our survey of the creed by examining a science fiction film that focuses centrally on matters of faith and belief, *Contact* (1997), directed by Robert Zemeckis (of *Forrest Gump* fame). As a modern genre, science fiction—whether in literature, film, or television—is uniquely suited for dealing with questions of faith. At first glance, we might take science fiction to be a distraction, a flight of fancy and escape from the real world. When science fiction first began to appear almost a hundred years ago, it was considered little more than the product of end-of-the-century anxiety. Since that time, however, it has served as an important avenue for dealing with heavy questions such as the shape of ultimate reality, the meaning

of life, and the place of human beings in the cosmos. Though religion and religious faith are not always an explicit preoccupation of contemporary film, it is not unusual to find science fiction dealing head-on with issues that have religious importance as an underlying and recurring theme. *Contact* boldly places the question of religious faith and its relationship to science at its front and center.

Contact ranked eleventh in the top grossing films of 1997, securing for itself a respectable position in contemporary American culture so far as popular film goes. The film is based on the late Carl Sagan's novel by the same name that imagines the personal, religious, and political impact of an extraterrestrial encounter—a question that is certainly worth entertaining, especially with regard to its theological implications. Anyone who has paid attention to the work of Carl Sagan will easily recognize his perennial interests throughout the film. Sagan, an outspoken atheist who wrote more than two dozen books, hundreds of articles, and hosted the 1980 PBS series *Cosmos*, was enormously successful in his lifetime at popularizing science and giving the search for extraterrestrial intelligence a measure of scientific respectability. Though Sagan had no place in his worldview for traditional religion and popular notions of God, he had a deep appreciation for the unresolvable mysteries of the universe. Sagan was actively involved in the transition of *Contact* from book to screenplay until his death at age 62 in December 1996. Toward the beginning of the film, the central character of *Contact*, Eleanor “Ellie” Arroway, asks her dad whether he thinks there are people on other planets. In a line that is something of a Sagan mantra, her father replies, “I don't know...but I guess I'd say if it is just us...seems like an awful waste of space.”

It is difficult to watch the film without being impressed by its special effects—especially the very beginning of the film where we are graphically transported backward away from the planet Earth for an incredible ride through the universe. However, *Contact* is much more subtle and intelligent on the “alien” side of things than other recent films, and it does have a way of drawing the viewer in where the dimension of science is concerned. Roger Ebert refers to *Contact* as “the smartest and most absorbing story about

extraterrestrial intelligence since *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.”² Of course, that may not be saying much, since few science fiction films over the last two decades have taken it upon themselves to rise above standard plots that include lots of people getting “slimed” by aliens, and cosmic cowboys chasing interplanetary bad guys throughout the galaxy.

It is refreshing to see a popular film deal with issues such as the existence of God, the meaning of faith, and the relationship between science and religion, rather than how to kill off strange-looking creatures. Unfortunately, this preoccupation with heavy questions can cause the film to become preachy and to attempt to be overly profound. At one point in the film, where the central character is making a case for research funding, the film has her describe her quest for making contact with aliens as “something that just might end up being the most profoundly impactful moment for humanity...for the history of history.” Here is a film that strains under the weight of its own pretensions to be dealing with the “big



Contact: © Warner Bros. Inc., Courtesy MoMA

issues” (and, no, there is no such word as “impactful” in the English language).

In brief, the film is about Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster), a zealous radio astronomer who discovers a pulsing signal originating from the star system Vega, some twenty-six light years away (later in the film we see an Elvis look-alike holding a sign that says “Viva Las Vega”). The signal contains instructions for building a star-transport, and most of the film traces the political, scientific, and religious complications that develop in response to the alien signal and Ellie’s strong desire to be the one to go on the transport. Introduced into the story to provide roadblocks for Ellie are a glory-hogging science advisor to the president (Tom Skerritt) and a paranoid national security advisor (James Woods). Ellie is an atheist because she doesn’t find any empirical evidence for the existence of God; but because the film develops her character so well, even the most devout theists will find themselves liking her and taking her side.

Ellie finally gets to take the transport, and after traveling through galactic wormholes at cosmic speeds, she encounters an alien who, strangely enough, appears in the form of her father (I can just see Freud with a broad smile across his face). The alien has few answers for Ellie’s questions and can only give her hints of the evolutionary process that has for millions of years brought them to this point. The alien doesn’t even know how the transport system got there in the first place. Nonetheless, he comforts Ellie with the following words of wisdom:

You’re an interesting species, an interesting mix. You’re capable of such beautiful dreams and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone. See, in all our searching, the only thing we’ve found that makes the emptiness bearable...is each other.

Twenty-six light years, and all we humans get for the effort is a cure for interplanetary angst! Still, an understated alien encounter is refreshing, given some of the outlandish portrayals in other science fiction movies. The film quickly turns to what is perhaps its most important segment—not the alien encounter, but Ellie’s return to earth. To her fellow earthlings it appears that her star-transport never

left—such is the nature of interstellar travel. Ellie is now left having to explain her experience not merely in the face of a lack of evidence, but in the face of controverting evidence. Ellie the atheist is reduced to the status of those poor religious folk who have no proof for their claims, but must simply live by faith and bear witness to their life-changing experiences in an unbelieving world.

The other central character, Palmer Joss (played by Matthew McConaughey), shows up early in the film during Ellie's research at the Arecibo radio telescope site in Puerto Rico. McConaughey is completely unconvincing as a kind of New Age ex-Catholic theologian who got his Master of Divinity degree, dropped out of seminary, and is now working on a book about how technology affects third-world cultures. Later in the film, we discover he has written another book titled *Losing Faith*, an indictment of modern culture, which has lost its sense of direction and meaning despite its advances in science, technology, and creature comforts. According to Palmer, "We shop at home, we surf the Web, at the same time we're emptier."

Palmer is supposed to represent faith in the film, and Ellie, of course, represents science. Their flirtations are the flirtations between science and faith. When they hold hands or kiss, we are watching the potential union of science and faith. And in a scene that is loaded with theological potential, faith gives science his number, but science never calls! The problem, however, is that we don't get to know Palmer well enough to understand, let alone identify with, his version of faith, so that throughout the movie the "faith" that collides with and sometimes colludes with science remains abstract, mushy, and meaningless. We do know that Palmer couldn't, as he says, "live with the whole celibacy thing." He tells Ellie, "You could call me a man of the cloth... without the cloth." Following the standard Hollywood convention for communicating to viewers that the two have established a close, caring relationship, they fall into bed for a one-night stand, never to see each other again until four years later after Ellie has tuned in to the alien signal. By this time, Palmer has become, as Larry King describes him, "author and theologian... spiritual counselor of sorts and a recent fixture at the White House," or, according to *The New York Times*, "God's diplomat."

As a film that deals with the question of the existence of God, both of its central characters, Ellie and Palmer, supply the typical arguments for their respective positions on the topic, and while their arguments are by no means profound, it is extraordinary to see a popular film even allow itself to deal with such questions explicitly. Where the film gets muddled, however, is, first, in its attempt to portray authentic religious faith, and, second, in its attempt to interface science with religious faith (which, of course, is a muddle that is the byproduct of the first muddle). Perhaps the film does not really understand religious faith, or maybe, while pretending to remain neutral on the question, it so implicitly disagrees with religious faith that it finds it difficult to write well for it.

It is tempting to suggest that it is Carl Sagan's well-known atheism that is the culprit here, but the truth of the matter is that authentic religious faith is notoriously difficult to depict accurately on screen. Try to think of how many films you have ever watched that even attempted such a depiction, much less pulled it off successfully. It is much easier to resort to caricature and distortion. Two of the films we will examine later in this book, *The Mission* and *Dead Man Walking*, come to mind as moderately successful in this regard, but such films are rare. Even films that are explicitly religious, such as some of the more well-known Hollywood epics on the life of Jesus, are, as we shall see in chapter 5, notoriously shallow when it comes to portraying religious motivation and faith. Through the vehicle of the Palmer Joss character, *Contact* tries not to yield to the standard Hollywood convention of trivializing religion by presenting persons of faith as misinformed, confused, ineffective, fundamentalist, or fanatical. But it is not at all clear that it succeeds in doing this with Palmer, and, in the case of three other less prominent instances of religious figures in the film, it finally does succumb to traditional Hollywood conventions altogether (and that doesn't even count the man holding the "Jesus is an alien" sign halfway through the movie!).

The first of these figures is a priest who, in the beginning of the film, attempts to console Ellie, age 9, after her father has died. The priest tells her, "Ellie, I know it's hard to understand this now, but we aren't always meant to know the reasons why things happen the

way they do. Sometimes we just have to accept it as God's will." Ellie responds matter-of-factly, "I should have kept some medicine in the downstairs bathroom... then I could have gotten to it sooner," and the priest is left with a helpless, confused stare on his face. It has now gotten to the point in popular film that if you see a man with a clerical collar, you can count on his being morally reprobate, inflexibly ruthless, or, in this case, sincere but intellectually helpless.

The second religious figure is Richard Rank, leader of the Conservative Coalition, who is thrown into the mix now and again to blabber this and that about not knowing whether the aliens have any moral values or to criticize science for "intruding into matters of faith." This is meant, of course, to be a parody of Ralph Reed and his conservative political action group, the Christian Coalition. The parody is made all the more biting by the casting of Rob Lowe (not exactly the epitome of righteousness). Finally, there is the fanatical cult member with a crucifix draped around his neck who blames science for all the world's woes and subsequently tries to nuke the entire project. But for what reason? "What we do, we do for the goodness of all mankind. This won't be understood—not now—but the apocalypse to come will vindicate our faith." In other words, no answer is to be given. Instead the film merely falls back on one of the standard film conventions for portraying religious faith, a mixture of fanaticism and irrationality. Not that some future contact with extraterrestrial intelligence wouldn't occasion some very real conflict and tension between science and religion. One need not think long about the central doctrines of Christianity such as the significance of Christ, the meaning of salvation, or the nature and destiny of human beings to realize that each of them would be thrown into a tizzy with the advent of aliens; but, of course, these are not explored in the film. Rather, the focus of the faith versus science tension is an entirely antitechnology predilection.

So, then, are these the only candidates to be found for what it means to be a person of "faith": the useless priest, the political moralizer, the irrational fanatic, or the whatever-Palmer-Joss-is? Apparently so. *Contact* is a good example of how Hollywood creates and maintains popular attitudes toward religion and religious "faith" whether it intends to or not. What we find in *Contact* is an explicit

message about science and religion that attempts a neutrality and maybe even a positive cooperation between the two. On the implicit level, however (the level where film conventions operate most powerfully), we find what is true of many popular films—a consensus that traditional religious faith is deeply untrustworthy and to be placed at the margins of culture, if not rejected altogether.

Furthermore, because of the implicit messages the film conveys to its viewers about the nature of religious faith, it never really is able to make the jump it wants to with regard to the relationship between that very faith and science. In the end, faith is not allowed to stand on its own two feet but is instead reduced to a caricature. As a by-product, even the question of God's existence is treated throughout the film as if it were logically parallel to the question of alien existence. It is just this confusion that an authentically Christian faith can never allow. The existence of God is not at all similar in structure to the question of whether there are aliens. The latter will always be an empirical question that is answerable, at least in principle, by empirical methods of discovery, while the question of God's existence is in a different category altogether. Such confusion is almost as laughable as hearing once again of the Soviet cosmonaut who, having attained space orbit, proudly boasted that he saw no God. What we have here is a mixing of categories and a misunderstanding of the nature of faith.

Faith and the Creed

In the Latin used by the early church, faith was translated by the verb *credo* (I believe) and the noun *fides* (faith). Both words still indicated a sense of trust, pledge, allegiance, or commitment. In fact, the word *credo* (whence we get the word *creed*) literally meant, "I set my heart on." Faith was an activity that involved the center of our entire being, not merely our brain cells. In the early creeds, *credo* did include the mind's acceptance of certain precepts, but these were not the objects of faith. It was God in whom the Christians placed their trust and allegiance, not words or sentences. Faith consisted of a dynamic interplay between mental activity and practical activity, belief and trust, conviction and allegiance, confidence and loyalty.

In the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, belief as a distinctly mental activity began increasingly to take over the activity of faith. "Belief *that* God" began to override "belief *in* God." In fact, belief and faith have now become virtually synonymous. But they are not synonyms, and we dangerously distort the meaning of *faith* when we reduce it to *belief*.

The English language has certainly not been a friend at this point. We have no good verbal counterpart to the noun *faith*. Typically, in English, when we want to turn a noun into a verb, we merely take the root word and add endings (such as *-es*, *-ing*, or *-ed*). The noun *dance* can become the verb *dancing*. The noun *fight* can become the verbs *fighting* or *fight*s. The noun *box* can become the verbs *boxed* or *boxing*. In all of these the root remains basically the same while endings are added. But what about the noun *faith*? We have no corresponding verbal form that retains the root *faith* and simply adds endings, thereby giving it an active and verbal sense. Think how strange it would be to use phrases such as "we faithed," "she is faithing," or "he faiths"! What do we do instead? Typically we change the entire root of the word to *believe*, and in so doing we are left with tragic consequences. *Faith*, a dynamic noun that has both mental and practical dimensions, is reduced to a purely mental activity—*belief*—thereby altering and severely restricting the meaning of faith. We could, of course, create a new vocabulary. We could ask each other about our "faithing"! Such language is probably unlikely to catch on, but it would help us to understand that faith is always a combination of believing and acting—together. When these get divorced, we get a distorted faith—or even, as James says, a dead faith (2:17). Faith and belief are *not* synonyms, and the difference between the two is critically important as we examine the various claims of the Apostles' Creed. Christian faith can never be reduced to a matter of merely "believing" certain propositions, doctrines, or creeds without great damage to faith itself. Faith as a way of living and acting may presuppose certain beliefs, but it certainly cannot be reduced to them. Faith is loyalty.

Actually, this important distinction is not completely lost in the film *Contact*. Most viewers (even Christians) will find themselves identifying with Ellie more than with any other character. Despite the fact that she can find no good reason to believe in God, she is

nonetheless, in general, a person of integrity. She is honest. David Drumlin, the film's national science advisor, on the other hand, confesses belief in God, but we don't really identify with him because he is manipulative and self-serving. Palmer Joss claims to be a man of faith, but we can't figure out what that actually means for how he lives.

It seems we know almost intuitively that belief is not at all the same thing as faith—that merely saying “I believe” does not mean a person is “faithful.” Faith entails a way of living. It entails specific allegiances, commitments, and life practices. We don't really see these in the film's characters who claim to believe, and so their faith comes off as vacuous, sentimental, or even hypocritical. Ironically, it is Ellie, who does not believe, who is often the most “faith”-ful of all the characters!

Another point where this film can be helpful is in teaching us something about the uneasy relationship of faith and science in our world. A faith that tries to achieve for its claims the certainty of science is as doomed as a science that pretends it begins with no faith claims of its own. There is a yearning in our world today for a spirituality that can resolve the tensions between faith and science with integrity and practicality. Perhaps *Contact* is ultimately unsatisfying in pointing the way to such an integral spirituality, but it at least has the courage to try to imagine its possibility. Whether and how we decide to rise to that challenge is up to us. In a secular and scientific world that less and less requires religious answers, our task as Christians is to communicate a faith that is pervasive, relevant, and meaningful rather than obscure, trivial, and silly. And perhaps the one point where that task will be most difficult but most important is, as the film itself suggests, at the intersection of the human spirit and technology.

As a general uneasiness about where our technocentric world is headed becomes increasingly widespread, along with alteration after alteration in our understanding of the cosmos, we can expect more films to reflect our cosmic anxieties and the implications of those anxieties for religious faith. Christian faith cannot afford to run from those anxieties or their implications by retreating into a private world of abstract and pious *beliefs*. As we shall see in the following chapters, to say “I believe” is costly and downright

revolutionary in our world. It entails a way of life that requires discipline and practice. To believe is to make a leap—not only of the mind, but of the heart, soul, and body.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is faith? How do the two main characters in *Contact* use the word?
2. Is faith compatible with science? Are there points where the two necessarily clash? Are there any problems with a scientist's also being a Christian?
3. What examples of "religion" or "religious faith" do you see in the film? Does the film do a good job of portraying religious faith?
4. What, if anything, did you like most about the film? What, if anything, bothered you about the film? Are you left with any questions?

RELATED FILMS

At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1991)

Black Robe (1991)

Chariots of Fire (1981)

City Slickers (1991)

Dead Man Walking (1995)

Leap of Faith (1992)

A Man for All Seasons (1966)

The Mission (1986)

The Seventh Seal (1957)

NOTES

¹This chapter was originally published in slightly different form as "Religious Faith and Science in *Contact*," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1998), and is used with permission.

²Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 11, 1997.