“Who do you see that I am?”

Global Perspectives on Jesus Films

Darren J. N. Middleton and S. Brent Plate

How might new representations of Jesus be shaping Christian theology of the future? With an ever-greater diversity of Christian ethnicities, cultures, and theologies, we see new images of Jesus as well as a greater diversity of ways of visually engaging him.

Jesus, elusive as he remains to historical critics, is alive and well in cinemas around the world. No other historical figure has been the subject of as many film productions, and a great many adherents garner their personal christologies from what they have seen acted out on screen, consciously or unconsciously. These images come not only from the industrial film production companies of Hollywood, but increasingly from areas that used to be considered “remote.”

Our aim here is twofold. First, and quite simply, we mean to highlight for many English-speaking scholars the plethora of international films about Jesus and to encourage further reflection on these. Along with the increasing globalization of Christianity, especially into the southern hemisphere, and radical reshaping of the faith that this entails (Jenkins 2002, 2008; Sanneh and Carpenter; McGrath), there is simultaneously a new production of Christian media in the form of film, video,

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literature, and the arts in general (Meyer; Middleton; Renne). In this light, we intend to contribute to a global conversation and attendant shifting of meanings about who Jesus is seen to be.

Our second aim stems from the first and that is to suggest how these new representations might be shaping Christian theology of the future. A new way of seeing emerges out of these popular media, a new way of engaging what might be called the “sacred gaze” (Morgan). This renewed vision gives rise to a new understanding of Jesus, his life and work. Far from being second-order representations of a more fundamental, linguistic christology, these images are actually shaping global christologies from the ground up. Hollywood has provided images of Jesus for well over a century now and, as is usual, he looks a lot like the people in the culture in which the images are produced. As Richard Wightman Fox puts it, Jesus is “perpetually reborn in one culture after another. . . . His incarnation guaranteed that each later culture would grasp him anew for each would have a different view of what it means to be human. Jesus had to be reborn if he was going to inspire or even make sense to people in every era” (Fox, 11).

Now, with an ever-greater diversity of Christian ethnicities, cultures, and theologies, we see new images of Jesus, as well as a greater diversity of ways of visually engaging him. This occurs not just “in every era” as Fox suggests, but in the same era in different places. Jesus today is light skinned and dark skinned, speaks Telugu and Xhosa, wears ancient Palestinian robes and modern sneakers, performs miracles and is a political activist: all things to all people. One key implication of the global shift is that Christianity rubs up against other religious traditions, and we begin to see Jesus through the eyes of, as will be noted below, Hindus and Muslims, among others.

History and the Hollywood Jesus

In 1985 the esteemed historian of Christianity Jaroslav Pelikan published Jesus Through the Centuries, offering a historical take on the changing views of Jesus. Jesus was a rabbi, then a king, a cosmic Christ, a monkish figure, teacher, poet, liberator, and more. Because of the success of that book, a decade later Pelikan published a shortened version, but this time with many illustrations. Readers are able to see the ways Jesus assumed these roles at different points in time (Pelikan 1985, 2007).

In similar fashion, contemporary biblical scholars have taken up versions of Jesus presented on film and suggested emerging typologies through 115 years of cinema (see Kinnard and Davis; Tatum; Baugh; Deacy; Humphries-Brooks; Reinhardt; Walsh). Dominant films include Sidney Olcott’s From the Manger to the Cross (1913), Cecil B. DeMille’s King of Kings (1927), Nicholas Ray’s King of Kings (1961), Franco Zeffirelli’s Jesus of Nazareth (1977), Martin Scorsese’s The Last

Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, for instance, suggests that by looking at various representations of Jesus in popular Hollywood films over time, we learn not only about film, but also about shifts in United States culture. DeMille's 1927 King of Kings was the “first truly American Christ,” and Jesus eventually changes from being a king to a hero, and ultimately with Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, a “superhero” (Humphries-Brooks). Adele Reinhartz also looks to the “Hollywood Jesus” for the a-historical but culturally important imagery of these imaged and imagined Jesuses, stating, “Even as the Jesus biopics play out our society’s fascination with Jesus as a historical and religious figure, they also address our own fears and anxieties, our comforts and joys, our beliefs and values” (Reinhartz, 8).

Reinhartz’s point here about Jesus films as a cultural marker, a litmus test of sorts, suggests that similar studies can be achieved in places other than the United States, as well as subcultures within the United States. Moreover, apart from the diachronic shifts noted by the authors quoted so far, we can also chart a synchronic view, investigating the variations that occur within a similar timeframe from global perspectives. Here we turn to some of the Jesus films produced in the past forty years from nations, cultures, and languages that are far from the Hollywood Jesus.

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**The Cinematic Jesus in Africa and the African Diaspora**

Given African Christianity’s numerical strength, up from an estimated ten million in 1900 to today’s figure, which lies between four and five hundred million, an African film illustrating the Gospel within an African cultural context was inevitable (World Christian Database). The first film in this vein, Son of Man, appeared in 2005 and, one year later, it received its world premier at Utah’s Sundance Film Festival. Inspired by Dimphono Di Kopane’s theatrical set-piece The Mysteries, which offers an African outlook on selected biblical events, Son of Man, directed by Mark Dornford-May and starring Andile Kosi, re-tells and situates the life of Jesus in a corrupt context within present-day Africa. Shot primarily in the Eastern Cape and in Xhosa with some English and Setswana, this 86-minute feature employs traditional art forms—dance, music, fable-telling, symbol, and ritual—not simply to secede from the mainly European-style Christianity that Africans first received from the missionaries, but to celebrate as well as uphold indigenous cultural renewal and local religious agency.

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Born to an ordinary couple in a shanty-town shed in the southern African state of Judea, Kosi’s Jesus soon finds himself thrown into an arena of scarcity and carnage—terrifying territory held fast by Satan, who appears, fully clad in black leather, during Jesus’ traditional Xhosa initiation ritual. Jesus’ mother is, like her Matthean and Lukan counterpart, a virgin, although her sassy, even operatic approach to the guardian angels, played by African boys, highlights her inimitability.
In time, civil war breaks out. Offered the chance to avoid its remorseless brutality and to secure himself to heaven, Jesus rebuffs his Father’s angels, and, instead, elects to walk among women, men and children, preaching a gospel of radical egalitarianism. But equality is a tough sell in this part of the world. Viewers see savage internecine warfare, kleptocracy, and summary executions; the TV news coverage of such stark realities only accentuates the modern, urban feel of the movie. Occupying forces—a new Rome—take over the city. Insurgency movements—modern-day Zealots—rise up in the townships. And yet Jesus loves wastefully, urging his followers to go and do likewise, and many do so. This African Jesus is the elder brother or the healer, to invoke two images within African christological thought, because this Christ comes before his people with a diagnosis of rampant, selfish individualism and a cure of radical communitarianism (Kärkkäinen; Stinton).

In *Son of Man*, Jesus’s message decolonizes the theology of the Judean tribal authorities, since his struggle to humanize life disturbs their so-called God-given *pax Africana*, and thus they broker a deal to do away with him. With the help of Judas, who spies on Jesus with a video camera, the gun-toting authorities arrest and then kill Jesus.

What happens next is stunning: Dornford-May films the resurrection as a majestic and meticulous amalgam of celebratory clapping, drumming, singing, and stamping. Here, African dance becomes the festive, exultant arena of *communitas*, where the sacred time and space of communion with the crucified and now resurrected Jesus re-creates the social order and culture, advancing as well as reflecting the solidarity and harmony that Jesus lived and died for, even as it—the dance—situates such harmony and solidarity within an African context that prizes both qualities unreservedly. The film’s final scenes thus illustrate Dornford-May’s attempt to craft a visual Christology that addresses the contemporary concerns of Africans—concerns for fairness and concord. The *Son of Man*’s Jesus represents Christ as the liberator and Christ as reconciler, two additional images of Christ in Africa, and, in this respect, the Jesus of *Son of Man* resembles the Christ of *ubuntu* (reconciliation) theology, traceable to the work of the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Battle).

In sum: *Son of Man* portrays how theology and film coalesce to depict what happens when one attempts to indigenize Christianity, to decolonize theology, and to uphold spiritual home rule—three traits of the mother tongue, post-Western Christianity that Lamin Sanneh and other scholars have in mind when they address the staggering movement in global Christian numbers to Africa (Sanneh; Sanneh)
and Carpenter). Besides consulting the growing number of sophisticated books detailing the major changes within Christianity in the twenty-first century, anyone intrigued by how Christianity is being reconceptualized in Africa will find that films like *Son of Man* offer thought-provoking, visual accounts of how Africans grasp and relate to Jesus Christ (Jenkins 2008; McGrath; Oden; Oduyoye).

To take in the African world comprehensively, which is to say Africa and its diaspora communities wherever we find them, we must mention *Color of the Cross*, two independently-financed, California-shot productions. They reflect the personal vision of Jean Claude La Marre, a Haitian-American artist, to film the Christological concern of the peoples of the African Atlantic diaspora—the belief that Christ’s *true identity*, as the oppressed one, must be scrutinized and understood in the context of the black experience (Brown Douglas; Cleage; Cone; Davis; Erskine; Witvliet). Filmed in Santa Clarita, which is located just north of Los Angeles, and working with a $2.5 million budget, *Color of the Cross* (2006) focuses on the last two days of Jesus’s public ministry, and it portrays a black Messiah leading his disciples to Arimathea, a city of Judea (Luke 23:51), to celebrate Passover. La Marre’s Jesus then wanders into the cross hairs of the temple authorities, who acknowledge his Jewishness but interrogate his skin color. Spirited away from such hostility, which includes the antipathy of the Romans, who think black Jews present more social challenges than white Jews, Jesus reconnects with his followers, preaches racial inclusivity and then makes *kiddush* before the *Pesach* meal commences. The ensuing story line then travels the well-worn path of betrayal, condemnation, and death; this said, *Color of the Cross* breaks new narrative ground in two ways. First, Jesus’ mother complains, sometimes quite trenchantly, that race motivates the authorities to persecute her son. And second, La Marre’s crucified Christ—hanging from the cross, mouth gaping with pain, stomach hollow, ribs etched against the skin—invites an instructive comparison with Countee Cullen’s poetic “Black Christ”: both signify an arresting, disquieting symbol of the brokenness of black existence, one that helps the viewer internalize the words of the old Negro Spiritual, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” (Cullen).

“We are the only race of people, African-Americans, that worship a God outside of our own image, and to have a movie like this, representing us, is, to me, probably tantamount to *Roots*, and the effect that that movie had on our community,” announces La Marre. With this comment, taken from a behind-the-scenes featurette that accompanies the DVD, and with his 88-minute film that depicts “the first black Jesus in the history of Hollywood,” La Marre pictures God in a manner not unlike James Cone, Marcus Garvey, and Henry McNeal Turner, three of the most remarkable and radical thinkers in the last three centuries of the African-American religious experience (Raboteau). Like Turner, an AME bishop who urged black people to visualize and represent God in their own image, just as whites did, La Marre suggests that theology—how we picture the divine—is not something always already done by somebody else; rather, theology derives from personal experience,
in this case the experience of black people, and it seeks to reflect the joys as well as the sorrows of those seeking liberty from oppression. “The truth will be told,” actress Ananda Lewis (‘Leah’) declares in the featurette, “Jesus is the color of you.” Unsurprisingly, Color of the Cross created considerable controversy upon its theatrical release, and some of the lively debates are still available on YouTube, yet “the movie was way overdue,” LaMarre avers, and while some reviewers, like The Washington Post’s Stephen Hunter, lamented its “cramped, TV-style re-telling,” its effort to promote as well as celebrate theology’s contextual character represents no small virtue (Hunter).

The straight-to-DVD sequel, Color of the Cross 2: Resurrection, was filmed—again, with limited resources—in the Mojave Desert’s Fremont Valley, and was released in 2008. Footage from the original appears at the onset of this 85-minute film, as if to remind viewers where they left off, and then the greater part of Color of the Cross 2 utilizes Matthew’s account of the first Easter morning. With the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, La Marre harmonizes Matthew and Luke; and, by and large, the message is that the physical resurrection of Jesus—we see La Marre’s Messiah wriggle out from his burial shroud, like a butterfly from its cocoon—is the definitive sign of God’s action in Jesus Christ. At the end, God vindicated everything Jesus did; and this miracle affords authority for believing in the living Christ. A nitty-gritty, black Jesus pulsates at the heart of Christianity, according to La Marre, and although race appears absent in the sequel’s dialogue, in contrast to the original, there emerges from both films an eye-catching image of an oppressed one, who struggles with and for the subjugated and browbeaten everywhere.

**The Cinematic Jesus in Interreligious, Asian Perspectives**

As Christianity has crept through the southern parts of Asia and Africa, the faith has merged and melded with other cultures and languages, but also other religious traditions. To flesh out this movement, here we look at two films from Asia that take views of Jesus in an interreligious direction.

The Telugu production, *Karunamayudu* (“Man of Compassion,” directed by A. Bhimsingh, 1978), has now been seen by over 100 million viewers, a number rivaling many a blockbusting Hollywood film. For the past three decades in South India and beyond, villagers have gathered in front of makeshift outdoor theaters to watch the life of Jesus on screen. The film is a devout Christian production, and the official website of the Hindi language version suggests it is “one of the most culturally relevant tools for sharing the love of Christ in India” (Dayasagar).

At the same time, it is over two-and-a-half hours long—a length more common in Bollywood than Hollywood—and incorporates a South Indian cast. Further,
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The film style resembles the long tradition of Hindu devotional and mythological films more than a Western-style Jesus film. Jesus could easily be seen as part of the pantheon of Hindu deities. Dwight Friesen, who wrote his PhD thesis on the film and its reception, suggests it is a fascinating blend of the Western biblical epic and elements of the Indian historical, devotional, and mythological genres. *Karunamayudu* even filmically achieves the noted Indian mode of mutual sacred gazing, understood through the term *darshan* (Eck). And through use of song and dance in the midst of the narrative, the film employs a staple of the Indian film tradition. The Jesus presented here is a local, Hindu visual and audio presentation. In so doing, Friesen argues, the Jesus of *Karunamayudu* is a “hybrid Jesus,” and while the film “reflects biblical accounts with fidelity, it simultaneously locates Jesus in the realm of Hindu mythology through the use of subtle allusions to deities and texts commonly associated with the *bhakti* tradition” (Friesen, 149–150).

In Iran, the journalist and filmmaker Nader Talebzadeh made the award-winning film, *The Messiah* (2007), the story of Jesus told from an Islamic-Persian perspective. Here, Jesus is strong, beautiful, and revered as the last Jewish prophet who teaches and performs miracles. He is not the “Son of God” but is highly revered as in the traditional Islamic view. Indeed, the film aired on several Arabic television stations during the month of Ramadan, though not without protests from varying Christian groups especially in Lebanon. There are significant divergences with the orthodox Christian perspective here, including the depiction of Judas Iscariot being substituted for Jesus in the Crucifixion. God saves Jesus and he ascends directly to heaven. However, the ascension scenario has a strong link with the vision of a second coming, only in the Iranian-Shia perspective it is the Imam Mahdi who returns to redeem the earth before the Day of Judgment, and in many views it is Jesus who comes with the Mahdi during this time. There are both links made between Christianity and Islam, but also differences.

Talebzadeh has been interviewed by several Western news outlets and provided strong arguments for the nature of *The Messiah*. In an ABC interview, Talebzadeh raises the question of the dissemination of religious ideas: “How do we export our thinking? It’s the movies. This is a film for students and for practicing Christians,
for people to become curious, and go investigate more” (Setrakian). The filmmaker here gives credence for the worldwide export medium that film is, and also shows the ways multiple perspectives on Jesus can be seen.

Interreligious dialogue itself, an ever-increasing vital enterprise, might begin by looking at the ways films from differing traditions represent a sacred figure, text, symbol, myth, or ritual. In this way too, the familiar Hollywood Jesus might become a strange image. However, new translations, perspectives, and visions allow us to see the strange as familiar and the familiar as strange, ideally leading to a renewed vision.

Renewing Ways of Seeing Jesus

There is no space to develop more in-depth studies here, so we work toward concluding with brief mention of other films worth attention for their renewing ways of seeing Jesus.

Man Facing Southeast (1986) was written and directed by the Argentine filmmaker Eliseo Subiela. The film is set in a mental institution and the “man” who faces southeast is one of the patients. (The film was blatantly plagiarized in the United States, made into a novel called K-Pax and then a film of the same name.) The man is somewhere betwixt and between a messiah, an insane person, or an extraterrestrial, and the film refrains from tying up any loose ends. Whether or not Subiela had the C.S. Lewis trilemma in mind (“Liar, Lunatic, or Lord”) is not clear, but the film fleshes it all out in rousing ways.

The Cuban film La Última Cena (“The Last Supper,” Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1976) recasts the eponymous meal, but sets it in a Cuban sugar mill at the end of the eighteenth century. The master is white and sits in the role of Jesus, while twelve of his black slaves act out the roles of disciples. There is a deep cynicism toward Catholicism here, with the white Catholic master playing a despicable role. Yet, the film inverts the story and one of the slaves (Sebastián, who initially figures as Judas) becomes linked to liberation as he is mixed with images of Orishas. In the end, Sebastián becomes the Jesus figure, and the master is Judas.

Video-film production in Ghana and Nigeria has grown immensely in recent years. Nigeria (dubbed “Nollywood”) is now the second largest producer of movies in the world, after India and ahead of the United States. While subject matter ranges from the mundane to the horrific, a great many of the productions center on Christian themes, especially delving into the supernatural. There are a vast number of titles to look at here, and more sustained studies will undoubtedly be forthcoming, especially as Nigeria has become one of the most populous Christian nations in the world.

Many other films could be discussed in this light, and our hope is that further studies will begin a search for a cultural Jesus (or, cultural Jesuses) in films other
than those of industrial Hollywood. Gibson’s *Passion* and the resulting controversy stimulated the academic publication of at least eight full volumes on the one film, while almost nothing has been written on the films we outline here. The discrepancy is telling.

Readers may never have heard of the films noted in the preceding, in spite of each of the films’ prominence in their locations of origin. Therein lies some Western myopia with regards to religion, including the regard for images of Jesus. Yet, it is not exactly the viewers’ fault: part of the reason people in the West in particular do not know these films is that each film mentioned has struggled to find any distribution outlets. Our understandings and comprehensions of theological issues continue to be regulated by distribution companies who control the media. Nonetheless, the films are available with a little research, and part of the interest in writing this article is that we might take some time to find new channels of production, distribution, and translation. In so doing we may find refreshing new ways to see Jesus.

References


