Judith Weisenfeld

Judith Weisenfeld is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at Vassar College, where she teaches courses on religion in America, African-American religious history, and religion and American film. She is at work on a project on African-American religion in American film, 1929-1950, to be published by the University of California Press.

It goes without saying that most of our students respond favorably to the use of movies as part of their academic work and many instructors have incorporated films as a component of courses on religion in America. Our students can be sophisticated interpreters of visual culture and are eager to engage films both as entertainment and as objects for serious intellectual inquiry. In a course I have developed on “Religion and American Film,” I have chosen to place film at the center rather than employing it simply to illustrate or raise issues about significant moments or characters in American religious history. Over the course of the semester, my students and I engage film as a case study for thinking about the history of relationships between religion and popular culture in America and examine a set of films as material artifacts of particular historical moments. While it is neither a conventional film studies course, nor a traditional survey of American religious history, I have structured the course so that my students become familiar with scholarly approaches to the study of religion and film, learn how to analyze and discuss films in historical context, and, most importantly, have an opportunity to explore ways in which representations of religion help to shape our understandings of Americanness, especially in relation to ethnicity, race, class, gender, and national origin.

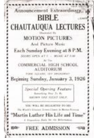
The course is organized chronologically, beginning in 1915, to emphasize changing relationships between American religious institutions and sensibilities and the film industry. One of my primary goals in taking students through this history is to convey the complexity of the interactions, not allowing them to assume that filmmakers and studios were uninterested in or scornful of religion, nor that religious institutions and individuals were unequivocally suspicious of the power of the medium and of the interests of filmmakers. To this end, we devote considerable attention to the use of film and film-related artifacts by religiously grounded social reformers and by churches. We consider the incorporation of films into the work of churches, both to provide informal entertainment and to complement or enhance ministers’ sermons. Along with viewing segments of early Bible films, we also examine catalogues, such as the 1923 *Catalogue of Non-Theatrical Motion Pictures, Inc.*, through which distributors marketed these films and used testimonials to argue for the inclusion of motion pictures in the religious practices of American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. We also look at broadsides, like one for a Bible Chautauqua lecture in New Haven, Connecticut in 1926 at which the lecturers screened *Martin Luther, His Life and Time*

, promoted as offering “8 stupendous reels on the Reformation.” Social reformers also saw film as useful for highlighting social problems like crime, prostitution, corruption in the American legal system, and corporate greed. Raoul Walsh’s 1915 film, *Regeneration*, based on the memoir of New York gang leader Owen Kildare and his story of transformation under the guidance of a settlement house worker, serves to introduce students to the genre of the social problem film.

At the same time that we acknowledge and explore some of the ways in which religious institutions and individuals made productive use of the movies in the period of early film, we also devote attention to censorship, arguably the topic most written about in film histories that engage religion. Here we consider the informal mechanisms of censorship employed in the 1930s by such groups as the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, the Legion of Decency, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, as well as the development of formal mechanisms of censorship in the National Board of Review, the Studio Relations Committee of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), and later the Production Code Administration of the MPPDA. We examine as well the influence of clergy and lay people in the development of censorship guidelines in this period. As a case study, I ask students to interpret Frank Capra’s 1934 film, *The Miracle Woman*, which takes Pentecostal revivalist Aimee Semple McPherson as the model for its main character, in the context of discourses about “the fallen woman” film of the early 1930s.

Another theme that runs throughout the course is the contribution of American movies to the process of constructing of religion, race, and ethnicity. Such films as D. W. Griffith’s 1919 *Broken Blossoms*, Alan Crosland’s 1927 *The Jazz Singer*, King Vidor’s 1919 *Hallelujah*, Leo McCarey’s 1945 *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, and Elia Kazan’s 1947 *Gentleman’s Agreement* serve well to encourage students to consider how filmic representations of the religious practices and lives of ethnic and racialized groups contributed to the process of making meaning of race and ethnicity in the American context and projected ideas about appropriate and inappropriate religion. Older films like Spencer Williams’s 1941 *The Blood of Jesus* and his 1944 *Go Down, Death*, both of which fall into the genre of race films produced for black audiences, and later films

such as Charles Burnett’s 1990
To Sleep with Anger
and Julie Dash’s 1993
Daughters of the Dust
allow students to think about the responses of African-American filmmakers to mainstream Hollywood uses of black religious practices.



The course also gives the students an opportunity to take up a number of other topics in the history of religion in American film, including changing approaches to filming biblical stories (from Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 *The Ten Commandments* to Martin Scorsese’s 1998 *The Last Temptation of Christ*
), the relationship between religion and horror films (Roman Polanski’s 1968
Rosemary’s Baby
, William Friedkin’s 1973
The Exorcist
, and Richard Donner’s 1976
The Omen
), and the uses of film by contemporary evangelicals and Mormons to reach a new market audience (Robert Marcarelli’s 1999 The Omega Code, Victor Sarin’s 2000
Left Behind
, and Richard Dutcher’s 2001
Brigham City
).

Teaching this course has presented a number of challenges. Although it is easy to grab students by placing film at the center of a course, I have found that they sometimes become frustrated in dealing with the demand that they think carefully about historical context, our primary methodological approach. In addition, some students have difficulty engaging films that rely on narrative and visual conventions that differ from those to which they are accustomed, particularly given the ubiquity of MTV style and pace in contemporary media culture. I have also encountered difficulty in finding readings that deal with the particular films in which I am interested and that situate the films in historical context as opposed to analyzing their mythic or archetypal religious structures. Nevertheless, it has been a rewarding experience developing and teaching the course; I have learned from my students as they have contributed a great deal to my own understanding, both of the history of religion in American film and of film in the history of American religion.