

## BOOK NOTES

# Faith guidance from Hollywood?

By ROSE PACATTE, FSP

**A**lthough many conservative Christians see Hollywood as an enemy of the Gospel, Greg Garrett, the author of a recently released book, *The Gospel According to Hollywood* (Westminster-John Knox Press), sees just the opposite. A professor of English and an Episcopal seminary instructor, Garrett thinks that many Hollywood movies work to transform society according to Gospel teaching. His new book, *The Gospel according to Hollywood*, sets out to prove this premise and demonstrate that many mainstream films also credibly deal with elements of the creed and the Christian life. He concludes with a somewhat polemical chapter asking—and answering—how movies influence what it means to be a believer in contemporary America.

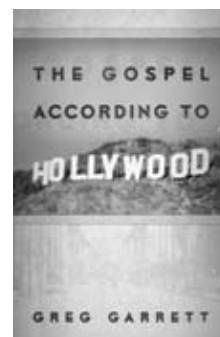
### How Hollywood writes the Gospel

Seeing Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 was a defining moment for author Greg Garrett. When Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta) conversed about divine intervention, Garrett experienced a spiritual awakening. All in all, he saw the film seven times in theaters and believes that this film, like the many others he references, is "crammed full of these moments that illuminate Judeo-Christian teachings..." I must admit that *Pulp Fiction*, despite its "moments" didn't impress me the same way it did Garrett. (I have not yet been able to go back and watch it again.)

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Garrett's introduction is perhaps the most significant part of the book because it lays out the tome's thesis, incarnational theology, tone, and energy from the outset. The first five chapters don't follow the creed exactly (like other books, such as Bryan Stone's 2000 *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*) but are divided into creedal areas and ask the kinds of existential questions people ask today: "Faith and Belief: Does God Exist?" "The Trinity: If God Exists What Kind of God Is God?" "Sin and Death: If God is Good, Where Did Evil Come From?" "Grace and Redemption: If the World is Filled with Evil, How Do We Find Salvation?" and "Peace and Justice: How Do We Live a Righteous Life?"



Chapter 6, "The Church and the Christian," is an energetic homily on several themes: what makes a good story, what makes a good story about the Christian churches, and the need for Christians to appreciate and understand storytelling. Although this chapter is a bit cluttered, when Garrett quotes Margaret Atwood in *The Blind Assassin* he pulls focus, "In paradise there will be no stories because there are no journeys. It's loss, and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road." Garrett likes movies about Catholics, from *The DaVinci Code* (noting that the film gave believers a great opportunity to ask and answer important questions about Christ), to *Romero*, *The Mission*, and *Dead Man Walking*.

Chapter 5, "Peace and Justice: How Do We Live a Righteous Life?" is my favorite chapter in *The Gospel According to Hollywood*. Perhaps because I live in Culver City, down the street from both Sony Studios and Culver Studios and within an hour's drive of Warner,

Disney, Paramount Studios, and others, and I am the film and television columnist for *St. Anthony Messenger* and see at least six films a month, I am aware of how many truly good films are being produced in our time about topics that matter. They matter because they deal with how we live together on this earth, and they invite thoughtful viewers to reflect theologically on what God is saying to us through cinema. These films invite viewers to respond to the question: what is God asking of me? Some of these films are *Blood Diamond*, *Tsotsi*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *God Sleeps in Rwanda*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Innocent Voices (Voces Inocentes)*, *The Price of Sugar*, *Trade*, *The Nativity Story*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Water*, *Erin Brockovich*, *A Mighty Heart*, *Arctic Tale*, *The Last King of Scotland*, *Glory Road*—to name a few. The principles of Catholic social teaching make a vibrant lens with which to see and talk about such movies. Although Garrett doesn't use Catholic terminology, he has the concepts down pat.

Garrett focuses on *Groundhog Day*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Batman Begins* in Chapter 5 and dips into the Hollywood vaults to remind us about films that emerged from and were about economic justice during the Great Depression. I think that Chapter 5 is Garrett's most theological chapter in the sense that he analyzes the films according to Gospel criteria and koinonia, that fellowship and communion of responsibility and love that characterized the early church.

This brings us to the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*: working together to heal the world, a theme Garrett develops in his book. Movies can help with this healing of the world because they provide a space for dialogue between people. Dialogue implies respectful listening, reflection, decision and action.

## Vocation directors and the movies

The great Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello (1931-1987) once wrote, "You have yet to understand, my friends, that the shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story" (*One Minute Wisdom*, 1985). Greg Garrett gets this, and so do most young people today who flock to the movies each week, even if they don't always articulate it.

I was privileged to present a workshop at the NRVC convocation in Irvine, CA in 2006. The title of my workshop was "Meeting Jesus at the Movies." I always enjoy giving this particular workshop, but I had such a good time doing so during this conference because vocation directors "get it." They have met Jesus at the movies (and in many other places), and they understand story and journey and grace because this is at the heart of their vocational ministry.

How would a vocation director use a book like *The Gospel According to Hollywood*, especially if they already think the way the author does? Garrett offers a framework for how each of us can process and talk about the films we watch. He provides a point of departure for vocation ministers to take theological reflection from the creed and social action to vocational discernment. Finally, those vocation directors who dwell in story, journey and the desire to heal the world by following Jesus—and who love cinema—can write the next chapter. That's a book I'd like to read.

There wasn't much to criticize in Garrett's book because he speaks about the films in terms of a theology of incarnation that is deeply felt and lived. The author infuses this theology into his understanding and love for film as a medium for spiritual growth. I would like to meet Greg Garrett some day and listen to how he continues to integrate faith, film, and life. His theology is informed, open and welcoming; his voice optimistic and inviting. He is comfortable in his Christian skin. Although it seems that Garrett is non-Catholic, he reveres Catholic stories and meets Jesus in the films that have moved him—just like vocation directors do. ■

### Further reading

*The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix*, by Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, 2002

*Holy Superheroes*, by Greg Garrett, 2005

*Reel Spirituality* by Robert K. Johnston, 2000

*Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*, by Robert K. Johnston and Catherine M. Barsotti, 2004

*Through a Catholic Lens: Religious Perspectives of 19 Film Directors From Around the World*, edited by Peter Malone, 2007

*Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, edited by Robert K. Johnston, 2007

*Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*, John J. Pungente, SJ and Monty Williams, SJ, 2004