From Out the Cloak of the Church: A Century of Christian Faith in Film

By Dr. Peter Fraser

This essay is to be the first chapter of a book-length study of 20 significant films of faith from the past century. Dr. Fraser is Professor of English at Wisconsin Lutheran College and Chair of the Department of Modern Languages. He has previously authored Images of the Passion: the Sacramental Mode in Film *(Greenwood-Praeger, 1998) and* ReViewing the Movies: a Christian Response to Contemporary Film *(Crossway Books, 2000).*

"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:10).

Introduction

In the century that has passed since Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) began the tradition of narrative film, hundreds of thousands of films have been produced in America and throughout the world. Given that the majority of those films have come from the West, it may only be surprising to the most hardened of skeptics that the single greatest influence on the tradition of narrative filmmaking for the first century of its existence has been the Christian faith.

This profound level of influence may change, of course, particularly as film production in the Far and Middle East escalates, as countries like China become more competitive in the international film market, and also as the West continues to slide away from its Christian foundation. Even so, it is hard to imagine any other single worldview exercising the authority that Christianity has held over film narrative and style.

The course of this influence has several currents that flow simultaneously, making difficult the task of the cultural and literary critic who attempts to trace the Christian lineage of individual films; yet, the presence of this influence is simple enough to detect, especially on the story level. Just take Porter's film, for example.

The basic story of the 12-minute classic, *The Great Train Robbery*, produced by the Edison Manufacturing Company, written, photographed, and edited by production-head Porter, is of a band of marauders who rob a train, then go on a spree, only to be tracked down by a posse of lawmen and captured. The inspiration for the story came from an actual 1900 train robbery involving Butch Cassidy's gang in Table Rock, Wyoming. The narrative, triggered by the mythos of the "train robbery," digs its roots in the familiar Western genre, birthed from American pioneer mythology and literary romanticism, popularized first in the 1820s in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales.* Cooper, a New Yorker, had created the prototype rugged American hero in frontiersman Natty Bumppo, the moral man of nature with a conscience formed from training with Moravians, who is not only a brilliant scout but the master of the long rifle. In Cooper's barebones first versions of what would become the classic Western formula, some rural community is threatened by savage forces, Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*, for example, whose goal seems only to destroy good order and bring about a chaos where only the powerful and treacherous few can prosper. The formula was given shape throughout the 19th century by various authors, selling particularly to Eastern markets hungry for tales of the Wild West. It entered mass culture through the popular dime novels of the late 19th century, featuring popular heroes like Deadwood Dick and Calamity Jane, and by the end of

the century had fully established its iconography—lone heroes on lonely plains, towns and homesteads threatened by marauders, gunfights, tavern brawls, barn dances, etc.

In Porter's film, the bad men wear masks, of course. They shoot an innocent man in the back when he tries to run for help. They drink and carouse with their loot. It is such familiar iconography with such predictable characters, we are tempted to accept it as a given, resisting the challenge of tracing the historical lineage of the mythology and its retelling of the American story. If we did, we would discover the roots of the Western extending far deeper than the dime novels of the '90s and the earlier novels of Fenimore Cooper into the folklore of our nation's founding.

Ultimately, the Western tale is one of manifest destiny—God providentially guiding his people to a promised land and protecting them once there. It is a tale familiar to Americans, but sourced ultimately in the Old Testament, the tale of the chosen race led into a fertile region populated by savages and then given victory over those savages. (In the period of Judges, following the deaths of Moses and Joshua, the settlers must then ward off the remaining agents of chaos.) This alignment of Jewish history and white European history in America came naturally to the Protestant Christians seeking religious freedom in a journey across the ocean. John Winthrop had articulated it in his famous sermon, titled "A Model for Christian Charity," delivered to the early settlers of Massachusetts Bay while still on board the *Arbella* in 1630. The sermon would later become required reading in many American history and literature courses throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, thus its deep engraving on the American cultural mythology. Speaking of God's special covenant with the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay, Winthrop spoke these words:

> We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us are able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England."

However, the lineage of the Western formula can be traced back yet further than Puritan covenant theology if need be to the Arthurian story tradition brought across the Atlantic with these same English settlers. The bullets of the villains always seem to miss the vital parts of the Western heroes, whereas the hero's aim is impeccable. This detail, so common in the formula Western stories, recollects the magical swords and shields of the medieval knights of Arthurian lore even more than it does Old Testament heroes; the Arthurian knights were protected on their quests by providence and the cloak of their own purity, a blending of Old Testament history and medieval rules of chivalry.

The point, of course, is that the Western formula narrative is soaked in the Christianity that fed American culture for well over 200 years. It is the principal mythology of a people convinced that their destiny is to establish a golden city in the midst of a wilderness and then protect that city against the hostile enemies jealous of their success. So, it would have been entirely predictable that the newborn art of narrative film, through its development over the first few decades particularly, found its richest nourishment in this Christian mythology. And indeed, hundreds of film Westerns were made in the first decades of the 20th century; and of all film genres, the Western reaches furthest, stretching more recently through the genre of sci-fi and fantasy, the myriad detective or police stories featuring maverick heroes, and many action-adventure films. Han Solo is a Western-styled hero, as is Sam Spade, Indiana Jones, Rambo, Batman, Spiderman, et al.

Anyone questioning my initial assertion regarding the profound Christian influence in narrative film need look no further than the story form of the Western and all the genres branching from it (and not limited to films in America either). But beyond this dimension of *narrative form*, there is the entire question of the Hollywood *narrative method*—how stories, of whatever kind, tend to be told in film. The Christian faith has also profoundly affected film *narration*.

The Hollywood Style: the Word Preeminent

The American film tradition is one in which story dominates style. Several film critics have made careers illustrating this point, despite how apparent it might seem, for it is easy to forget that what we experience every day is often a matter of will, not necessity. There have been many films made in which style dominates story (consider Disney's *Fantasia*, 1940, for example), where it doesn't much matter if a viewer follows the story line the first time through or not, but these are a small percentage of the whole. Ask someone about a film and he or she will typically launch into the plot.

In the Hollywood tradition that dominates world cinema, the technicians behind the cameras and lights and microphones and those in the editing rooms are trained to seamlessly render story. All the familiar cinematographic techniques involved in establishing shots, the rules governing camera placement and visual perspective, the cutting and intercutting of sequences of film—all work in submission to the great end of telling a tale that has a point. A film like *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), often used to illustrate the Hollywood style and as often celebrated as one of the greatest films ever produced, tells its story of two lovers caught in an impossible situation in Nazi-occupied Morocco with textbook economy. Each shot has a narrative purpose. Each line of dialogue defines character and builds narrative tension. The resolutions of the story lines follow clean moral lines. Characters are lost or saved, redeemed by sacrifice to a cause greater than themselves, or lost to their own weakness or corruption.

This method of telling a story, with the storyteller humbly deferring to his material, is as much indebted to the Christian tradition as the forms of the stories that are told. Hollywood filmmaking, especially in the classical studio period running roughly from the '30s through the '50s, based its method on Protestant assumptions—icons are used not for their own sake, but to illustrate truth; all characters travel along a road leading from the City of Destruction toward the Celestial City; moral clarity can be achieved by making the correct choices, etc. In Protestantism, the Word is prominent; truth is prominent. So, in the American film tradition, the story that illustrates the Word must be preached without encumbrance for some to be saved.

Expressionism and the Return of Medievalism

Interestingly enough, the first adjustments to this Hollywood method of telling stories came from another side of the Christian tradition. This stylistic adjustment would come from middle Europe in the form of expressionism, a style heavily influenced by middle European Catholicism coupled with the fatigue of WWI and the popularization of Freud in the field of psychiatry. With expressionism, the psychological state of characters distorts the visual world of the art into an extension of human psychosis. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is probably the most recognizable example. Like the literary romanticism in the early to mid-19th century, expressionism developed along two channels when it came to film principally in Germany in the '20s.

First, expressionism became a way to convey an optimistic light world of romantic idealism. Country landscapes became places of peace and refuge, separated from dangerous dark forests and chaotic urban environs. The greatest German film in this tradition was F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), the tale of a country home threatened when a temptress from the city seduces the husband as a vacation escapade. The husband and wife are drawn into a dark web of deceit and murder until the husband repents and reestablishes his position in the rhythms of the rural community.

The second channel of influence flowing from expressionism came as a result of its alignment with the Gothic tradition of horror. The horror genre became and has remained the place where expressionism has flourished. The two most recognizable early German expressionist films are Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), both dark tales

of monsters who arise at night to prey on weak men and beautiful women. In the films, the worlds conveyed are shadowy lairs of repression and fear—rats scurrying in dark corners, the hint of infectious disease in the air. Even more recent horror vehicles like *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) take their stylistic cues from these "classics."

Both forms of expressionism came to America with the many European directors and cinematographers who immigrated to Hollywood prior to the Second World War, either for financial gain and artistic license or to escape the mounting troubles in their home countries. The stylistic contributions of these imported artists extended beyond individual films into the mainstream genre of horror and then into other genres, like the *film noir* of the '40s and '50s, in which the city becomes the haunt of the dark forces, with the monster often taking the shape of a beautiful woman, the *femme fatale*, who seduces and devours foolish men.

Although expressionism might seem to be a step away from a Christian worldview with its Freudian echoes (repressed anxieties, etc.) and seemingly Manichaean universe (angels and demons in perpetual war), it is really much better understood as a step back toward medievalism, and as such a resistance to the modern, post-Enlightenment insistence on the world as cold machine. The expressionist world is one infused with spiritual energy, where souls hang in the balance between heaven and hell, souls caught in a crossfire between angelic and demonic forces. The expressionism that settles into American film is peculiarly Christian in that good eventually triumphs over evil once there is repentance and the use of some symbol of grace (be it a crucifix, a silver bullet, a stake through the heart, or the counsel and love of a pure woman). Where good does not triumph, as in certain *film noir*, characters have made an earlier choice to sell their soul, leaving the world of the film devoid of redemptive possibility.

This European influence, with its inherent Catholic medievalism, nuanced the American film away from the simple mechanisms of the Hollywood style in the 1930s and 1940s toward somewhat more complex visual techniques. When Jefferson Smith, in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), humbles himself before the giant form of Lincoln's statue, then sits with the woman he loves in silhouette under the arches of the memorial, all the stylistic cues are toward the triumph of light over darkness in a world charged with spiritual force. This type of framing of action represents a change in the traditional Hollywood style toward a style infused with elements of a much older Christian tradition, one where iconography carries more meaning than plot, or the "preached word," one where the tale of the common man finding his way to the Celestial City (with the help of providence and a good woman) gets told less through events and lengthy conversations and more through stained-glass panes. So, with expressionism, the Hollywood method of storytelling shifted its terms somewhat but still retained its traditional base in the faith.

The Sacramental Narrative

Another major influence of the Christian faith on film style has come through what I have identified elsewhere as the *sacramental style*, that almost universal tendency for filmmakers to draw on the forms of Christian liturgy when telling a story of faith. Less significant than the numbers or quality of Jesus films (Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, for example) or of films telling stories of saints (Henry King's 1943 film *The Song of Bernadette*) is the number of films that employ the principles of Christian liturgy when telling "religious" stories. As a Christian liturgy progresses typically from the liturgy of the Word toward the liturgy of the Eucharist, so films as disparate as Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) and William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959) both find it necessary to reshape their own narrative style in order to convey the incarnation, the transformation of the world by the entrance of God in the climactic moments of these films. In one case, *Ordet*, backlight pouring through a parlor in which a dead woman will be miraculously raised bathes all the characters in a white glow to convey the wonder of the sacramental moment; in the other, *Ben Hur*, violins played in a minor key and a

background "angelic" choir dominate the scene when a mother and daughter are miraculously cured of leprosy. Whatever the established style of an individual film, that style is transformed in some dramatic way (often in a complete reversal of the stylistic tendencies of the film) to convey the filmic incarnation, this transformation in a pattern very much borrowed from traditional Christian liturgies—a change in liturgical pattern, the lifting of the elements, often accompanied by the ringing of bells and a few moments of stillness, conveys the entrance of God in the Eucharist.

History as Memorial

These are only some of the means by which the Christian faith has influenced film. Much could also be made of the influence of individual directors like Robert Bresson or John Ford or Alfred Hitchcock, whose Catholicism helped shape their very individualized styles, and whose works have since been much studied and copied by many other directors, whether believers or not. In fact, that is a discussion riddled with irony. Bresson, who makes the reverent *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) from the Catholic novel of George Bernanos, has his style imitated by the lapsed Calvinist Paul Schrader whose rendering of another of Bresson's masterpieces, *Pickpocket* (1959), features a male prostitute saved from a tawdry life by his love of a female client in *American Gigolo* (1980). Likewise, the Catholic Ford who beautifully renders Graham Greene's novel *The Power and The Glory* into *The Fugitive* (1947), and who recreates the American Western into its most familiar form, has his style copied by the disciple of the Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Clint Eastwood, in a vehicle like *Unforgiven* (1992), and by a disciple of Joseph Campbell, George Lucas, in *Star Wars* (1977).

This discussion of the Christian influence in film, and particularly American film here, is so obvious and so far-reaching in subject that it runs the risk of being pedestrian. Yet, in a culture slipping further, generation by generation, from its original moorings in the faith, this discussion serves an archival purpose, if nothing else. Call it a memorial. The following pages present as a record of the profound impact of the Christian faith on the first century of filmmaking in the West in anticipation of a day when that influence might be entirely forgotten or denied.

The method to be followed in this study will be twofold, first to describe the exact nature in which Christianity has influenced film, and second to identify those great masterpieces of specifically Christian film that best illustrate this influence. I have endeavored here to identify the 20 best "Christian films" of this first era by a standard of artistic excellence and narrative integrity. Of course, whenever such lists are made, they are open to question, but these questions often facilitate discussion of other works of merit, and that can only be viewed as a good thing. Besides, the issue here is not so much which films are included and which not, but why certain films are included, and what they can teach us.

Let it first be stated that it is difficult to define precisely what is meant by a "Christian film." To some this implies film made by believers or a film made about a biblical subject. Neither need be the case. Sometimes the most interesting films of faith are those that reflect the profound influence of Christianity on multiple levels of an artistic production, rather than the faith of an individual artist or artistic subject. For the most part, I do intend to choose obvious subjects like Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* or Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), but a few of my selections might seem surprising choices, like Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945) or Tykwer's *Heaven* (2002). And it might seem even stranger when I take side trips into horror films or film renderings of comic books. With a little patience, these trips should all bear fruit, as this work is principally about the influence of Christianity on film, not which films fit some tidy little box with a neatly penciled label. Influence is a very untidy concept, as the following short analysis will illustrate.

On the Waterfront

Winner of eight Academy Awards and nominee for four more, Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954) is one of the most acclaimed films of the past century, and one of the most decidedly Christian films ever made. The Vatican even recommended it on its short list of great films promoting values. Yet, the precise source of *On the Waterfront's* religious authority is difficult to pin down.

Kazan, who was a Greek Orthodox Christian, directed the film about union corruption on the New Jersey docks from a Budd Schulberg screenplay. Schulberg was Jewish. Schulberg had gained access to the material through a Catholic priest, Father John Corridan, a champion for local laborers, who had first scoffed at the notion of Hollywood further exploiting longshoremen for the sake of a movie, but who then softened and allowed Schulberg to interview dissident workers who gathered in local bars and in the basement of St. Francis Xavier Labor School in Hoboken.

The links between organized crime and the activities of the New Jersey docks in the '40s and '50s were unmistakable—extortion against freight carriers, corrupt bookkeeping, thug intimidation of workers. The New York State Crime Commission had attacked the union by enticing certain workers to "rat" on the bosses, offering them protection should they agree. The hero of *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy, developed from the story of Anthony (Tony Mike) De Vincenzo, who played such a role as "rat " or "pigeon" for the Feds, and, in fact, collected an out-of-court $25,000 settlement with the film producers for invasion of privacy. De Vincenzo had fingered Michael Clemente, the boss of local 968, a mobster with ties to the powerful Vito Genovese family of New York. De Vincenzo would later say he was "proud to be a rat."

The immediate context for *On the Waterfront* was another matter altogether: the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation of communist influence in the film industry. Schulberg and Kazan, and co-star Lee J. Cobb a few years before had all named names before the Committee; and thus the film was something of a personal justification of the traumas of their confessions and implications of colleagues—the story on the New Jersey docks functioning as metaphor. All three—Schulberg, Kazan, and Cobb—incurred the wrath of industry fellows for their testimonies. Kazan's confession in 1952, two years before the release of *On the Waterfront*, was later considered by many to be justification to consider withholding a lifetime achievement Oscar from him in 1999. When his award was eventually granted, half the crowd of Hollywood insiders at the Academy Awards ceremony refused to stand to applaud.

The film evolved out of this personal and industry crisis—mixing some real faith with social concern, conscience, and a good dose of self-protection; hardly a single-minded production, especially when one also adds in the license allowed the method performers to interpret the material on their own by ad-libbing scenes where effective, a characteristic of the Actors Studio in New York where Kazan and several of the stars had worked. Nevertheless, *On the Waterfront* stands as a profoundly moving film with unmistakable Christian patterns in its narrative structure and with a style also drawn from Christian iconography; clearly a case where the force of the tradition compressed a range of themes into one coherent whole, and, in effect, directed the film as much as Kazan did.

On the Waterfront is a Passion story, wherein the hero, an ex-boxer turned chump for the mob, repents of his complicity with the mob, confesses his crimes and those of his friends before a federal crime commission, and then leads his fellow longshoremen in a revolt. Terry Malloy takes down the union boss, Johnny Friendly, single-handedly, although receiving a vicious beating by a gang of mob thugs for his trouble before making his final redemptive journey into the ship ahead of the workers. When Terry leads the workers to freedom at the end, the narrative unveils the Christian motif overtly. Terry falls in weakness several times along the way, and he carries with him his cross—the longshoremen's hook. The mob boss, Johnny Friendly, is pushed off the dock down into the water by one of the

workers to prevent him from stopping Terry, a reference to Satan being "cast down from heaven," words spoken by Jesus during the original Passion story.

Terry's journey begins as the film opens when he sets up a dockworker named Joey Doyle, who has offered information to the crime commission. Johnny Friendly arranges for Terry to call Joey to his apartment roof where two mobsters await and throw him down to his death. Suddenly aware of his complicity in this murder, a grief-stricken Terry finds himself drawn to Joey's beautiful sister, Edie, who has gone to the docks to discover who killed her brother. Edie, fresh from a Catholic girls' school, urges a local priest, Father Barry (modeled after Father Corridan), to help the workers organize against Johnny Friendly. When the priest does call the meeting in the church basement, thugs break it up and beat the workers. One of them, Kayo Doogan, agrees to testify after this. Terry, meanwhile, has begun to fall in love with Edie, whose love awakens his conscience. When Terry eventually confesses his role in Joey's death to Father Barry, the priest urges him to continue his contrition by confessing to Edie and then the authorities. Terry eventually does, but at a great cost. His own brother, Charlie, one of Johnny Friendly's close allies, is forced to protect Terry, and Johnny Friendly retaliates by having Charlie killed and hung by a hook. This sorrow serves to give Terry further courage, and he lays down his own life for the workers as Charlie had for him.

An interesting gloss on the story would be Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which puts the theology of the later medieval period, and particularly the theology of Thomas Aquinas, in poetic form. *On the Waterfront* can be seen as a purgatorial narrative. Terry Malloy goes about a cleansing as the story progresses, metaphorically climbing the three steps leading to Peter's Gate on Dante's Mt. Purgatory—Confession, Contrition, and Absolution. First he must confess his complicity with the murder of Joey. Then he must ask forgiveness, particularly from Edie, which he does. Then he must realize that satisfaction for his crime cannot come by his own means—he is tempted to use a gun against Johnny Friendly after Joey's death; instead, satisfaction comes through the merits of Christ, so here Terry must align himself with Christ's Passion, his journey on the dock toward the boat. Likewise, Terry's redemptive journey requires a guide, here both Father Barry and Edie. For Dante, of course, it is the poet Virgil and Dante's beloved Beatrice. Edie's purity, suggested by her training at a convent school (and her long, blonde hair) makes her the image of love and goodness that ultimately draws Terry onward toward the Heavenly Spheres.

As would be expected, some of the narrative details draw heavily from the symbols of the Christian faith. Crosses abound in the film, in the poles that line a fence where Terry and Edie talk; on the wall in the apartment shared by Edie and her father, Pop Doyle; amidst the antennae on the rooftops where Terry tends pigeons; in the hooks that the workers carry and that Charlie is hung by. Likewise many of the characters are viewed beside or within fences. Terry's pigeon coop is fenced and the camera often views him through that mesh. The workers gathered with Father Barry are beaten against a fence. Terry talks with Edie before his confession beside a long fence. And when Terry confesses to Edie, Father Barry watches with joy from the other side of a fence. Both of these visual symbols, the cross and the fence, given obvious attention by the camera, correlate with narrative themes. Terry is on a journey to a cross to save those who are being punished unjustly by the mob. Likewise Terry, like all the workers, is in fenced bondage by his complicity with the mob and his hidden guilt.

Another narrative motif shapes the Christian plot of the film. Terry is told early in the film by a down-and-out worker that he is "a bum" for setting up Joey. Terry cringes, knowing that he is indeed lost and will be forced to contend with that reality. Later, when Edie tries to reason with him, he shares his personal philosophy, the law of the docks, eat or get eaten; yet, his words lose force, for his conscience contests this self-justification. His salvation only comes after he acknowledges his lost condition—in one of the most famous scenes in all American films, he tells his brother Charlie in the back of a cab that he "could've been a contender" when he boxed, but sold out and is instead only "a

bum." That Terry wants an identity beyond this label of "bum" is the force that drives the plot. Terry has been stripped of his name and integrity by the mob and can only redeem them through repentance and by aligning himself in the end with Christ in his Passion.

The visual style of the film keeps with this redemptive motif: Terry raised from bum to saint. Most noticeably, the camera tends to shoot scenes from above or from below. Terry calls Joey from the street to have him climb to the roof of his apartment from which he will be thrown. Terry climbs to his own roof to tend his pigeons and brood over his own troubles; later he descends a hill at the urging of Father Barry to tell Edie what he has done. Father Barry initially gathers the longshoremen in the basement of his church. Then he preaches a sermon from the lower deck of a ship after Kayo Doogan's murder. Johnny Friendly is often above the workers and his own men, until he is thrown into the water by Pop Doyle. When Terry breaks into Edie's apartment to receive forgiveness from her, she cowers on the floor under a crucifix. He grabs her when she tries to run and falls to the floor with her. In the final scene, Terry is beaten down by Johnny Friendly's men, only to be lifted to his feet by Father Barry and Edie. He staggers and falls under the weight of this martyrdom on the final journey to the ship. The camera records his Passion from the front and slightly below eye level, then shifts to Terry's subjective point of view as he walks toward his final goal (one of those stylistic shifts I identify as the "sacramental style"). The various camera positions from above or below do more than establish power relationships, a common device in film; here they carry theological significance, suggesting damnation or salvation, or alignment with Satan or the cross of Christ.

In like fashion, the overall visual texture of the film suggests a world under a curse. Men huddle in small groups before a ship, hoping to be called to work. Indigents try to stay warm near smoldering rubbish bins. Small figures, like Terry and Edie, play out the most significant moments of their lives in large, seemingly indifferent spaces. It is a world of urban loneliness, mist shrouding the edges of the horizon, no rays of sun, a cursed, lost world—hope alone comes through the promise that those who follow the way of the cross and reestablish their integrity will be saved. The plaintive Leonard Bernstein score captures this mood perfectly. There is only one lighthearted scene in the entire film, this the well-known interchange between Terry and Edie as he walks her home past a small park. In a now famous ad-lib when Marlon Brando, as Terry, picks up one of the gloves that Eva Marie Saint, as Edie, inadvertently drops, they both smile like awkward young lovers, the only time in the film two characters exchange simple human warmth, and the first glimmer of the film's promise—that hope borne of love will be fulfilled through Christ.

On the Waterfront is profoundly moving to Christians who see it, be they Catholic or Protestant, because of the force of the artistry and the resonance of these thematic elements. Yet, it can hardly be said that the film was made to be a religious film. Nor was it made by a cluster of people united in faith—Kazan, Schulberg, Bernstein, Brando, et al. What influenced and shaped the film was principally the Christian tradition tapped into by a group of artists looking for a way to tell their own story of confession and personal redemption. The Christian narrative patterns and visual style of *On the Waterfront* seem to develop naturally from the material.

So seems to be the case with many films from the past century. How else does one explain the many anomalies of religious filmmaking—the greatest film made on the life of Christ was made by a Marxist atheist, Pier Paolo Pasolini (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*); and arguably the worst film ever made on the life of Christ was made by a cluster of people with the most pious and noble of intentions (George Stevens, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965). Thousands of films made by evangelicals trying hard to make moving, theologically correct films have failed miserably. And many films like *On the Waterfront* or *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981) or *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987) succeed as "Christian film" almost accidentally. The explanation, albeit not easily developed, is in the centuries of story patterns that have emerged from a culture fed on the breast of the Church, and in the evolution of visual styles rooted likewise in basic Christian conceptions of good and evil,

salvation and damnation, blessings and curses. Although even the Church has been slow to acknowledge the profundity of its own influence, filmmaking in the first century of its existence has fallen squarely in the stream of the powerful Christian tradition, which has fed all literature in the West.

The Present Future

We think we are headed toward the future. The truth is, the future is headed toward us. And it's in a hurry (we now know the universe is speeding up, not slowing down). We also generally think that the present makes sense only in light of the past. Again, we need to check our thinking. The present makes clearest sense in light of the future. We humans write history by looking at the past. God creates history ahead of time. He never forecasts. God always backcasts. He began with an end in mind. The future is always incipient in the present. Before the foundation of the world, the Lamb was slain. Calvary was anticipated in God's kiss of life into Adam. The cross gains dimension silhouetted against the empty tomb. The empty tomb confirmed the invasion of the future into the present. When Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus, he realized the future had been fast forwarded. That changed everything.

It still does.

(Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 2003)