

Greg Garrett. *The Gospel According to Hollywood*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2007. 200 pages. \$12.71.

I have had the opportunity to review a number of the “Gospel According To” books. In the process I have developed a litmus test, a set of questions, that I find helpful in evaluating those and other books on media and pop culture. The first question is, do I learn more about the author’s opinions than the media under examination? Does the author open up my thinking or close it down? Is there a discernable method to the analysis that I can transport to other media, other producers of media?

Then after I read the book, do I want to see the movies being discussed or listen to the music under review, or better yet, see/listen again? *The Gospel According to Hollywood* scores very well on both counts. Yet another consideration is whether or not the title is misleading. Is there really a comprehensive theological overview being uncovered and explored or just the subject’s moral imperatives, pulled out one by one? Score another one for Garrett. He employs far greater depth, breadth, and sophistication of theological discussion in this book than in many of the others of this genre, yet remains thoroughly accessible. I also appreciated the occasionally sassy attitude the author takes, apparently not taking himself overly seriously and avoiding a sticky, self-righteous piety about the enterprise. Chapter headings include (with some of the films considered): Faith and Belief (*It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Field of Dreams*, *American Beauty*, *Magnolia*), the Trinity (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *The Matrix*), Sin and Death (*Double Indemnity*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Schindler’s List*, *Munich*), Grace and Redemption (*The Philadelphia Story*, *North by Northwest*, *The Fischer King*), Peace and Justice (*Robin Hood*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Crash*, *Paths of Glory*, *Unforgiven*), and The Church and Christians. These are all “secular” films that Garrett probes for theological freight. Most of the films are well known, but he also adds to the list of the usual suspects in such a study. Through the course of the chapters there is a movement from description to prescription from examination to exhortation, from what movies might tell us about the nature of God, sin and redemption, to how we experience God, to living a just life in light of this experience.

Because of the films Garrett has chosen, he necessarily avoids the blanket condemnation of Hollywood films and the culture that produced them as prime sources for our contemporary state of moral corruption. Indeed, he says, “I have found that God can sometimes speak to me as powerfully through elements of the culture as through a formal religious service or in a religious setting.” In fact, he credits *Pulp Fiction* as one source of religious epiphany in his own theological development. Further, “we Christians do ourselves few favors by refusing to engage the culture, especially when it regards culture that could help lead a broken world in the direction of faith and wholeness.” Garrett does note that movies tend to reinforce the notion that evil is extra-personal, that we cannot blame ourselves for the evil that happens. We want to know why bad things happen. There is an answer, of course – “if there is evil and death in the world, perhaps we are responsible for it.” Yet it would misrepresent Garrett’s perspective to make this too heavy a verdict. There is also grace and redemption. Of course, the alternative perception appears in *film noir* in which it is some flawed inner disposition that moves us toward evil. He concludes, “In its simplest terms, we might say that salvation in a world of sin comes when we recover our connection with ourselves, with others, with creation, with God.”

While there is no portable method of analysis proposed in the book, the author nevertheless provides clear analysis and, at least for me, a reason for going back and giving some

of these films another, more informed look. I recently purged my shelves of a number of these film-theology books. This one stayed.

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