



Jeanette Reedy Solano

# Religion and Film

the basics

ROUTLEDGE



evangelism and violence against gays, anti-gay protests, and interviews with the figures listed above. Scenes of Rev. Scott Lively show him fanning fears of "gays trying to recruit your children... Uganda don't let that happen to you!" He preaches "when the righteous rule, the people rejoice." Rev. Lively is featured on television and speaks for five hours to the Ugandan parliament teaching them how homosexuality harms society. Parliamentarian David Bahati does not mince words: "It [homosexuality] is not the change the world is looking for, it is the evil it should fight."

Being against homosexuality became a major way for Ugandan political and religious leaders to assert their ideological independence of liberal Northern influences. There is a dramatic clip featuring Rev. Ssempe illustrating this independent stance: he reads from a letter he sent to President Obama calling him a hypocrite for approving abortion while telling Ugandans how to care for their children. The screen behind him shows graphic pictures where he shows his congregants "the truth" gleaned from his "research" about homosexual sexual activities which include images of a man licking the anus and "poo-poo" of his sexual partners. "Say no to homosexuality! Say no to sodomy! This is a spiritual battle!" Ssempe adjures his horrified audience who are seen taking notes.

Speaking up in defense of the civil rights of the LGBT community comes at great cost. Bishop Senyonjo was relieved of his priestly duties for not condemning homosexuals and has been ostracized by his church. Rev. Kaoma had to leave the country due to death threats and David Kato was brutally bludgeoned to death for his LGBT activism. When protests broke out at Kato's burial, Bishop Senyonjo delivered the following politicized eulogy:

His death is a result of the hatred planted in Uganda by U.S. Evangelicals. But I have known these people who are LGBT. I respect them for who they are. I believe they are going to heaven. God created you. God is on your side!

Bishop Senyonjo explained that his Christian convictions caused him to stand with the Ugandan LGBT community, "it simply comes down to this" he confessed, "what is the most loving thing to do?"

## SEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH: A COMPLICATED AFRICAN CONTEXT

The context is more complicated than the film portrays it to be. Same-sex relations have been criminalized in Uganda since British colonial times, they are not simply a result of recent U.S. incursions. Articles on "unnatural offenses" and "indecent practices" have been retained in the penal code since independence in 1962. Williams' sympathies clearly lie in support of homosexual civic rights and the missionaries and evangelists are portrayed to be simpletons at best, coercive imperialists at worst. He highlights the most outrageous footage of speaking in tongues and passionate clips without contextualizing them. The clear heroes of the film are Kato, Kaoma, and Senyonjo. Many Christians in Uganda felt that U.S. LGBT rights groups were forcing them to change their culture too rapidly. For example, the African bishops at the 1998 Lambeth global conference of Anglican bishops voted overwhelmingly against affirming same-sex relationships. One third of Ugandans are members of the Anglican church and another third are Roman Catholic, another Christian denomination that does not condone homosexual activity or same-sex marriage. So, the thesis that anti-homosexual sentiment is primarily the work of Evangelicals from the USA is simply not true. As we saw with Ewing and Grady's *Jesus Camp*, be sure to clarify the agenda of the filmmakers and always be conscious they are crafting a story, not solely capturing reality. That being said, *God Loves Uganda* is a powerful chronicle of the power of religion to shape public sentiment surrounding human sexual behavior and politics.

## RELIGION AND RACE

This section will delve into filmic presentations of religion using the interpretive lens of race. Race is critical part of human experience and, as such, central to religion as well. The following two films were chosen explicitly because they highlight how religion can reinforce racism and prejudice. Below we will focus on how medieval Iberian Catholicism confronted indigenous people and their spirituality in the Mexican film *The Other Conquest* (1998) as well as consider how

Protestant Christianity supported the ideology behind the Ku Klux Klan and provided the antidote for dismantling racism and bringing about racial reconciliation in a small southern town in the film *Burden* (2020).

#### RACISM IN MEXICO: COLONIAL ROOTS, MESTIZAJE, LEGACY

*The Other Conquest* was a seven-year-long passion project for Mexican filmmaker Salvador Carrasco who wanted to make a historical film that dealt with the complicated racial and spiritual legacy of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. It is a beautifully shot fictional story featuring Topiltzin, a codex painter and son of Moctezuma, who has survived the initial destruction of the main temple of Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City) in 1521 and is captured by Spanish soldiers. Topiltzin (Daniien Delgado) soon encounters Hernan Cortes who spares his life due to the intercession of his half-sister, princess Techuicho (Elpidia Carillo), the captured lover of Cortes (Iñaki Aierra). She pleads for his life and Cortes agrees but only after his public “conversion” and torture by the sadistic Capitán Christóbal Quijano. The second half of the film is focused on the complicated process of trying to convert Topiltzin and his relationship with Fray Diego, his spiritual director. Topiltzin comes to identify the blond Spanish statue of Mary with his own mother goddess Tonantzin. The film’s merger of Maria with the Aztec goddess foreshadows the brown-skinned mestizo Madonna of Tepeyac, The Virgin of Guadalupe. It is a wonderful story to explore Mestizo, borderland Christianity; however, here we will focus on scenes directly related to race and religion. The 500-year anniversary of the Conquest in 2021 will bring a re-release of the film.

#### REGARDING THE OTHER: INDIGENOUS-SPANISH RELATIONSHIPS

The action begins with a small unit of soldiers accompanied by a priest (Fray Diego) on a “maneuver of purification”—a scouting mission to find any remnants of indigenous holdouts, then capture and convert them. They arrive moments after an Aztec human sacrifice of a virgin with the priest holding her bloody heart in his hand. A horrified Fray Diego exclaims “you really do come from another world”



Figure 5.3 The public torture of Topiltzin by Capitán Cristobal with Maria and Fray Diego looking on in *The Other Conquest* (Salvador Carrasco, 2000). Source: Photo by Andrea Sanderson, used with permission.

and crosses himself for protection against the evil alien. Topiltzin’s brother whispers that the Spaniard “barbarians” will not let them be with their gods, demonstrating that the demonization and distrust went both ways. The Spaniards destroy the goddess stone statue and Fray Diego tries to explain that the goddess Tonantzin is “nothing but a handful of stones” to a distraught Topiltzin who finds some solace in the maternal gaze of the very white Maria (Figure 5.3).

Spanish xenophobia is represented by Capitán Cristobal who warns early on that mixing with other cultures is detrimental to pure Spanish culture using the infiltration of Muslims in Spain as an example. He disapproves of Hernan Cortes’ indigenous lovers: first *La Malinche* and now the daughter of Moctezuma, Techuipo. He hisses at her “your mixture is disgusting to God.” He sadistically relishes publicly whipping Topiltzin and burning his feet proclaiming all of it is for the natives’ benefit to insure their eternal salvation as Christians. The Capitan’s racist actions are commissioned by the Catholic Church whose Papal bull condoned the forced conversion

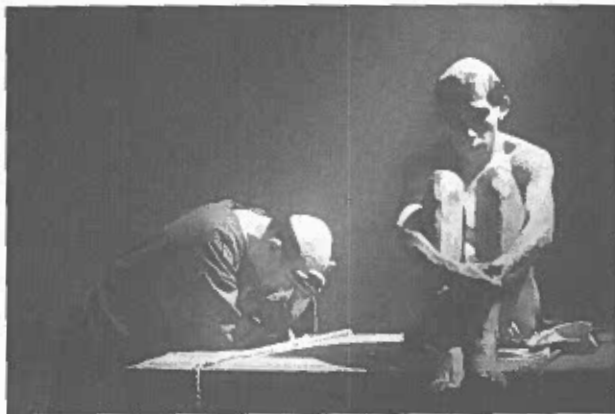


Figure 5.4 Fray Diego realizes Topiltzin's conversion to Christianity is mixed with indigenous beliefs in *The Other Conquest* (Salvador Carrasco, 2000). Photo by Andrea Sanderson, used with permission.

of native peoples. Cortes represents the European mentality that saw native people as sub-human and believed their customs, religious history and cultural identity must be obliterated. *On the Just Causes for War Against the Indians* by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1489–1573) articulates the European mentality that justified the rape and enslavement of indigenous peoples. Sepulveda argues in the 1544 text that “Indians” were morally inferior, did not have human souls, had no governmental order or laws, therefore civilized Christians could legitimately evangelize and enslave them. Conquest was sanctioned by the Roman Catholic church and enforced by the military (Figure 5.4).

Fray Diego views the new world through a racist lens, but he sincerely cares for Topiltzin, recognizing his intelligence and spiritual sincerity. Their theological discussions slowly teach him the beauty of Aztec spirituality, at least devotion to the goddess. As Topiltzin descends into a fever and a mental breakdown, he becomes fixated on the blond Madonna. Fray Diego begins to accept the symbolic merger of the two figures and even encourages the syncretism: “Yes, she is just as lovely as yours [Tonanztin] what matters now is that this is a new world.” As kind and gentle as he is with Topiltzin, he is always clear that his white Maria and his European translation of

Christianity is the only allowable religiosity in this “new world.” It is only after the dramatic death of Topiltzin who is crushed under the weight of the Marian statue that Fray Diego has his racial breakthrough. As he lays out Topiltzin's broken body alongside the Virgin (whose broken arm drips with blood—whose we do not know) he calls for Cortes to come to the monastery to witness “the miracle of how two races can be as one through tolerance.” A bit heavy handed, but Carrasco ends his historic portrayal of race and religion with a hopeful note. Perhaps religion, which often girds racism, can help abolish it as we will see in the next film.

The racial tensions at the heart of *The Other Conquest* are alive and well in the 21st century. Many Latinx people today have the blood of Aztec warriors and Spanish conquistadores running through their veins. Many Mexicans are reticent to speak about the racism that permeates their society. There are no discrimination laws in Mexico and discrimination against indigenous peoples is deeply entrenched. For instance, Carrasco was told in no uncertain terms by the Director of the Mexican Institute of Cinema that the lead actor Damien Delgado was “too ugly and no one would ever go to see a film with an indigenous actor.” He refused to support the film financially unless Delgado was replaced with a whiter, green-eyed established Mexican actor. Carrasco refused and the ministry made filming on location extremely difficult. Film is often the spark that get people talking about racism. Most recently this racism was exposed when a famous Mexican actor, Sergio Goyri, called the Oaxacan indigenous actress, Yalitza Aparicio, the lead of Alfonso Cuarón's 2018 hit *Roma*, a “f—kin Indian” and passive dolt in the hands of the director. In the 20 years since the Mexican film board urged Carrasco not to use an indigenous actor, little has changed in Mexico.

#### THE KKK AND THE BLACK CHURCH: RELIGION AND RACE IN *BURDEN*

A newspaper story about a Ku Klux Klan museum in a small Southern town caught the eye of actor/director Andrew Heckler in 1996. It took him over 20 years to realize his dream of telling this true story cinematically. *Burden* (2020) takes place in Laurens, South Carolina, USA in 1996 and tells the story of African American Rev. Kennedy who confronts racism head-on by befriending





## knowledge begins with **the basics**

**"In *Religion and Film: The Basics*, Dr. Solano offers the student of religion and film an invaluable resource for navigating contemporary life: a tool for understanding ourselves and the (religious, political, racial) other in and through the cinema. The book is equal parts accessible and irenic, drawing on the best of religion and film scholarship while also being eminently readable. I highly recommend it."**

**Kutter Callaway, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary, USA.**

*Religion and Film: The Basics* is an accessible and engaging introduction to the history, diverse approaches, and ideas associated within the study of religion and film. Referencing films from around the world from the early 20th century to the present day, this unique introduction includes the following topics:

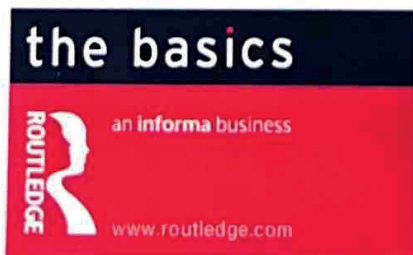
- **the history and dynamics of religion and film**
- **various methods to approach religion and film**
- **the evolution of religion and film scholarship**
- **film genre and theory**
- **world religions and film**
- **unique themes—from race and gender roles to karma and redemption.**

A fascinating range of films are discussed, from early silent films such as *Hypocrites* to recent releases such as *Minari*. Five genres are explored, including horror in *The Wicker Man* (UK) and *Let the Right One In* (Sweden), and world religions are analyzed in films such as *OMG*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *Malcolm X*. Tropes examined include gender in *Water*, karma in *It's a Wonderful Life*, death in *Beautiful*, redemption in *Magnolia*, and evil in *Get Out*.

With helpful features including recommendations for further study and key films to view, this book is an ideal starting point for students approaching religion and film for the first time as well as those interested in learning more about the field while broadening their methods, knowledge of film, and their film canon.

**Jeanette Reedy Solano** is Associate Professor at California State University, Fullerton, USA. She is Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Unit in the American Academy of Religion and serves on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Religion and Film* for which she has served as a film critic for Sundance and other film festivals.

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