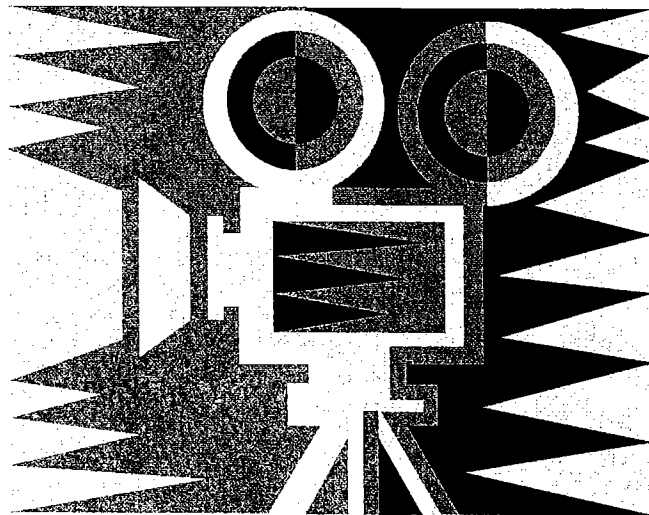


FILM AS THEOLOGICAL TEXT

**A discussion series for adults
and senior youth**

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Introduction to the Series

Why this new series?

More than at any time in our history, the entertainment industry has taken a leading role in cultural interpretation. Indeed, film and television play a central role in setting the cultural agenda. Whether intentional or not, we—the viewing public—draw meaning from what we see on the screen. Film functions as a “hidden curriculum” in that we are often unaware of the ways in which popular culture shapes our values and teaches meaning. Like a book, contemporary film becomes a text, a teaching tool. While learning and adaptation from culture are always taking place, writers, producers, and directors bring particular perspectives, world views, to their work. They are not only artists but cultural interpreters.

As consumers of media and as people of faith, we struggle to make meaning of our lives and the world around us. If we accept the classic definition of *theology* as “faith seeking understanding” (beginning with a faith-based premise and critically reflecting on that premise against other faith claims), then we are “doing theology” as an ongoing enterprise, as part of our everyday lives. This is the context for this new series, *Film as Theological Text*.

Theology is not a solo task. Because it helps us to deepen our reflective skills through the exchange of ideas, it is best done in community with others. Thus, *Film as Theological Text* is designed to promote dialogue, to help us to think critically, to engage more deeply, to broaden our perspectives and theological interpretations of both the ordinary and the extraordinary in a complex cultural milieu.

Some of the films we have selected for this series are classics while others (often independent productions) are less well-known. While most film plots are not explicitly “religious,” religion is a central theme in some. All films selected for this series engage us more deeply in thinking about values and ethical choices. They challenge us to think more deeply and more critically about the great moral issues of our times. They ask us to recall history and the consequences of our individual and collective actions.

More specifically, goals for the series include the following:

- To provide a structured opportunity for spiritual reflection on popular culture—specifically dramatic film—while having fun;
- To reflect on personal values and actions;
- To build a deeper sense of community in a meaningful intergenerational and relaxing atmosphere;
- To help participants begin to see culture as more critically informed by faith and religious values;
- To strengthen our understanding of and commitment to an anti-racist, multicultural society;
- To deepen our commitment to “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

Because contemporary films are frequently based on complex social and historical themes, many are rated R because of graphic violence, strong language, and/or partial nudity. The films suggested for *Film as Theological Text* do not contain gratuitous violence; indeed, where violence appears in this series it is central to telling the story as well as to the viewer's understanding of the struggles on which the plot is based. Parents and facilitators are advised to use discretion in inviting older youth (e.g., age 14 and older). A note of caution might also be helpful for adults who are sensitive to such themes or find strong language offensive.

Of necessity, *Film as Theological Text* includes a limited number of carefully selected films; however, any film that takes human concerns seriously and addresses the need to attribute meaning to our common struggles is appropriate for the series.

Process Suggestions for Film as a Theological Text

Getting Support

Some congregations already have (or have had) a "movie night" or similar program. If yours is one of these, assess to what extent this activity is institutionalized or can be adapted. You might consider, for example:

- How long the group has been in existence;
- Average attendance and whether it has been regular or sporadic;
- Whether the group is primarily a social activity, a reflective or religious experience?

Depending on how you answer these questions, you might do an informal survey to determine if there is sufficient interest in a thematic time-limited group with a structured discussion of ethical, spiritual, and/or religious themes in popular film.

If a movie or film program is a new idea for your congregation, identify the person responsible for adult programs or adult religious education and seek his/her support.

Group Composition: This program is designed for adults and high school students in many demographic groups with varied life experiences and for people who hold a variety of psychospiritual perspectives. It may also be of interest to a particular group (e.g., young adults, older adults, people with disabilities, people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender) that already has a meeting schedule that would accommodate the program.

Publicity: In order to plan, publicity for this program should be done at least six weeks in advance. Church newsletters and weekly bulletins are good places to start. These can be supplemented by adult religious education brochures or flyers posted on well positioned bulletin boards. If your congregation has a tradition of staffing a table during coffee hour, literature about the program and a sign-up sheet are good publicity boosts.

Time and Place: Most of the films in this series are approximately two hours; several are longer. Because a significant block of time is needed, congregational film discussion

groups work best on weekends unless the program is designed for retired people, stay-at-home parents, or others who may have daytime availability. Friday night seems to be more popular than Saturday; Sunday afternoon or early evening seems to work better than Sunday morning or late evening. Groups may meet weekly, biweekly, or monthly. If a biweekly or monthly option is selected, it is important that publicity is clear. Frequent reminders may be needed. We suggest a three to four-hour time slot in order to accommodate the film showing, a short break, a meaningful discussion, and perhaps a meal. Where there are related themes (e.g., two films on the same subject), you may wish to schedule a Saturday or Sunday afternoon viewing for two films.

This program can take place at a congregational site or in a private home. If held in a private home, you should choose a location that is convenient and be sure that attention is given to transportation needs. You should also decide whether there will be one or several hosts; rotations relieve the burden on any one individual. Use your best judgment to determine which space best suits your needs. Consider factors such as the size of the group, portability of equipment, audio quality, comfortable seating, and lighting. If it is a daytime program, also consider whether the room can be darkened.

Leadership

This series can be led by a professional religious educator or a lay leader. Co-leadership offers diversity of gifts, style, and perspective and lightens the level of responsibility of one individual. If you choose co-leadership, intentionally around difference is desirable. The following qualities are important when selecting a leader for a successful program: willingness to prescreen and reflect on the films, and facilitation skills.

- Check your local library and video-rental store(s) as primary sources for obtaining films that are part of this program. If major video rental chain stores do not have a film in stock, they can sometimes order it for you. Online film rental companies are also an option.
- Facilitators are encouraged to seek perspectives beyond this discussion guide. Periodicals, books, libraries, and the internet provide a rich variety of resources that may be helpful.
- Class size is optional. Film discussion groups have worked well ranging from five to twenty-five participants. Eight to fifteen seems optimal. Keep in mind that the greater the number of participants, the greater the chance for a free flow of ideas and real engagement with the subject.
- Motion pictures are protected by copyright laws. Profit-making organizations, as well as churches, and non-profit organizations, must adhere to these laws. Before showing any video, leaders should read the “fine print” for applicable copyright law. In general, video movies—even a clip—cannot be duplicated.
- Every program has associated costs, which participants are frequently expected to supplement. Requesting a “free will offering” or a “donation” is an easy way to recoup some of the costs associated with this program, such as the cost of video rental and snacks.
- Decide whether you want a centering reading and a closing reading. If so, keep them short—perhaps as simple as a candle lighting and extinction. Should you

decide in the affirmative, one or more options are included with each series. Alternatively, dig into your own reservoir of spiritual resources.

Materials Needed:

Chalice or candle and matches
Video cassette player or DVD player
Television monitor
Light refreshments (optional)
Video or DVD (rental or purchase)

Advance Preparation

- Several weeks in advance of the program, advertise the series (including the length of time) and post a sign-up or registration sheet. In the publicity or registration process, it is suggested that it be made clear that the event is not merely a movie; that participants are encouraged to remain throughout the three-hour period for the discussion.
- Reserve an appropriate room (a room that can be darkened is best) and request a television monitor and video cassette player and/or DVD player to arrive at least one hour prior to the event. The monitor should be placed at or above the eye level of a sitting person.
- A day or two prior to the event, rent or purchase and preview the film privately.
- Review the film description in this packet. Study the discussion questions and modify them in ways that are comfortable for you.
- If possible, bring (or arrange for) snacks. Popcorn and soft drinks may provide a sense of familiarity, but other snacks will be appreciated as well.

Day of Event

- Arrive at least 30 minutes before the scheduled event. Familiarize yourself with the equipment. Keep the remote control nearby in case the volume needs to be adjusted.
- If you are doing a centering, set up the chalice or candle. Arrange snacks on a table (preferably not positioned near the television monitor).
- Arrange the seating in a comfortable manner facing the television monitor. Chairs arranged theater-style and a combination of sofas and chairs informally arranged to face the monitor both work equally well. If you serve snacks that are available during the film, be sure that there is an aisle out of the line of sight of the monitor so as not to block the viewing range.
- Cue up the film to the opening credits and test the sound.
- Briefly review the film discussion questions provided in this packet. You may choose to review other materials about the film.
- When the event begins, welcome participants and open with a centering-a reading suggested in this packet or your own selection.
- If participants do not know each other, brief introductions are suggested.

- You may choose to ask how many have seen the film; or in the case of films based on a book, how many have read the book. This information may help you gauge the level of familiarity with the subject, writer, or director.
- A ten minute break is suggested at the end of the film. While intense discussion is not suggested until after the break, you may wish to leave participants with a burning question to ponder or simply ask them to reflect on how they felt at the end of the film. The break is also an opportunity to rearrange the seating so that participants can see each other.

Series 1: Justice

This series is designed for six sessions focusing on justice. While each session is designed to stand alone, there is a coupling of films for each of three sub-themes:

- the criminal justice system in the United States: *A Time to Kill* and *Dead Man Walking*;
- the enslavement and Holocaust of Africans via the Atlantic: *Amistad* and *Sankofa*; and
- the enslavement and Holocaust of Jews in Europe: *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful*.

(Where possible, it is suggested that the films be shown in the sequence indicated above.)

Among the themes intrinsic to any discussion of justice are the following: history, suffering, respect, power, equality, freedom, and reconciliation. These themes are reflected in each of the films in the series.

Reflections on Justice

Where there is no true justice, there can be no right.

—Augustine of Hippo

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

—Theodore Parker
(Unitarian)

If you stick a knife into my back nine inches and pull it out three, that is not progress. ...Progress is healing the wound.

—Malcolm X

The holy thing in life is the participation [in the struggle for] these processes that give body and form to universal justice.

—James Luther Adams
(Unitarian Universalist)

It's difficult to take seriously an apology that is not coupled with atonement.

—Susan Shown Harjo

It is only by confronting evil, violence and injustice that we can ever hope to overcome them ... And while we may never taste the fruit of our labor, we are not required to be successful, we are only required to be faithful.

—Martin Sheen

Centering Readings

I am afraid of nearly everything: of darkness, hunger, war, children mutilated.

But most of all, I am afraid of what I might become: reconciled to injustice, resigned to fear and despair, lulled into a life of apathy.

Unchain my hope, make me strong.

Stretch me towards the impossible, that I may work for what ought to be: the hungry fed, the enslaved freed, the suffering comforted, the peace accomplished.

—Source Unknown

Closing Words

A small prayer...that my ego-needs get smaller and smaller, my fears become more present and admittable and that my love for myself and others expands to fill me with wonder and awe.

—A Thoughtful Woman

A Time to Kill

Directed by Joel Schumacher

Warner Brothers, 1996

Length: 150 minutes, Rating: R

Based on a book by the same title by John Grisham, attorney and novelist.

Description:

