

Using films about peace and violence in RE

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Increasingly, films provide children and young people with images that help to shape the interpretation of their own experiences. In this article – parts of which have been adapted from an earlier article by Jolyon Mitchell ('Peacemaking in the World of Film', *Media Development*, 4 (2007), pp13–16) – the author focuses on three films that raise issues about both violence and peacemaking.

Introduction

Religion has become inextricably connected in many people's minds with the promotion of violence. The depiction of religion as a harmful force is commonly found in different contemporary media. While not always explicitly named as religiously inspired conflicts, the struggle of Sunnis against Shi'ites, Catholics against Protestants, Hindus against Muslims, can all too easily be used to provide an oversimplified explanation for acts of violence. Cinematic depictions can also reinforce religious stereotypes, providing reasons why characters behave in the way that they do. For instance, in *The Kingdom* (2007, directed by Peter Berg), the motivation of terrorists appears to be found in their religious beliefs. One suicide bomber says: 'All glory to Allah' just before he blows himself and many bystanders to pieces. Such negative portrayals of Islam are qualified by representation of other Muslims as pious, compassionate and working against terrorist attacks. For example, viewers are shown a colonel in the Saudi army, the lead local character (played by Ashraf Barhom), praying with his family and acting in clear opposition to the violent extremists. *The Kingdom* is part of a cluster of recent films reflecting aspects of religion and violence, from Stephen Gagan's *Syriana* (2005), set in the Middle East, to Mark Forster's *The Kite Runner* (2007), set in Afghanistan.

Portraying violence is by no means a new phenomenon. From the first days of cinema, film-makers have delighted in offering viewers moving images of conflict and violence. The torrential cascade of cinematic violence is hard to avoid – from boxing fights to violent train robberies, from fencing duels to dramatic executions, from shoot-outs to exploding helicopters. Whether creating comedies or tragedies, fantasies or histories, film-makers have found violence an irresistible topic for their craft. It is found in almost every film genre and is put to use in many different ways. Its ubiquity

partly explains why there is so much research in the area of violence and film, investigating particularly whether watching violent movies make viewers more aggressive. Questions about the effects of violent film often dominate research agenda, debates and discussions. Far rarer is consideration of how films represent, challenge and celebrate peacemaking. Given the number of recent and ongoing actual conflicts, as well as blatant, hidden and structural violence, the topic of cinematic peacemaking merits careful consideration.

In this brief article, my aim is to investigate how films which re-present different forms of peacemaking can be used in the teaching of RE. A question that I have asked several classes of teenagers as well as different groups of RE teachers is: Why is peacemaking so rarely explicitly explored in film? I have found that this question regularly leads to other related questions such as: When peacemaking is represented, how is it portrayed? To what extent can violence or conflict in films help to promote peace? In other words, can showing violence be used to promote peace, or is the use of violence always counterproductive, celebrating the very phenomenon that film-makers intend to critique? How and why do some film-makers express the cry for peace? How do audiences interact with films which portray a move from conflict to reconciliation? How far do cinematic portrayals of peacemaking differ from traditional theological or religious understandings of how reconciliation can be achieved? This cluster of questions represents the tip of a teaching iceberg. In order to explore some of these questions, and to show how films can become rich sites of discussion and debate, I analyse three feature films. I have used each of these films with groups of young people in different settings. Each provoked vigorous discussions and further reflection. We turn first to one of the most famous anti-war films of all time.

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)

Based on the best-selling 1929 story by Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* tells the story of a young German schoolboy, Paul Bäumer, and his friends, who are inspired by their schoolmaster to save the Fatherland by joining the Kaiser's army. The muddy reality of the trenches soon dispels his romantic illusions. In one particularly memorable encounter in no-man's land, Paul (played by the pacifist and student of comparative religion Lewis Ayres) stabs a French soldier to death. Trapped in the same small shell-hole, as Paul watches him die he tries to alleviate his enemy's suffering by moistening his parched lips with water. Discovering a pocket photograph of the wife and child of the man he has just slain further traumatises Paul. There may be little explicit religion in this film, but it raises profound ethical, historical and, indirectly, religious issues, such as the whereabouts of God in the midst of human-made trauma and killing.

Directed by Lewis Milestone, the 'talkie' version was a far from 'quiet' account of life at the front. Produced only three years after *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first movie with synchronous music, dialogue and sound effects, *All Quiet on the Western Front's* portrayal of life in the trenches impressed many reviewers:

When shells demolish these underground quarters, the shrieks of fear, coupled with the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, the bang-ziz of the trench mortars and the whining of shells, it tells the story of the terrors of fighting better than anything so far has done in animated photography coupled with the microphone.¹

I have found that many young viewers identify with Paul, the only survivor from his group, who returns home to find the same schoolmaster exhorting a new set of pupils to join up. Unable to convince them of the madness of enlisting, he returns to the front to train new soldiers. The last moments of the film show Paul putting his head over the trench to catch a butterfly, only to be shot by a sniper. Like many other anti-war films, and the original novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* promotes peace through showing the seeming futility and tragic realities of war.

This was a common rhetorical pattern found in other popular anti-war films produced at the time, especially the British *Journey's End* (1930), the German *Westfront 1918* (1930) and the French *Wooden Crosses* (1931). While *All*

Quiet on the Western Front was initially banned in some countries, it received a powerful endorsement from a *Variety* critic:

The League of Nations could make no better investment than to buy up the master print, reproduce it in every language, to be shown in every nation every year until the word war is taken out of dictionaries.

The belief in the power of film to promote peace rests on a similar assumption as the belief that film has the power to promote violence. The contested conviction that cinema can contribute to changes in behaviour, even encouraging more peaceful forms of action, is not only found in interpretations of anti-war films, but also in biopics and dramas.

Gandhi (1982)

Gandhi (directed by Richard Attenborough) invites the viewer into a cinematic world very different from *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Through dramatic scenes it offers a sharp contrast between the violence of the police and the non-violence (*ahimsa*) of Gandhi, both in Durban and later in India. Some even claim that *Gandhi* had a considerable impact on audiences in Lithuania, where it was frequently shown prior to the peaceful 1991 revolution.² Part of the power of film is its ability to show audiences what happened or might have happened, turning abstract ideas such as *satyagraha* (the force of truth to resist tyranny non-violently) into concrete images, and turning words into actions that can be imitated. Even if it lacks immediate human presence, used in creative ways film can help to educate viewers about the challenges of trying to build lasting peace through non-violent resistance.

In *Gandhi* this is enacted through both words and actions. First, words: consider the scene set at the Imperial Theatre in Johannesburg, where Gandhi (played by Ben Kingsley) attempts to persuade his listeners, angry at new identity pass legislation, to embrace the way of non-violence:

I am asking you to fight, to fight against their anger, not to provoke it. We will not strike a blow, but we will receive them. And through our pain we will make them see their injustice, and it will hurt as all fighting hurts. But we cannot lose. We cannot. They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me. Then, they will have my dead body, not my obedience!

While Gandhi did not make such a stirring speech at this theatre, it does reflect his actual desire to bring a just peace through non-violent resistance.

Second, actions: in an even more memorable scene Attenborough depicts Gandhi defying the instructions of the South African police and dropping identity pass after identity pass into a fire. The leader of the police is enraged, battering Gandhi's arms and head with his baton. Even though Gandhi collapses, crumpled and bloodied on the dusty ground, with one shaking hand he still manages to drop the last pass into the burning grate. In the film, this brutal beating is witnessed by a Western journalist and makes the headlines; though in reality Gandhi was never beaten for burning passes. Irrespective of their historical veracity, these two scenes demonstrate the complexity of portraying a protagonist with a clear aversion to using violence and with a vision for peaceful practices. It is almost impossible to show an individual standing up against the injustices of a segregated South Africa or the carnage of the First World War without depicting some of the violence which they are trying to challenge. The danger here, recognised by many film-makers and worth considering in the classroom, is that in the desire to interrogate such violence film-makers can unintentionally end up celebrating conflict through showing violent forms of action.

Like *All Quiet on the Western Front* there is little explicit religion in *Gandhi*. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Consider, for example, how Gandhi's famous 'fast unto death' in 1947 is depicted. His aim was to bring peace between Hindus and Muslims. Susanna Younger in an article on 'Gandhi: the Person and the Film' describes the scene well:

He is fasting in Calcutta in the house of a Muslim. He is greatly emaciated; his friends with anxious faces are standing around him ... A band of rough-looking erstwhile murderers walk in and surrender their macabre weapons. At this point the wildest looking of them all bursts in with a chapatti (Indian bread) in hand which he almost throws on Gandhi. 'Here! Eat!' he shouts, 'I am going to hell; but I do not wish to have your death on my soul!' Feeble, his voice barely rising above a whisper, Gandhi tells him, 'Only God decides who goes to hell. Tell me, why do you say you are going to hell?' 'I killed a small child! I dashed his head against the wall because they

[the Muslims] killed my little one.' Gandhi says, 'I will tell you a way out of hell: You find a child whose parents have been killed. Then you and your wife bring him up as your own. Only, make sure the child is a Muslim and raise him in the Muslim faith.' Disbelief and then a look of awe come over the dazed eyes. He bends low, touches Gandhi's feet with his forehead, and silently departs.³

Shooting Dogs (2005)

What happens when peacemaking between opposing groups fails and when those responsible for keeping the peace are powerless? These are some of the questions which recent films about the 1994 Rwandan genocide tackle. The inability of the peacekeepers to actually keep the peace and prevent thousands of people losing their lives is reflected in films such as *Shooting Dogs* (Michael Caton-Jones, 2005), *Sometimes in April* (Rauol Peck, 2005), *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004), and *100 Days* (Nick Hughes, 2000). *Shooting Dogs* is based upon the true story of a large group of Tutsis who sought refuge in a Kigali secondary school (Ecole Technique Officiële), which was briefly protected by UN peacekeeping troops. Once the Belgian soldiers withdrew, leaving the group defenceless, nearly all of the 2500 men, women and children were massacred by the waiting militia or *interahamwe*.

In contrast to other films about the Rwandan genocide, *Shooting Dogs* makes one of the central characters a white priest, Father Christopher, played by John Hurt. The result is that many of the theological questions which are latent in other films about the Rwandan genocide are brought into the foreground in *Shooting Dogs*. So too are questions about whether non-violence is an effective form of peacemaking in the face of unconstrained violence. For instance, in one scene Father Christopher is stopped and confronted at a road-block by a drunk and enraged former pupil. Instead of fighting or running away, he embodies a peaceful response by affirming: 'When I look into your eyes, the only feeling I have is love.' Unlike in *Hotel Rwanda* where the protagonist Paul Rusesabagina (played by Don Cheadle) acts like a Rwandan Oscar Schindler, providing a safe haven for endangered Rwandans, Father Christopher's actions operate at several different levels. Peacemaking for this priest is partly about being present with those who suffer, and performing the liturgies of the church, along with welcoming hundreds of strangers into his school, trying to organise their protection, cajoling the UN peacekeepers to

help and then, when all else fails, losing his own life as he attempts to help several children to escape. Such scenes provoke other questions about how peacefulness can be expressed and what kinds of love and peace can be embodied in a place overrun by killing.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that several feature films not only act as valuable catalysts for provoking questions about peacemaking, but also depict and even model actions intended to bring peace in a violent world. Used sensitively in the classroom they can stimulate rich reflection around the process of peacemaking. I have intentionally avoided discussing in detail religious biopics of leaders known for their efforts at promoting peace and justice, such as *Romero* (1989) or *Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story* (1996). Nor have I gone into detail about the practicalities of using such films in a school or college setting, though it is worth noting here that I have found that, by offering a few simple questions before watching the film, viewers (of many different ages) have provided richer observations than when they just watched the film 'cold'. Encouraging viewers to look beyond the violent spectacle is a valuable practice to encourage. The camera and the eye are naturally drawn to violent action, and peacemaking practices are often hard to portray dramatically. It is not surprising, therefore, how relatively rare the depiction of peace or peacemaking is within most films.

Even though it is a comparative rarity, through the individual films emerging out of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America it is becoming

clear how many films do in fact celebrate different kinds of peace, and subtly explore the religious roots of these practices. Even if they cannot themselves break the cycle of violence, they can at least be used as valuable educational resources highlighting the endless waste associated with resorting to the gun, the machete or the bomb. They can also demonstrate the difficulties and opportunities that are available to peacemakers on every continent. Some of the best films encourage the viewer to think beyond the narrative. The three films I have considered in detail can help initiate discussions exploring how religion does not always have to be inextricably connected with the ways of violence, but may even become an agent for peace.

References

- 1 Mordaunt Hall, *New York Times*, March 15, 1930, and in *The New York Times Film Reviews: A One Volume Selection: 1913–1970*, (NYTFR, 1971), pp106-7.
- 2 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, (Augsburg, 1992), p237.
- 3 <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1983/v40-2-article5.htm>.

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