

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Religious Film and the Hagiopic



Lush, vaguely liturgical music floods the theater. A sonorous off-screen male voice slowly articulates the words, “And it was written . . .” or, “In the year . . .” On the screen, clouds mysteriously separate, and a semi-transparent figure appears in the sky. Later in the film, a blood-soaked man, stumbling under the weight of a heavy cross, is savagely whipped as fainting women are escorted away. Or, instead, a young girl is dragged from a dungeon and tied to a stake, where she is set on fire.

Conventional films about religious heroes are instantly recognizable. Average film-goers can easily identify the most common sounds and images, and, more importantly, they can name the particular values that the most traditional films of this kind uphold: blind faith, chastity, extreme forms of virtuous suffering, and the superiority of one religion over all others. What viewers—and film scholars—cannot name is the genre itself.

This book focuses on films that represent the life, or part of the life, of a recognized religious hero, and identifies these films as a genre, which I call the hagiopic—the “holy” or “saint” picture. As its name suggests, the hagiopic is closely related to the biopic—the biographical film—but there are significant differences. Unlike the biopic, the hagiopic is concerned with its hero’s relationship to the divine; and the world the

conventional hagiopic portrays is a place found in no other genre of films, a place where miracles occur, celestial beings speak to humans, and events are controlled by a benevolent God, who lives somewhere beyond the clouds.

The term “hagiopic” also suggests hagiography, a significant feature of the genre. Conventional and alternative hagiopics are both concerned with hagiography: the former idealize the hero while the latter may critique this idealization or examine how the hero’s ideas have been distorted by followers or religious institutions. In making any film about a major hagiopic hero, such as Jesus Christ or Joan of Arc, the director cannot escape awareness of the genre conventions, and must work with or against them. Pier Paolo Pasolini exorcized himself of the Hollywood influence by making a politicized parody of a commercial Jesus movie, *La Ricotta* (1962), and then went on to create one of the greatest and most unconventional of all hagiopics, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964).¹

Although hagiopics can be about heroes in any religious tradition, this book focuses exclusively on Christianity, the tradition that is dominant in the Western world and increasingly influential in the United States. The massive, controversial response to Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, the explosion of Christian entertainment on television in the USA (programs such as *Joan of Arcadia* (2003–5) and the 2005 series *Revelations*), and the expansion of Christian themes in popular movies (such as Neil Jordan’s *The End of the Affair*, 1999; Ridley Scott’s *The Kingdom of Heaven*, 2005; and Ron Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006) leave no doubt that films about religion and religious figures are now a significant part of popular culture. The surge of interest in films on religious topics in the early twenty-first century is part of a much larger phenomenon—the rise of the religious right in US domestic politics and the increased influence of evangelical Christianity on almost every aspect of American public life: the courts, education, medicine, and even the armed forces. During the last decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the new millennium, the renewed concern with religion in the United States has been reflected in a vast number of articles on the front pages of newspapers and the covers of mainstream magazines.

The significance and popularity of films about religious figures cannot be measured by movie listings in major cities. The audience for hagiopics far exceeds the number of ticket-buyers, since churches, religious schools, and missionaries regularly show these movies to groups in the United States and other parts of the world. As far back

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as the 1960s, the Vatican acknowledged the power of religious films, stating that these movies had taken on the former function of large frescoes and sculptures; they had become “the so-called Bible of the poor.”² Now, nearly half a century later, films and television programs have become even more influential in the USA as interpreters of the Bible: for many people in all classes, they are the primary sources of information—or misinformation—about the origins of Judeo-Christian values.

The Appeal and Conventions of the Traditional Hagiopic

Why do audiences enjoy watching movies in which virtuous people with visions and miraculous powers are ridiculed, tortured, spat on, crucified, or burned at the stake? What desires and fears do these films address? What are their stylistic conventions, and how do they operate?

In a far more direct way than any other film genre, the hagiopic deals with basic questions about suffering, injustice, a sense of meaninglessness, and a longing for something beyond the world we know. Rather than simply depicting good characters and evil ones and offering pat answers about faith and morality, most hagiopics take us through the harrowing emotional experiences of the protagonist, and sometimes of other characters as well, thus dramatizing inner conflicts that many people experience. Even if these films offer clichéd forms of religious comfort and conventional answers to moral questions—which they often do—they also take the viewer through a journey that involves doubt, struggle, and transformation; and they also usually allow for a variety of responses and interpretations, mirroring spectators’ own spiritual questioning.

Hagiopics generally dramatize their questions through narratives that are set in specific long-ago, faraway places. The locations—familiar from a century of religious films, which in turn have derived their iconography from several centuries of painting, sculpture, stained glass, and illustrated Bibles—arouse certain expectations even before any action occurs. Typical settings for films about Jesus and other New Testament figures are the ancient city of Jerusalem with its grand temple and palaces and its underground prison cells, nearby olive groves and desert gardens, small primitive villages with dusty roads, and barren landscapes through which the wealthy are transported by camels and horses as the poor travel by foot. In this world of extreme wealth and dire poverty, we find gloriously costumed Romans and their allies: a king, a tetrarch,

a procurator, and many soldiers whose armor gleams in the sun. We also encounter virtuous, humble people—Jews whose Jewishness may or may not be effaced to make them appear as proto-Christians (a topic I will discuss in Chapter 4). Most of the ordinary people dress in long flowing robes, which emphasize their gentle, respectful movements and speech. Two Jewish men are exceptions to this rule: the hyper-masculine John the Baptist, who wears animal skins and shouts out the word of God, and Barabbas, who may be skimpily dressed, ferocious, and quick-moving. The main female exception to the tradition of modest dress is Mary Magdalene, who appears in the conventional hagiopic as a provocatively dressed prostitute and then transforms into a modest, devoted follower of Christ.

Medieval hagiopics have settings and characters that parallel those of the biblical films in their segregation of rich and poor. Bejeweled kings and queens and corrupt bishops appear in palatial settings, contrasting with characters such as a pious peasant girl, her devoted mother, and a humble country priest, who are found in grottos, tiny houses, and small churches. The settings and characters, of course, vary somewhat from film to film, as we will see in the chapters about individual movies, but the use of generic material makes the events that occur only in the hagiopic seem natural and expected. Just as a spaceship carrying aliens is a normal occurrence in a science-fiction film, so a miracle or an apparition of the Virgin Mary is a standard event in a conventional hagiopic.

Sound is another important element in the special world of the hagiopic. In addition to the sonorous voice-over and liturgically inspired music mentioned above, we may also encounter a Jesus who speaks slowly and possibly with an odd mix of biblical and modern language, and female visitors from the heavens who have soft, gentle voices. We know when an apparition is imminent, because it is usually preceded by generically specific rustling wind sounds; and in many films we can recognize the resurrection scene with our eyes closed because it is traditionally accompanied by the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's *Messiah*.

The stylistic conventions of the religious film are exaggerated and sentimental, to say the least; indeed, they can verge on the ridiculous. Consequently they are endlessly parodied in comedies, television advertising, and even some hagiopics. The over-the-top quality of the most clichéd moments often adds an element of playfulness and reflexivity, even in scenes that attempt to convey a sense of the sacred. This double meaning skillfully addresses a broad range of intended viewers: believers, non-believers, and people with mixed feelings. The genre's conventions produce a specific cinematic world that film-goers

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can enter, perhaps seeking wholesome, instructive entertainment for their children, maybe hoping to strengthen their own wavering faith, or perhaps simply anticipating the pleasures of the familiar, spiced with a few surprises. The conventional hagiopic is a nostalgic genre. Its old-fashioned devices and long-ago settings suggest that in previous eras, at least for the fortunate, life was less complicated and therefore better than it is now. In contrast to the hagiopic's miraculous realm, where God or his messengers speak directly to the protagonist, the modern world can seem like a place of multiple losses: loss of certainty, loss of the divine order, and loss of meaning.

Wish-Fulfillment and Miracle-Time

The conventional hagiopic is also a genre of wish-fulfillment. These films provide a set of comforting reassurances: they assert that we are never alone, because there is a God who sees all and hears every prayer; they tell us that good will be rewarded, evil will be punished, and justice will ultimately prevail; and they depict a world that is always pregnant with the possibility of heavenly visitations and divine intervention. This miraculous environment is not identical to the world described by any actual Christian denomination. The expectations, sounds, and images of the hagiopic comprise a genre-specific cinematic world—a singular kind of fictional time-space configuration. Mikhail Bakhtin referred to such configurations as “chronotopes”—time-space realms evoked by particular literary genres. Bakhtin's first example, “adventure time,” the chronotope of the Greek adventure novel of ordeal (100–500 CE), is a magical time-space in which the hero travels vast distances over mountains and across seas, having adventures that, in real time, might take decades. The hero returns, as young as when he left, finding his still-young and beautiful beloved, who awaits him as if he had departed only days before. The lack of realism in this genre, Bakhtin points out, is insignificant, because readers intuitively understand that the purpose of the stories is to provide a dramatic illustration of constancy.³

The name I have given the hagiopic's time-space configuration, or chronotope, is “miracle-time.” In miracle-time, the blind and the lame can be cured; lowly peasants can be honored with divine visitors; the relentless march of chronological time can be stopped; and there is a sense that the fullness of time will eventually arrive. In traditional Christian theology, Jesus is seen as bringing together radically different kinds of

time. As God the Son, he exists in heaven for all eternity; but, through the Incarnation, he breaks into *chronos*, the humdrum, relentless, passing time in which humans are trapped. Through his life on earth, his death, and his resurrection, Jesus conquers *chronos* and begins to usher in *kairos*, the appointed time, the fullness of time, the new era of “God’s time,” when all will be transformed. In the hagiopic’s miracle-time, there are also breaks in the barrier between the meaningless ticking of the clock in *chronos* and the glorious eternal world of *kairos*: visitors from the eternal realm burst into the mundane world; saints die on earth and ascend into the heavens; and from there they produce miracles, which occur on earth. These processes conquer the limitations of space as well as time.

Suffering and Sacrifice

In the Hebrew Bible, Job voices feelings that most people experience occasionally, if not frequently:

Do not human beings have a hard service on earth,
 And are not their days like the days of a laborer?
 Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
 and like the laborers who look for their wages,
 So I am allotted months of emptiness,
 and nights of misery are apportioned to me.

Job 7: 1–3

In the New Testament, the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ constitute a discourse on pain and humiliation that puts our ordinary sufferings in perspective. Traditional hagiopics, like Jewish and Christian religious scripture, claim that this world, with its suffering and its injustice, is not all there is. More than that, they assert that the worst aspects of life—pain, loss, and death—can be the most valuable. The hagiopic, like Christianity itself, attempts to turn worldly values upside down, providing comfort for those who are lowly and miserable and a bit of warning to the powerful. The narrative structure of most hagiopics centers on a hero who suffers greatly, works miracles that relieve the sufferings of others, dies a painful death, and then ascends to heaven. Joan of Arc burns at the stake, and Bernadette and Therese undergo slow, excruciating deaths, all echoing the general trajectory of the life of Jesus, who is the model for Christians.

One of the important functions of images of Jesus crowned with thorns, bleeding, and hanging on the cross is to remind us that our problems are small: if Jesus can bear his cross, surely we can bear ours. As comforting as this idea is—and it has undoubtedly helped millions endure lives of terrible suffering—it is in some ways misleading. The gospels, by focusing exclusively on the torture and crucifixion of Jesus (with brief mention of the two “thieves,” who are placed on crosses next to Jesus, mainly to add to his humiliation), draw attention away from the fact that thousands were crucified by the Romans on a regular basis. The most traditional hagiopics follow suit, and implicitly add another misleading idea: that such brutality is a thing of the past. By associating horrific practices with ancient times and focusing attention on a single instance of extraordinary and entirely unjust suffering, hagiopics can shield us from current realities: the fact that torture, mutilation, and killing—acts even more brutal and prolonged than those described in the passion or the lives of the saints—occur every day in the modern world. Martin Hengel’s scholarly study *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* ends with the following statement: “Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching.”⁴ Jesus films may be less detached from reality than some contemporary theology and preaching, but they rarely make comparisons between political torture in the ancient world and the similar practices in our era. Nor do they usually give a sense of the many horrors associated with crucifixion itself. One obvious exception, in terms of the savagery of Jesus’ crucifixion, is Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, a sacrificial hagiopic, which will be discussed in Chapter 9. Even in this extremely bloody film, however, the focus is on one death, which is presented as voluntary and sacrificial. The film avoids the kinds of historical information that Hengel discusses.

Hengel documents the extremely widespread use of crucifixion in the ancient world—an important fact that could be of great significance to film-makers, who could choose to portray Jesus as a member of an endangered class, which was, and still is, vulnerable to cruel and extreme punishments. A film with such a focus would have more to say about the plight of the poor (the meek and persecuted, whom Jesus called “blessed”) than about satisfying divine vengeance.

Hengel also points out that crucifixion sought to maximize physical suffering, humiliation, and dehumanization through drawn-out torture, nakedness, public exposure, and refusal of burial. Those carrying out the punishment were allowed full expression of their sadism, and often

added torments such as taunting, maiming, or killing family members, ridiculing and blinding the victim, mutilating his genitals, or nailing him to the cross upside down. At a time when lack of burial was the cruelest of all punishments, the crucified were commonly left as food for vultures and wild dogs.

Hagiopics invariably tone down the most gruesome aspects of crucifixion, and they nearly always avoid associating ancient forms of punishment with equally cruel present-day modes of torture. How then do they interpret the killing of Jesus? Do they reinforce the explanation that began to develop shortly after Jesus died on the “tree of shame,” when the brilliant theoretician Paul began to interpret the execution in terms of the familiar practice of religious sacrifice? Finding several passages in the Hebrew Bible that he interpreted as prophecies of Jesus’ death, Paul taught that humans had alienated themselves from God through sin, and that God, through his great love for his human creation, sent his only son to live on earth and suffer for the sins of the entire human race. This perfect sacrifice would make all further sacrificial killing unnecessary. The evangelist John and later theologians elaborated upon this Christology, which eventually became official doctrine.

Before the Second World War, it was common for conventional hagiopics, like the gospels themselves, to combine the sacrificial interpretation with depictions of the Jews as Christ-killers. The story was anti-Semitic and contradictory: God arranged for his son to be crucified (and Jesus cooperated), but the Jews are responsible for the crucifixion. After the Holocaust, when the ghastly consequences of anti-Semitism became obvious, most film-makers were careful to show that crucifixion was a Roman, not a Jewish, practice. The sacrificial interpretation, however, remained. By having Jesus voluntarily embrace his agony and death, the hagiopics position us as witnesses to a necessary, redemptive deed. We must accept the crucifixion with gratitude, since it was ordained by God.

Very few film-makers have chosen to represent other perspectives on the crucifixion, such as the theories of contemporary theologians, historians, and archeologists. (Denys Arcand’s *Jésus de Montréal* (Jesus of Montreal, 1989), a striking exception, will be discussed in Chapter 7.) In recent years, some theologians have questioned the idea of interpreting Jesus’ death as a sacrifice arranged by God the Father. They ask why a God of love would want any creature—animal or human—to be killed as a sacrifice. They especially question why God would do something that, if done by a human being, would be considered an extreme form of child abuse: subjecting one’s son to torture, humiliation,

and a long, excruciating death to “pay” for the sins of others. Furthermore, they question the very concept of a vengeful God—an all-powerful deity who allows people to sin and then punishes them—or punishes someone else. The scholars who raise these questions represent a range of theological positions. Many are practicing Christians who consider Jesus a wise, courageous, inspiring human being rather than the Son of God. The views of some of these writers will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Decisions by serious film-makers about representation of the crucifixion are part of a two-thousand-year-long study of Christianity’s mysterious, compelling, and shocking primary symbol—an image of a bloody, nearly naked, half-dead man nailed to a cross. A film-maker’s understanding of the crucifixion is the core of a hagiopic, whether the film is about Jesus or about a saint whose life was modeled on the life of Christ.

The work of René Girard can help us sort out questions about a hagiopic’s perspective, or perspectives, on the crucifixion, and on sacrifice and suffering in general.

Girard offers perhaps the most interesting contemporary interpretation of the crucifixion—and of human sacrifice, which he believes was practiced at some time in every human society.⁵ His explanation of the mechanism of scapegoating as a method of uniting a community, and his discussion of the gospels, provide a valuable way of looking at the sacrificial hagiopic. Like many literary scholars, Girard compares Jesus with the other sacrificial victim most familiar to Western culture, Oedipus. Girard finds Oedipus the exemplary scapegoat: his story contains all the stereotypes of a “persecution text”—a text written by persecutors who do not understand the unconscious motivations for the actions they are describing. The city of Thebes, suffering from a plague, responds like other communities under duress: it needs to find a cause for its troubles (someone to blame). It “discovers” that its king has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother (the town accuses Oedipus of parricide and incest, grave crimes against order and hierarchy—or, in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, “differentiation”). When presented with the evidence of his crimes, Oedipus accepts his responsibility; he blinds himself and accepts exile, ridding the city of the evil that caused the plague.

Girard points out that, as readers or viewers of Sophocles’ play, we accept the logic of the tragedy: Oedipus is guilty and must be removed. Furthermore, as people living in the scientific era, we consider the story a myth and are not concerned with the question of historical truth. In

other words, we approach the Oedipus story and other myths as *texts*, and do not try to look beyond them to find historical referents. Nor do we try to do what Girard does—use massive literary evidence to point to lost or deliberately obscured referents. The lost referents that interest Girard are the formation and reunification of all communities through victimization, or scapegoating, and human sacrifice. Scapegoating continues to this day in disguised forms such as persecution and capital punishment. In accepting the Oedipus story as presented, Girard says, we accept the point of view of the persecutors. In other words, we lend credence to the “mythologizing” process that condones reforming or “cleansing” a community through collective, legalized murder, or exile.

Girard states that there are instances when we reject the persecutors’ perspective—where we are able to separate historical fact from myth, and see the narrator as unreliable. His first example is a historical record written in fourteenth-century France, during the black plague, by the poet Guillaume de Machaut. Guillaume reports that the townspeople were dying of a mysterious illness; they “discovered” it was caused by the Jews, who were poisoning the rivers. They killed all the Jews, and the plague ended. The second example is the records of the trials and executions of witches. Evidence is brought; the accused woman may become convinced that she is indeed a witch; she is burned to death; and the town feels freed from a source of evil. In reading these narratives, we know there are historical referents, even if we do not have the exact details of the particular stories. We know there was a plague and Jews were massacred, and we know there were witch trials and burnings. We also know that the Jews could not possibly have caused the plague by poisoning the rivers, and we do not believe in witches. The texts are extremely revealing about the sacrificial or scapegoating process because of the narrators’ confidence in their own perceptions—a confidence we cannot share. The narrators of these texts lay bare the workings of the scapegoating process in a way that modern records do not.

Girard’s point is that we should look at all myths that are about the foundation or reconstitution of a society through collective, legalized violence in the way that we look at Guillaume’s text or the witch-trial transcripts. We should recognize that myths refer to real murders (the numbers of myths, their stereotyped patterns, and the naivety of the narration argue for an underlying truth) and we should begin to understand the universal human pattern of projecting a group’s guilt, anger, and conflicts onto a victim, whose removal can “cleanse” and unite the community. The reason it is vitally important to take myths seriously,

Girard says, is because they teach us about patterns that continue today in ways we are unable to see. We are as blind to our own scapegoating as Guillaume and the witch-hunters were to theirs.

Ancient myths have a second part that is absent from medieval and modern persecution stories: the transfiguration of the scapegoat into a savior. Since the epidemic or the conflict was supposedly caused by the selected victim, the same person is also responsible for the cure. The tremendous power attributed to the scapegoat, which brought about evil, now brings about salvation (health or reconciliation). Through this process of sacralization, the victim now becomes a saint or god. The process of sacralization transforms a sordid killing into a redemptive act. The sacred, Girard says, is always associated with violence. The Oedipus story is again illustrative. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, when the protagonist arrives, blind and self-mutilated, he says to Theseus, “I come to offer you a gift—my tortured body—a sorry sight; but there is value in it more than beauty.” The chorus (sounding almost Christian) comments on the value of this degraded body: “Surely a just god’s hand will raise him up again.” And Oedipus, having reached a human nadir, the condition that cries out for transformation, wonders, “Am I made a man in this hour when I cease to be?”

Terry Eagleton likens Oedipus’ “subjective destitution” to Jesus’ descent into hell for three days, a sign of his solidarity with torment and despair.⁶ In his comparison of Oedipus and Christ, Eagleton looks upon the protagonists from the perspective of identification, empathy, or, to use the Aristotelian term, “pity.” We vicariously experience the pain of both men as they “descend into hell” and thereby heal or save the community.

Girard, on the other hand, observes these figures primarily from the point of view of those who either participate in the persecution or painfully witness it. The great difference between *Oedipus Rex* and the gospels, for Girard, is that the former is written from the perspective of the persecutors, who believe they are right to accuse and exile the king, whereas the latter is written from the perspective of allies of the persecuted man, who believe the accusations are false and the punishment unjust. In Girard’s schema, *Oedipus* is a persecution text (it sanctions persecution and claims it is effective), whereas the gospels are *the* texts that can demystify the entire mythological process—the process of selecting and persecuting a victim and sacralizing (or legalizing) the act. The gospels emphasize the innocence of Jesus (which contrasts with the guilt of Oedipus) and explain how Jesus is falsely accused, tortured, and publicly executed, and then finally emerges as a savior as a result of his persecution and death.

Films about Jesus virtually always tell the story from the perspective of the innocent victim and his followers. In this sense, they are revelatory texts, in Girardian terms: they illustrate how the scapegoating mechanism operates. But do conventional hagiopics actually function as explanations of unconscious social processes? Do they alert us to the dangers of scapegoating or of killing the innocent? I believe they do not. Like the gospels, most films about Jesus strongly assert the injustice of the crucifixion, but then support the idea of substitutional sacrifice by claiming that God the Father orchestrated the execution and Jesus willingly offered himself as victim. In DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Jesus holds out his hands to be manacled; in most films, Jesus tells Judas to hurry and do what he must do; and in nearly all Jesus films, the savior, just before dying, utters words like "It is accomplished."

Do traditional hagiopics look at the crucifixion of Jesus, or the burning of Joan of Arc, exclusively from the perspective of the innocent? I believe they do not. Because of the cinema's realism and its ability to show images from multiple points of view, films give us some freedom to choose our own way of seeing and interpreting what appears on screen. Jesus films and other sacrificial hagiopics invite a double response. They promote identification with the victim (films about Jesus, Joan of Arc, and other saints often begin with the hero's birth and childhood as a way of binding us to the protagonist) and they also allow for the "cleansing," relief-giving, or sadistic experience of scapegoating by giving us images of persecution. In other words, they invite us to follow the narrative as revelatory text and persecution text at once. As thousands of viewers left screenings of *The Passion of the Christ* in tears, some critics speculated that the film might become a cult favorite for those who enjoy gory sadistic images. Hagiopics that portray extreme forms of torture depict heroes who are genuinely courageous and inspiring. At the same time, these films offer a feast of emotional experiences for the viewer: vicarious suffering, sadistic pleasure, guilt, and a self-congratulatory sense that, if we were "there," we would surely have been on the side of the virtuous.

Ritualoid Entertainment and Narrative Patterns

Hagiopics, especially in their depictions of the crucifixion, invite a particular form of viewer engagement—a hybrid response evoked by their admixture of commercial religiosity, narrative, and spectacle. Rejecting the view, expressed in some cinema studies literature, that

genre films function as popular rituals, I propose a term to describe the vicarious experience provided specifically by the hagiopic: “ritualoid entertainment.” I intend that the term “ritualoid” suggest a pseudo-ritual experience; the word echoes “liminoid,” a term coined by Victor Turner to describe the ludic, liminal-*like* experience of disorder that characterizes many carnivals, festivals, and theatrical performances.⁷ My emphasis on “entertainment” refers to the word’s original meaning, which, as Turner points out, is “to hold apart.” Theater creates a frame and “holds apart” a liminal-*like* space where alternative ways of thinking and acting can be vicariously experienced. Theater may aim to transform the viewer, or to reinforce familiar beliefs, or to allow for either response. Hagiopics also invite this range of responses. One may leave the movie house feeling uplifted, inspired, disgusted, or amused by a particular way of thinking—or with a mixture of responses.

I have mentioned several of the most striking characteristics of the traditional hagiopic: the typical locations, characters, and sounds; the genre-specific interweaving of chronological time and a sense of eternity; the concern with suffering; the miracles and the sense of the nearness of the heavenly realm; the nostalgia for an earlier era; and the depiction of the persecution and painful death of an innocent person. There are also generic narrative patterns. One typical narrative element involves skeptics, doubters, or cynical characters, who make snide comments about religious belief near the beginning of the film, only to be proved wrong at the end. These characters, who are often witty, attractive, and worldly, are stand-ins for the modern viewer; they make it easier to accept ideas such as miracles and heaven at the conclusion of the film.

The hagiopic hero follows a relatively predictable trajectory. He or she is chosen by God to have a vision of something beyond the familiar world. Joan of Arc is visited by saints, who instruct her to lead an army and save her country. Bernadette sees “a lady.” And Jesus has a vision, or an idea, that he calls the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. The hero is laughed at and accused of insanity, lies, or crimes, but refuses to give up the vision, even in the face of trials, threats, and torture. What makes the religious hero so threatening to the authorities, and so appealing to ordinary people, is the fact that he or she has seen something glorious, an indication that there is something beyond the dreary everyday world of the poor.

Hagiopics often begin with a reference to a prophecy, which is fulfilled over the course of the film. The sense of the preordained has multiple functions. It affirms that there is a divine plan: God is firmly in

control, and human beings cannot alter what the deity has ordered. Prophecy also indicates the existence of eternal, unchanging truth, a reassuring fundamentalist principle, and it can be used to bind together narratives that are often in conflict: history and scripture.

Alternative or non-conventional films about religious figures, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Jacques Rivette's *Jeanne La Pucelle I and II* (1984), Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986), and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* approach their topic entirely differently. They usually, but not always, avoid the miraculous; they often acknowledge the lack of available information about their central figure; they deliberately make references to parallels between the faults of ancient and modern religious institutions; they sometimes include the views of present-day scholars; and they avoid the sense of certainty and reassurance that is produced by emphasizing prophecy, using voice-over narration, and referring to unchanging truth. In representing the religious hero, alternative films are far more likely to portray a character who has doubts, conflicts, and sexual desires. Pasolini's *Gospel* opens with a starkly beautiful scene in which a very pregnant Mary meets Joseph for the first time. Cavalier's *Thérèse* respectfully explores the sexualized self-inflicted torture of Carmelite nuns. Denys Arcand's deeply moving *Jesus of Montreal* depicts the resurrection as a wish-fulfilling fantasy of devoted followers of Christ. Some hagiopics blend alternative and conventional traits. Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), based on the eponymous novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, presents ideas that would never appear in a traditional religious film, but the movie uses many conventional Hollywood techniques. (It is discussed in Chapter 9.)

The chapters that follow will discuss several types of hagiopics. Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of the genre, from the 1890s to the early twenty-first century, and Chapter 3 is an overview of critical writings on religious film. Chapter 4 examines the hagiopic as a form of spectacle, focusing on a film that reverses many of the conventions of earlier hagiopics: Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961). In Chapter 5 I discuss the hagiopic as comfort film, examining a popular movie made during the Second World War, Henry King's *The Song of Bernadette* (1943). Chapter 6 discusses a musical hagiopic made in 1973—Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar*—and a remake that uses the same story and music, but reverses most of the ideas: Nick Morris and Gale Edwards's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (2000). The alternative hagiopic is the subject of Chapter 7, which briefly discusses Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964)

and then focuses on a film that incorporates the ideas of several contemporary biblical scholars: Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* (Jesus of Montreal, 1989). Two approaches to Joan of Arc are discussed in Chapter 8, which examines Carl Theodor Dreyer's famous silent picture, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), and a recent violent exploitation movie, Luc Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999). Finally, in Chapter 9, I discuss two films that focus on Jesus as a sacrificial victim: Martin Scorsese's controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).