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**Robert K. Johnston. *Reel Spirituality. Theology and Film in Dialogue.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000. Pp. 236. \$16.99 (Paper).**

[1] In the last ten years, evangelical Christians have shown a renewed interest in the culture that surrounds their work. An example is the new series at Baker Books, "Engaging Culture." *Reel Spirituality* is the first book in that new series.

[2] The author, Robert K. Johnston, has taught a course on theology and film for many years at Fuller Seminary and reviews films regularly for *The Covenant Companion*. This background has made him familiar with many interesting films (see 223-27) and with arguments about the relationship between theology and film (see the bibliography, 207-21).

[3] Johnston enters the foray of arguments quite boldly, staking out the claim that Christianity not only can but must today enter into dialogue with film. He makes three points. First, there is currently a confusing lack of experiential reference in "talk about God" (Christian theology). Second, we should note that ours is a new epoch, comparable to the beginning of writing, marking a shift to the cultural dominance not of the written word but of the filmic image (95). Movies are our world's new *lingua franca* (173). Third - and speaking directly to evangelical Christians - more attention should be paid to the experience of God found in film. "Film's story can [beneficially] affect our understanding of the Christian story, not just the reverse" (80).

[4] Whatever the success of the arguments, this is a very well written book, parts of which are exciting to read. Some of the chapters are a bit pedantic, with diagrams on the blackboard. It builds toward a conclusion that is somewhat disappointing. Nonetheless the book is interesting, including its groupings and analysis of various films, its stories of people whose lives have been changed by films, and its analysis of how film criticism should be done. Film criticism should include four interrelated parts: genre criticism (exploring the conventions of the particular type of film); auteur criticism (comparing a film with others done by the same director); thematic criticism (discussing the themes standing behind the events and encounters of the particular film); and, finally, cultural criticism (examining the way the film both reflects and shapes an ideology or reality of an age).

[5] The spirit of the book is not simply an evangelical corrective and it is quite far from being simply biblical in its references. In fact, the spirit of the book turns out to be quite Roman Catholic. It includes numerous and lengthy quotes from C. S. Lewis (stories expanding the imagination to the transcendent), T. S. Eliot (the sacred reflected in the very quality of art), and Andrew Greeley (the sacramental character of the world). Johnston himself writes: "(W)e seldom notice God's sacramental presence in the ordinary experiences of life, including our moviegoing. We fail to hear God speak" (173).

[6] The book begins with an analysis of the power of film to captivate the viewer, proceeds to a very insightful history of interactions between Hollywood and church censors, offers careful consideration to the ways in which movies are indeed an art form, and then outlines the guidelines for film criticism. Woven throughout the text are allusions to Johnston's thought that people are struggling today with an absence of God in institutional religions. Like many contemporary sociologists (see Robert Wuthnow), he notes that people are seeking a revived, personal, and less institutional, spirituality. Traditional religion has so restricted the Christian perspective upon God that new eyes are required to allow people to see God anew. Film provides the new opportunity for "seeing."

[7] With this promise of something new, the book's final chapters are a disappointment. They provide Johnston homilies on two particular films, *Shansbank Redemption* and *Deep Impact*. Interesting, neither is especially revelatory. Then there is a lengthy analysis of films by Australian director Peter Weir. This man, a product of the sixties, is claimed to exemplify a new way of seeing. He protests in his films against our simplistic materialism, using story, lighting, environment, and characters to suggest transcendence. His films, since the 1960's, include *Gallipoli*, *The Truman Show*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Mosquito Coast*, and numerous others.

[8] Earlier in the book Johnston spoke of individual films that impacted people's lives, including his own. He ends the last chapter with the story of how a Weir film, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, transformed the life of his own wife, Catherine Barsotti. From being an appraiser for Bank America, she became a full-time advocate and defender of the poor and oppressed.

[9] The benefits of the book include its bibliography, its clear summation of a tremendous amount of material, its rather persuasive arguments, its suggestions on how to approach film criticism, and its categorization of films according to some of their similarities and themes. It provides interesting evidence for how and why films might be found valuable for discerning in human experience the presence or sign of the transcendent. The birth process of the new way of seeing, however, seems still under way, and the criticism of Weir's films not especially rewarding.

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