Screening Race and Religion in Hollywood: Gandhi, MLK, Chavez, and Malcolm X on Film

Carter Henderson

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/2633

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.
Screening Race and Religion in Hollywood: Gandhi, MLK, Chavez, and Malcolm X on Film

submitted to
Professor Gaston Espinosa

By
Carter Henderson

Senior Thesis
May 3rd, 2021
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ 4  
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 6  
Chapter 1: Christianizing Gandhi .......................................................................................... 21  
Chapter 2: Secularizing Cesar Chavez .................................................................................. 36  
Chapter 3: Humanizing King ................................................................................................. 51  
Chapter 4: Iconizing Malcolm X ............................................................................................ 69  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 90  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 106
Abstract

Film is a medium that has, and continues to, immortalize some of the world’s greatest people. From political figures to artists to fictional characters, Hollywood’s representation of a human subject in a film has a lasting impact on the legacy of that person. For famous racial-ethnic minority religious activists, the manner in which they are represented varies greatly and this affects how their accomplishments and methods are interpreted. This thesis seeks to explain how famous racial-ethnic minority religious leaders are depicted in Hollywood films. Using the biographical films of Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X as cases; this project will analyze how these biopics represent the religiosity of their subject. Additionally, this analysis will include a discussion of how racial-ethnic minorities are portrayed in each film and what kinds of religious stereotypes are affirmed and refuted by each filmmaker.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Gaston Espinosa, the Arthur V. Stoughton Professor of Religious Studies at Claremont McKenna College, for making this thesis project possible. Your Race, Religion, & the Civil Rights Movement class was one of the best I had the opportunity of taking at CMC and the concepts learned in that class were instrumental in informing the direction of my thesis. Additionally, I want to thank you for being willing to sit with me repeatedly while we went through the painstaking process of trying to make my thesis topic more manageable; I don’t know what I would have unsuccessfully attempted without your guidance. Lastly, I wanted to acknowledge how difficult it was for you to monitor my thesis project in an online environment, yet you always asked great questions that made me consider unexplored perspectives and angles. I want to thank you so much for being my reader.

I would also like to thank the Claremont McKenna College Religious Studies Department, specifically Professors Jamel Velji and Daniel Michon. Professor Velji’s Contemporary Issues in the Study of Islam was my first Religious Studies course at CMC and it opened my eyes to the types of discussions that occur in this discipline. Additionally, my classes with Professor Velji exposed me to Islam and I’m incredibly grateful for the manner in which you made classroom discussions feel like a safe place to ask questions. Similarly, Professor Michon exposed me to the world of South Asian religions in his Hinduism & South Asian Cultures. I had heard the name Gandhi before, but your class taught me more about what his beliefs were and why they were so
revolutionary. I want to thank you for piquing my interest in Gandhi and teaching me about the foundational religious texts to Hinduism.

I would also love to thank Professor Zayn Kassam, the John Knox McLean Professor of Religious Studies, at Pomona College and the rest of my fellow seniors in her thesis seminar class for being support systems for me. I would love to especially highlight Renee Susanto and Claire Schnadig for hosting thesis working sessions via Zoom during the 2021 Spring semester. You have no idea how much these periods of time helped me write my thesis.

Lastly, I would love to thank my mother and sisters for their love and support during my thesis writing process. I am usually fairly particular about the environments where I choose to write, however the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated writing the largest paper of my life at home. I recognize all of you did your best to accommodate me and ensure that I had the space and time necessary to complete this project on time. Thank you for everything!

Sincerely,

Carter Henderson
Introduction

In order to understand why I’m writing a religious studies thesis; I believe it's important to understand who I am as a person. I’m a Protestant black man. Technically, I am a multi-racial person who is regarded as black due to the lasting legacies of the “one-drop-rule”; nonetheless, I identify as black in most circumstances. Yet, when I was 4 years old, I have a distinct memory of watching the news and asking my mom why all the “dark people” were “bad people.” She was immediately appalled by this statement and worked to convince me that this was not the case. Luckily, my father is black, and I was able to reflect upon my relationship with him to quickly refute this falsehood. This day is when I became painfully aware of how powerful perception is and how the media plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative surrounding certain people--groups, cultures, and nations.

During high-school, I came across Spike Lee’s Malcolm X and the Muslim minister quickly became one of my favorite historical figures. Potentially as an attempt to purge any trace of my four-year-old incident from my mind, I had a routine where I would turn on Malcolm X before going to bed and try to fall asleep while the movie was on. This all-but-guaranteed that Malcolm X would become my favorite movie and Denzel Washington would become my favorite actor. Looking back at this time, I believed that my high-school self marveled at the Malcolm X that Spike Lee had created, and I aspired to be him. Someone who was undoubtedly intelligent and sure about their “blackness”, a concept that I still struggle with to this day; I looked to this cinematic figure as a role model. Shortly after my 50th rewatch, I made it a point to find Malcolm X-looking
glasses to wear, I read through Alex Haley’s & Malcolm X’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and I even listened to some of his old speeches on Spotify as an attempt to absorb some of his intellect. Needless to say, I was so enamored with Malcolm X that—despite him being a Muslim minister—I would listen to his sermons in my free time as a Protestant Christian; I considered him to be the embodiment of black intelligence and I sought to learn about his behaviors and tactics so I could emulate them as best I could. My high school self’s fascination with Malcolm X was the best thing that Spike Lee could have hoped for when releasing his biopic; I had latched onto his representation of Malcolm X and began referencing his film to model my own behavior. This should be the goal of any filmmaker who decides to make a biographical film about a racial-ethnic minority religious leader. In this respect, directors have an important role in deciding how these iconic religious activists are represented, since viewers will characterize their legacies as good or bad depending on how the film portrays them.

Going into college, I took one fateful class that had significant influence on the direction of this thesis, Professor Espinosa’s *Race, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement*. In this class, we discussed how King, Cesar Chavez, and Native American leaders like Dennis Banks utilized the spirituality within their respective communities to empower their respective movements during the American 1950-60’s. I found the class material engaging and I soon found myself attempting to connect it with previous observations I’ve had in my life. Since high school I had known how Malcolm X used religion to change his life and change the life of other people, but I had little to no idea that activists like Cesar Chavez had done the same. I had heard the name of Cesar Chavez
before, but I didn’t know much about him or the religious nature of his movement. Here, I began to wonder: why didn’t I know about the spirituality of these famous people?

Fast forward to 2021. During the years of my thesis writing, America has seen a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery this year, a global pandemic concerning the COVID-19 virus, and a rise in anti-Asian sentiments. It’s during times like these that people will often look to the American 1950’s & 1960’s, which is often viewed as the golden age of social advancement toward equal civil protections and the deconstruction of racist legacies, for possible answers to our present predicaments. This will inevitably spark conversations around the legacies of people like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose name became renowned for his work and martyrdom for the cause of equal protections of all Americans under the law. Still, how does today’s society feel about King’s activism? What are the lessons that we feel King sought to teach us? And what entity wields the most influence over how Americans are likely to answer the previous two questions?

I know I’ve prefaced this thesis with my anecdote of encountering negative black stereotypes at a young age, but alternative religious groups and icons of American culture are subjected to their own media-created narratives as well. In my experience, Protestants and Catholics are often both characterized by traditionalism. This often encourages Americans to associate these people with conservatism, prejudice, or bigotry because Christians may find themselves scripturally-opposed to progressive agendas. This is certainly true in some respects, but not true overall. In the 1950-60’s, the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) was one of the many Christian groups that galvanized Black citizenry in the American South to launch the Civil Rights Movement.
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the most renowned leader of the Civil Rights Movement, had headed Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery and others prior to (and during) the Civil Rights Movement.¹ Through these Baptist platforms, he was able to speak to the conscience of his community and brace them for the fight against systematic oppression. Malcolm X had similarly begun his activism when serving as a minister for the Nation of Islam, using his platform to enlighten his community about the ways they could be supporting the Black community and fight against oppression. Both men were certainly religious and expected everyone who participated in their movements to similarly conduct themselves with religious-like discipline.

When one thinks about it, some of the most notable civil rights leaders had their respective social movements rooted in their personal faith. King and Malcolm X are names that have already been mentioned as being champions of the 1950-60’s Civil Rights Movement, but both Mahatma Gandhi and Cesar Chavez had their respective movements’ ideologies crafted around their religious tenets. However, if asked, many people would not be able to tell you that Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence was based upon the Hindu principle of satyagraha or that Cesar Chavez used Catholicism to unite Latinx and Filapinx migrant farm workers under the UFW. For each one of these four men, their religions played a crucial role in creating solidarity in their respective communities and establishing the principles that their social equity movements will

operate under. However, American films made about these individuals will often
downplay the extent to which their activism was faith-based.

**Literature Review**

John C Lyden, a professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska-Omaha
and the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Religion and Film, is one of the most recognized
voices in the field of religion and film. In his article, “To Commend or To Critique? The
Question of Religion and Film Studies,” Lyden makes a distinction between two
positionalities that scholars assume when evaluating religion and film: a positive one and
a negative one.² He says that the arguments of scholars that look upon popular film
favorably think that popular culture expresses its own values through media, like film,
and produces what people want to see and already believe.³ Conversely, critical scholars
view film as a presentation of popular culture and “view its religious aspects with great
suspicion.”

While very broad, I think his analysis is correct and that this thesis would fall
under the later distinction. Still, Lyden often characterizes Hollywood as being
conservative in matters relating to gender and racial inequalities, but I disagree with this
assessment. As it relates to religion, Hollywood is often secular and promotes violent and
sexual content that would offend conservative Americans. I believe it would be a mistake
to try and characterize Hollywood with the terms conservative and progressive. Instead, I
would rather consider Hollywood to be considered an entity that interacts and responds to
its conditions, similar to how any living organism would.

---

³ Ibid, 2
Christine Hoff Kraemer offers a comprehensive overview on the study of religion and film in her article, “From Theological To Cinematic Criticism: Extricating The Study Of Religion And Film From Theology.” She starts by critiquing that too much scholarship about religion and film is focused on Christian traditions. Undoubtedly, Christian themes are bound to be prevalent in American films given 85% of the country in 2003 claimed some sort of Christian religious identity, however, Kraemer argues that this has led the majority of scholarship to fixate on the wrong aspects of religion and film. She references Margaret Miles to make the point that film is an accessible medium that brings issues of public and private life for the consideration, and thus film should only be judged using cinematic norms rather than theological ones. In addition, Kraemer wants to express the notion that film has power and that scholars studying religion and film need to recognize this. She specifically mentions John C. Lyden when talking about film as a medium through which modern myths, or stories that express the worldview and values of a particular community, are created. Overall, she considers the study of religion and film to be too focused on the subject matter of films, rather than addressing audience reactions and interactions with films.

I agree with most of Kraemer’s arguments, especially her emphasis on the audience’s reactions. In my thesis, I do intend on taking a look at how religion serves as a narrative device, without engaging questions of theological accuracy. In other words,
rather than asking the question, “Is this film accurately portraying religion x’s theology?”, I would rather have my work analyze how religion x is functioning in the construction of the film. For example, having a certain religious group occupy the role of protagonist or antagonist in the narrative, or using a place of worship as a movie setting can contribute to the audience’s later perception of that religion. These cinematic decisions, when aggregated among films, create a cultural commentary on a religion that is persuasive and particularly damaging to religious minority communities in the US.

Rubina Ramji, a professor in the Philosophy and Religious Studies department at Cape Breton University, examines Hollywood’s role in perpetuating negative perceptions of Muslim and Arab peoples in her article, “Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11.” Here, Ramji describes the impact that film has had on America’s perception of Muslims pre- and post-9/11, like how the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” have become conflated in the American lexicon. She first critiques how popular film only presents Islam in a one-dimensional manner that leads to the impression of Muslims being a homogenous and monolithic community. This phenomenon is not specific to Islam, but she argues it has most negatively-impacted Islamic individuals in America. Ramji also discusses the impact of 9/11 and how the terrorist attacks radically shaped how Muslims and the Islamic faith were portrayed in film.

---

10 Ibid, 2
11 Ibid, 3
I like Ramiji’s article because it directly associates lack of nuance and cinematic structure with the treatment of a religious group in America. Throughout her writing, she describes how American films continue to treat Islam as a foreign cultural monolith and this being problematic. In terms of pluralism, Islam actually has as many ideological rifts as Protestant Christianity, but this reality does it make it onto the silver screen. As a result, the perception of Islam being a religion that is wholly and violently opposed to the West is propagated through films. Ramiji also makes an observation about the consistency of Islam’s role in the cinematic structure of films. In titles such as The Sheltering Sky (1990), Air Force One (1997), and Black Hawk Down (2001), Muslim characters are cast into an antagonistic role and their motivations surround wanting to destroy America. This is made worse with the commentary of Islam being sexist and treating women poorly. Both the representations of Islam as a cultural monolith and the consistent casting of Muslims in antagonist roles crafts a cultural narrative that says: Islam is dangerous to America. For the purposes of this project, I will be sourcing the stereotypes of Islam being violent and sexist from the discussion in this article.

Rachel Dwyer, Professor Emerita of Indian Cultures and Cinema at University of London, analyzes Hinduism and its intersections with Indian film in the Hinduism chapter in the Routledge guide to Religion and Film. One of the most notable findings in her chapter is her discussion of how Indian secularism differs from Western secularism and how this impacts Indian film. First, Dwyer prefaces her chapter by explaining that

---

12 Ibid, 9
13 Ibid, 3
14 Ibid, 10
India is a deeply religious country; to the extent that the urban, educated population is more religious than the poor, less educated people in the villages.\textsuperscript{16} This finding is unique among populations observed in Western Europe and North America.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, secularism in India does not mean a separation of church and state or an intentional omission of religion from aspects of public life, rather it assumes that all Hindu deities are given the same level of credence and thus no deity is regarded as monotheistically superior to its peers.\textsuperscript{18} Dwyer argues this encourages Indian filmmakers to desire being perceived as overtly religious. She also acknowledges that Indian films are under political censorship constraints that limit the ability to show taboo practices and certain images of minorities.

I found this reading to be fascinating and Dwyer’s “Hinduism” has informed the religious stereotypes I present in two ways. Dwyer acknowledges that Indian secularism implies a delicate balance to maintain religious pluralism and highlights Indian filmmaker Yash Chopra as being a person who embodies what this philosophy looks like on an individualized scale.\textsuperscript{19} He believes that religion requires a duty toward other people and that one should respect all religions while simultaneously believing that religion is one of the greatest sources of human conflict.\textsuperscript{20} For my thesis, I intend on using Dwyer’s work as academic basis for the stereotypes, “religion bonds people together” and “religion divides people”, that I later present.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 142
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 142
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 157
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 157
James Cone (1938-2018), a renowned theologian and black liberation historian who taught at the Union Theological Seminary, talks about the differences and similarities between Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X in *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or A Nightmare.*²¹ In this book, he discusses the legacy of black integrationist thought and how Christianity was used as a conduit for this philosophy to manifest in the life of King and the Civil Rights Movement.²² Cone also contrasts the legacy of integrationist thought with the ideology of black nationalism, creating a narrative from its inception on American shores to how it found its way into Malcolm X’s life. Over the course of the book, he argues that King and Malcolm X’s personal approaches to activism began to mirror one another towards the end of each of their respective lives.

This book is incredibly insightful in identifying how the religion was used to motivate activism in the 1950-60’s Civil Rights Movement and it will serve as the ideological foundation from where I source many of my religious stereotypes that I analyze later in the project. In his book, Cone gives credence to the notions of Christian-motivated resistance being nonviolent and Christianity being at the heart of the Civil Rights movement.²³ Additionally, when discussing the creed of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, Cone acknowledges how these groups felt that Christianity is hypocritical, white Christianity is the religion of the status quo, and Christianity placated

---

²³ Ibid, 29
black people and made them accept their dismal reality. While a lot of these notions are Christianity-specific, I intend on generalizing the idea of “Christianity placating people” to “religion placating people” for the purpose of examining this sentiment in different contexts.

Lastly, I want to mention Gerald Horne, the Moores Professor of History at the University of Houston, and his discussion surrounding film and its role in creating myths in his article “‘Myth’ and the Making of ‘Malcolm X’”. In his work, Horne classifies myths as not necessarily being lies but explications that perform “a symbolic function essential to the culture that produced them.” Myths are often misleading since they neglect certain facts or “distort the relationship between facts”. Hollywood has been a major producer of myths for the West, since it’s considered the film capital of the western world.

Horne’s theory of Hollywood producing myths is the foundation of my thesis. Throughout my paper, I am examining how the famous racial-ethnic religious activists—that were historically known for benefiting the lives of people they’ve never personally met—are having their legacies decided by Hollywood films. While it’s true that books and other modes of academia exist for anybody to access, film’s advantage over academia is that it's incredibly accessible to the masses and thus its message is able to reach more people. As a result, people’s perceptions of racial-ethnic religious activists are influenced greatly by Hollywood films.

24 Ibid, 212
26 Ibid, 440
27 Ibid, 440
**Research Question**

In this thesis, I am aiming to answer the following question: in what four ways does Hollywood depict famous racial-ethnic religious activists?

The majority of my introduction relates to my own encounters with discrepancies between historical figures and how they perceived today. I posit that Hollywood films have had an influence on the legacies of famous racial-ethnic religious activists and to what degree their religiosity is perceived to have impacted their work.

**Central Thesis**

I intend to argue that each of the four films represent a different way of depicting famous racial-ethnic religious activists. *Gandhi* is a case of how these figures can be represented using a Christ-type archetype. *Cesar Chavez* is an example of how religious activists leading campaigns for social justice can have their accomplishments secularized on film. *Selma* details how a filmmaker can humanize an activist to emphasize how they are fallible. And lastly, *Malcolm X* displays how a subject’s religion can be used as a vehicle to facilitate narrative

**Methodology**

When examining this question further with my reader, we decided that the best medium to examine would be films. News outlets are putting out content daily and many have scoured their more problematic publications from searchable records; similarly, there are a multitude television shows that exist and finding good ones that have had scholarly studies conducted on them is a nigh-impossible task. Instead, I plan to use films to represent the American media’s narrative of a particular religion at a given point in
time. This approach offers two advantages: the first is that films are easily searchable and they’re confined to a particular moment in time. Conversely, TV shows are not easily findable and are drawn out over long periods of time. The second advantage is that films have numerical values attached to viewership, which can allow for a rough estimation of the film’s scale of influence. If the data permits, my thesis will be able to examine the narratives around certain religions, how these narratives change over time, and what films were most responsible for contributing to the narratives.

To analyze each film on a comprehensive and comparative basis, I utilized Professor Espinosa’s Movie Analysis tool.28 This tool guides research for basic quantitative facts about the movie (date released, budget, gross sales, run time, etc.) and asks questions that encourage one to think critically about how certain facets of the film are represented. After watching Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Selma, and Malcolm X and using the Movie Analysis tool for each, I was able to structure each chapter around the following four points.

The first part of the chapter includes a discussion of the core argument. This is designed to explain how the film being discussed in each chapter connects to my central thesis point.

The second component of my methodology was to discuss how racial-ethnic minorities were portrayed in the film. My main goal in this section was to identify any racist Hollywood tropes being used to characterize a racial-ethnic group. Additionally, I

wanted to examine how racial-ethnic groups were being portrayed in relation to their respective famous religious social activist. If these people are being portrayed negatively as a means to make the activist more impressive, I wanted to make note of that. In this section of my thesis, I often talk about the notion of minority intelligence. For example, in *Cesar Chavez*, I wanted to see if the UFW leaders around Cesar Chavez were shown to have been capable of executing plans, coming up with viable strategies, or performing a meaningful consultative role to the film’s main activist. I think centralizing all the intellectual innovation of a people-group into one person perpetuates a notion of exceptionalism, implying that the famous racial-ethnic religious activist had to be uncharacteristically intelligent and gifted to pull off something nobody else in their racial-ethnic group had the capacity to do.

The third component of my methodology is to identify the director’s views on religion and discern their impact on the film. Here, I reference the director’s own religious beliefs and provide evidence of scenes that suggest their positionality regarding religion. Some of the directors in this project communicate in their films that religion is a phenomenon that brings people together while others contend that religion is inherently divisive and creates conflict. The director’s own spirituality and their position on religion has an effect on how the racial-ethnic religious activist will be portrayed, so this aspect of my methodology is intended to account for that.

The last component of my methodology is to identify the religious stereotypes that are affirmed and refuted by each of these films. Personally, I have previously encountered each of the religious stereotypes discussed in this project in my life; the sources identified in the literature review refer to most of them and acknowledge them as
extant perceptions. In this section, I don’t intend to prove or disprove any of these notions wrong, but I want to similarly acknowledge how stereotypes—positive or negative—get perpetuated by Hollywood films.
Chapter 1: Gandhi as Christ-Type Archetype
When the name Mahatmas Gandhi is invoked, it often carries an aura of wisdom, authority, and peace. The man is known around the world as one of the architects and first practitioners of the philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience, and this often gives him a saint-like quality when people reflect upon his legacy. In fact, people like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, who are regarded similarly for their respective exploits, enacted the nonviolent tactics employed by Gandhi in their own contexts to achieve civil equality.²⁹ This makes it easy to create parallels between Gandhi and Jesus. Both preached a message that necessitated peaceful means, both men had radical ideas and were martyred for their beliefs, and both had disciples that effectively carried their visions into the modern day. Hollywood noticed this too.

In this chapter, I will explain how Hollywood can use a Christ-type archetype to depict famous racial-ethnic religious activists. First, I’ll define what a Christ-type archetype is; then I’ll describe how Sir Richard Attenborough’s Gandhi creates his Christ-like Gandhi by Christianizing him, omitting his blemishes, and rewriting history; and lastly I’ll analyze how the film’s racial-ethnic minorities are portrayed and how the director communicates their views on religion on screen.

**Defining a Christ-Type Archetype**

To understand how Hollywood is able to create a Christ-type archetype to mold their protagonists into, it necessitates a knowledge of what the archetype is. Adele Reinhartz, a professor of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa, defines a Christ-type archetype as a character with, “mysterious origins, charisma (the

ability to attract followers), conflict with authorities, commitment to justice, suffering, the providing of redemption, and post-death recognition.” 30 31 I find this definition to be comprehensive yet flexible, since a character does not need to embody every characteristic in order to qualify as Christ-like. Using this definition, it is easy to see how the Gandhi that filmmaker Attenborough creates embodies all of these qualities that many attribute to Jesus.

Starting with mysterious origins, Gandhi never delves into the man’s origins, but briefly references them periodically. After the opening assassination of Gandhi and the funeral procession, the film starts Gandhi’s story with him sitting in a train car, gazing outside his window to scan the South African horizon. 32 After refusing to leave his first-class seat, South African lawmen toss him off the train and Gandhi has to find his way to his destination. 33 From the next 30 minutes, the audience learns that Gandhi is a renowned lawyer who practices English law but is now in South Africa. 34 For the next 150 minutes, Gandhi only talks about how he was married to his wife Kasturba Makhanji at age thirteen and that he was originally born into India but hadn’t been there in years. There is no mention of his parents, their parental philosophy or religious beliefs, how he behaved as a child, or formational moments that led him to become a lawyer. The people in the film already interact with Gandhi as if he is a man that is deserving of respect and

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
admiration, but there is not a lot of time invested in explaining why this is. This is reminiscent of the Jesus that we read in the canonical Protestant Bible. We know that he was born around Bethlehem, that his parents fled with him to Egypt to flee the persecution of King Herod, and that his family settled in Nazareth after returning. 35 Other than a story of a twelve-year old Jesus fleeing home to visit a temple, there are no other details regarding Jesus’s rise to fame. 36 This gives Jesus an aura of mystique, since the majority of his childhood developmental years are not described but he appears in the Bible as a fully-formed adult.

Also, Attenborough makes his Gandhi out to be an extremely charismatic person, capable of both strategizing a movement and speaking convincingly to the masses to call them to action. In the film, Gandhi is called down to South Africa to work with Arabic and South Asian elites on how to deconstruct apartheid. He is new to the environment and yet he is able to navigate it with an uncanny familiarity and convince the other leaders to agree with his nonviolent tactics with little to no opposition. Similarly, Gandhi in the film is able to convince a council of elites called the Indian National Congress to adopt his spiritual-based nonviolent tactics and personally stake their own lives to get involved in the on-the-ground activism. In another scene, Gandhi is seen addressing a crowd of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists about General Smut’s recently signed ordinance that included outlawing any marriage that wasn’t Christian. After the crowd responds with an intention to riot over this news, Gandhi instructs them to disobey the

36 Ibid.
laws and endure the consequences but never to inflict violence. In each of these circumstances, Gandhi had to use his personal charm and oratory abilities to persuade heterogeneous groups of people to act in unison towards a common goal. This is a nigh impossible task, but Gandhi is able to perform this feat multiple times in the film.

Gandhi also demonstrates both a conflict with authorities and a commitment to justice throughout the film as he is exercising civil disobedience. These incidents range from his burning of passes in South Africa to in front of police officers, to him being arrested for marching upon British-controlled salt mines. Gandhi can be seen in a film articulating his tactical civil disobedience when saying, that the design of the movement is to force the British to respond, either by capitulating to the demands for an independent India or by utilizing violent actions that will be televised nationally to make the British appear badly.

Despite authoring a nonviolent stratagem based upon disobeying the law, Gandhi is committed to the idea of justice. Throughout the film, Gandhi is arrested on five separate occasions. In these encounters with lawmen, Gandhi never appears to be violent or hateful; he simply seems to be conscious about the bigger picture. This disposition was not just a personal one, he made sure that participants in his movement followed suit. When speaking to Indian and Arab peoples during a Natal Indian Congress address in South Africa, he instructed the audience to both disobey the laws that were unjust and accept the legal consequences for doing so. Gandhi was not advocating for anarchy nor rioting, he wanted specific laws to be struck down and choose a means of

37 Attenborough, Gandhi.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
resistance that would allow him to target laws that he found to be unjust. However, he was still willing to bear the consequences for breaking these laws and remain committed to the idea of justice.

As the film continues, Gandhi starts to display more overt Christ-like tropes, with one of the most notable examples being him assuming the role of “suffering for the sins of man”. During the Indian National Congress’s movement to free India from British control, there was an incident where an initially-peaceful march turned violent and Indian protesters killed nearby guards. In response to this news, Gandhi suspends official movement activity and decides to undergo his famous hunger strike, also known as a fast. When asked by his wife and fellow activists about his reasoning, Gandhi responds by insisting that his fast is intended to bear the sins committed by his followers on himself and convince them to never use violent means again. This bears a resemblance to the narrative surrounding Jesus’s crucifixion, as his logic for being sacrificed for the sake of humanity was to bear the price of their sins.

Furthermore, Gandhi demonstrates the depth of his Christ-type archetype when he provides a path to redemption for one of his followers. Towards the end of the film, the newly-independent India is rife with civil unrest as tensions between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority grew to unprecedented heights. As a response to this chaos, Gandhi undergoes another fast to get both sides to stop enacting violence on one another and open their minds to the possibility of reconciliation. Similarly to his last fast, people

---

40 Reinhartz, “Jesus and Christ-Figures,” 430
41 Attenborough, Gandhi.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
approach Gandhi to take care of him and urge him to eat again. One of these people is a Hindu man, who cries in Gandhi’s lap after confessing that he killed a Muslim child.  

Gandhi then tells him to find a Muslim orphan and raise him as his own son, making sure that he grows up to be a Muslim; if he does this, then he will find redemption. In the Acts 9:1-22, the story of Jesus redeeming Paul is one incident that sounds eerily similar to this scene with Gandhi. In the latter, Jesus is redeems a man who persecuted Christians to become one himself and live the remainder of his life in the service of the church; in the former, Gandhi charges this distraught man with the task to raise a Muslim orphan to atone for killing another. Redemption is a theme throughout the Bible and Gandhi is given a similar role on screen.

Lastly, Gandhi is given the type of post-death recognition that cements him into a Christ-type archetype in the film. The movie opens and ends with Gandhi getting assassinated and having a massive funeral procession in his honor. There is international coverage over the event, as announcers reflect upon Gandhi’s legacy as an undeniably great man. The funeral procession seen on the screen during Gandhi’s funeral procession includes more than 300,000 people acting as extras, which is a greater number than the historical attendance of his funeral. Additionally, the existence of this movie can be seen as an example of post-death recognition, especially when considering

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
48 Attenborough, Gandhi.
49 Ibid.
the number of other Christ-type tropes seen in the film. This type of treatment in the film can be seen as post-death recognition, given that it incentivizes the audience to view Gandhi as a tragic martyr who died for his beliefs for a better India rather than a victim of political assassination.

Creating a Christianized Gandhi

Now that we have an idea of what a Christ-type archetype is and how Gandhi fits into that role, I want to discuss how this archetype is a fictional construction of the director’s making. The Christ-like Gandhi we see in Attenborough’s *Gandhi* is a fictional character due to the Christianization of his character, the omissions of his eccentricities, and the rewriting of history.

One of the most notable examples of *Gandhi’s* Christianization is how there is little to no mention of *satyagraha* in the film. Satyagraha, Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence, is best understood in a framework of five Sanskrit words: *satya* meaning truth, *ahimsa* meaning intention to not harm, *tapasya* meaning self-sufficient, *sarvodaya* meaning welfare for all, and *swadeshi/swaraj* meaning authenticity and relational autonomy.\(^5\) At face value, these words seem to embody common sentiments professed in many religions, and that makes their Christianization seem inconsequential. However, despite Gandhi’s self-identification as a *Vaishnava* or a devotee of the Hindu god Vishnu, one of the foundational ideas to his philosophy was the Jain concept of *anekantavada* or the many-sidedness of all phenomena.\(^6\) In Gandhi’s case, this led him to examine and

---


\(^6\) Ibid, 5
acknowledge the philosophies of other religions, as he believed that they were also
gleaning portions of the absolute truth in their tenets. This is not an idea found in
Christianity or any Abrahamic religion, as these traditions tend to consider any
ideological deviations within a tradition and other religions as manifestations of heresy.

Therefore, rather than contend with Gandhi’s complicated views on spirituality,
religions, and their impacts on his philosophy, Attenborough elects to create a
Christianized Gandhi that fits more within the tropes that a Western audience would
readily identify with. As C.S.H.N Murthy – a professor from Tezpur University – writes,
the film supplies “an unquestionable picture of Gandhi with a lone moral individual
triumphing over the conventional forces of authority in society.” According to him, the
moving image of Gandhi snugly fitted into [the] mold of a cowboy, the space hero, and
all those cinematic incarnations of Jesus and Moses…who defied conventions for their
own purposes.” The Christ-type archetype, that allows the director to pit their
protagonist against the world and come out triumphant, is a popular within Western film.
Therefore, to ensure that his film would be received well by his intended audience, he
defaulted to Christianizing Gandhi so that he would be perceived as undoubtedly good.

Also, Attenborough omitted the peculiar and controversial qualities and practices
of the historical Gandhi to create his character to be as western-friendly as possible. This
includes the absence of Gandhi’s daily enemas and his mudpack rituals, which the

53 C.S.H.N. Murthy, Oinam Bedajit Meitei, and Dapkupar Tariang, “The Tale Of Gandhi Through The
Lens: An Inter-Textual Analytical Study Of Three Major Films- Gandhi, The Making Of The Mahatma,
And Gandhi, My Father,” CINEJ Cinema Journal; Vol 2, No 2 (2013): Spring 2013DO -
54 Ibid, 10
55 Reinhartz, “Jesus and Christ-Figures,” 430
historical Gandhi engaged in for their health benefits. In both cases, these practices reflect the side of Indian culture that may be perceived as strange or backwards to the West, so they are subtly alluded to or omitted entirely from the film. Similarly, Gandhi’s wife Kasturba died of a bronchial infection that may have resulted from his refusal to let her be treated with penicillin by British doctors. The film covers the death of Kasturba and how it impacts Gandhi, but it fails to be critical of Gandhi’s role in the matter. As a result, it can be argued that Gandhi engages in “the standard Hollywood hagiography, in which the hero is rhetorically elevated to sainthood by systematically stripping him of all his psychology and inner life.” The inclusion of these omitted details does not necessarily diminish the legacy of Gandhi as a great man, but it undoubtedly would lead the film to take a much more critical look at the man rather than the icon.

Lastly, Attenborough engages in outright historical rewriting in scenes of the film to glorify the legacy of Gandhi. One of the most memorable scenes early in the film is when Gandhi is beaten by a policeman for burning passes. These passes were given to Indian and Arabic peoples if they were registered to the South African government and they were symbols of their oppression. In the film, Gandhi speaks to a crowd of Indians and Arabic peoples outside about fighting for their rights and begins to attract the attention of nearby policemen as they gather passes by a nearby fire. The police warn Gandhi and the other speakers to not destroy government property and they physically

---

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Attenborough, Gandhi.
60 Ibid.
assault the men once they fail to comply. While this epically displays Gandhi’s willingness to accept suffering to achieve equal rights, the historical Gandhi was never beaten in South Africa for burning passes. By fabricating this scene, Attenborough is able to create more obvious parallels between Gandhi and Christ, which appeals to the Western audience that Attenborough was hoping to reach with the film.

Further along in the film, Attenborough deviates from dominant historical narratives to support Gandhi’s legacy as a charismatic leader. In the scene, Gandhi is speaking to a mixed crowd of Indians and Arabic peoples about the new anti-Indian ordinances passed by General Smut. Amid the cries of outrage, he gives a speech to calm people down and insists that their best course of action is to disobey the laws, endure the consequences, and vow to not retaliate in a violent manner. The Gandhi we see in the film is able to command a room of angry people and convince them to be reasonable and strategic, which leads the audience to believe that Gandhi was a great public speaker who could command attention and obedience from a room. However, Gandhi didn’t give this speech, Haji Habib did. Attributing this scene to Gandhi only serves to bolster his legacy as a captivating public speaker, which is a trait that many often attribute to Jesus and the Christ-type archetype.

**Portrayal of Racial-Ethnic Minorities in *Gandhi***

In *Gandhi*, the racial-ethnic minorities given film time are Indian and I believe most are portrayed fairly. There are no overtly racialized tropes being perpetuated in the

---

61 Ibid.
63 Attenborough, *Gandhi*.
64 Ibid.
65 DiSalvo, “Gandhi: The Spirituality and Politics of Suffering A Symposium on Film and the Law,” 54
film, instead, Attenborough does a good job of recognizing that India has rural communities, impoverished urban communities, and educated, wealthy elites.

One caveat to this observation is that Attenborough did not display Indian intelligence to the extent that he could have. Throughout the film, Gandhi appears to be the sole source from which all peaceful and good ideas come from, which portrays prominent historical figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah as Biblical-like disciples who depend on Gandhi’s knowledge. The Gandhi shown in the film never seems to consult his fellow leaders, and when he does, he dismisses their ideas. However, this treatment is not unique to Indians, Gandhi treats everyone this way in the movie.

Also, one could possibly claim that the inclusion of Hindu-Muslim tensions and violence perpetuates a stigma that insists Indians are a violent people; however, I believe this dynamic was handled responsibly. The tensions were alluded to throughout the film, so it didn’t create the perception that India had just received its independence and then manufactured civil unrest just for the sake of being violent. Also, the historical Gandhi’s views upon the Hindu-Muslim tensions contributed to his assassination, so it was necessary for Attenborough to address the struggles of Indian independence if he wanted Gandhi’s film to be comprehensive.

**Director’s Commentary on Religion**

As an agnostic, Sir Richard Attenborough engaged with religion through a somewhat negative lens, viewing it as a powerful phenomenon that often leads to
conflict.66 Gandhi, the subject of the film, is undoubtedly spiritual and crafts his tactical nonviolence method from religious tenets. By sourcing ideas from multiple religious traditions, not only is he able to communicate his desire for Indian independence through Anglican concepts, he’s also able to garner support from Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists within his Indian following. Gandhi shaped his activism around religion, and Attenborough acknowledges this.

However, Attenborough still considers religion to be inherently divisive, implying that Gandhi’s ability to unify people through religion is the exception—not the norm. Throughout the movie, there are tensions between Hindu and Muslim Indians and these aggressions culminate into Gandhi’s assassination at the end of the film. In particular, this is represented with the relationship between Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Gandhi tries numerous times to build an India that is inclusive of both Hindus and Muslims, but Jinnah is convinced that will never work and seeks to build a Muslim-majority country (eventually known as Pakistan).67 The film presents the separatist Jinnah in a negative light initially, but as violence grows between both groups in post-independence India, his earlier words appear prophetic.

**Director Affirmation/Refutation of Religious Tropes**

Within the film, Attenborough affirms the stereotypes that Christian-motivated resistance is nonviolent, and that Islam begets violence. There are multiple times where Gandhi is seen referencing Christianity in the movie with a frequency that suggests that

---


67 Attenborough, *Gandhi*. 
Jesus was his biggest role model. Whether it was Gandhi lecturing Reverend Charles Andrews about what Jesus “turn the other cheek” really means or getting a group of South African Indians to sing “God Save Our King” after discussing how they need to be committed to nonviolence, Attenborough does seem to lean on the notion that Christian resistance is nonviolent resistance.68

_Gandhi_ also implies that Islam is a conduit of division and violence through negative evidence. Admittedly, there is nothing explicitly stating or suggesting that Islam is inherently violent, but the lack of on-screen Muslim-led reconciliation efforts can serve to support this stereotype. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the head of the Muslim League, is the biggest spokesperson for the Indian Muslim community in the film. He has no interest in supporting Gandhi’s efforts to relieve tensions between the groups; instead, wishing to use the tensions as an argument for why a Muslim-majority South Asian country (Pakistan) is necessary. Jinnah is not shown to be a violent man, nor does he argue for violent means to achieve his goals, but his unwillingness to take part is efforts to promote Hindu-Muslim peace serve as negative evidence for the “Islam is violent” stereotype.

Conversely, _Gandhi_ actually serves to challenge the notion that Christianity is a tool used to maintain the status quo. There are contexts where a society’s majority religion can serve as a bastion of social conservatism and there are times where Christianity has regarded as such in an American context.69 However, as previously discussed, the film crafts Gandhi into a Christ-type archetype and references Christianity multiple times in relation to his messages on nonviolent resistance. Therefore,

---

68 Ibid.
69 Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare*, 17
Attenborough provides an alternative perspective on how Christianity (albeit tangentially) can be used as a means for social progression.

In conclusion, *Gandhi* serves as an example of how Hollywood can depict racial-ethnic religious activists as Christ-type archetypes. This type of portrayal makes the film’s subject align with Western morals as much as possible in an attempt bolster their legacy. In *Gandhi*’s case, Christian elements were often added and highlighted in the film, while the Hindu beliefs and practices of the historical Gandhi were downplayed. The usage of this archetype often comes at the expense of historical accuracy, since most notable historical figures have legacy-threatening flaws and the exclusion of these flaws threatens the archetype’s integrity.
Chapter 2: Secularizing Cesar Chavez
Cesar Chavez accomplished great things as an activist and his name is nationally recognized as being one of the preeminent activists of the 1950’s-60’s Civil Rights Era. Despite the recognition given to the name, many don’t know about his cause, the group of people he was fighting for, or the extent of his impact. For example, I was educated in the California public education system my entire life and knew nothing about Cesar Chavez before coming to CMC. My schools did a thorough job of explaining the events of the Civil Rights Movement that occurred in the American South, but Cesar Chavez’s campaign for migrant farm worker rights in California was never mentioned in any classroom curriculum.

Director Diego Luna acknowledged the public lack of knowledge about the man and hoped Cesar Chavez would “let everyone know that Cesar existed, [and] tell the story to all of those who think Cesar Chavez is a street or the name of a park but they don't know why.”\textsuperscript{70} When making this film, Luna wanted a new generation to be introduced to Cesar Chavez the way he saw him, as an accomplished Latino hero that triumphed over the odds to win farm workers their rights.\textsuperscript{71} Luna’s fixation on Chavez’s accomplishments, without taking his motivations and influences into account, is what lead to the leader’s on-screen saint secularization. In this chapter, I will discuss how Cesar Chavez engages in the secularization of the man Cesar Chavez and explain how this ultimately undermines the purpose of the film.

Identifying Secularization and its Problematic Nature

Out of the four ways in which Hollywood chooses to depict racial-ethnic religious activists, secularization may be the worst. At its core, the idea to omit the influence of spirituality from these leaders’ lives is to inherently create a disconnect between the subject’s desires and their willingness to only use moral means to achieve them. Secondly, secularization makes the subject assume all the qualities that their religion accounts for, which causes them to appear as a “secular saint”. For example, the film’s Chavez confronts both his son and members of the UFW about their use of violence, arguing that nobody should ever resort to violence. Why is this so? Godfrey Chesire of Rogerebert.com, a highly-regarded film critique website, asks similar questions about how Chavez came across his pacifist convictions and wonders if Gandhi, King, or his Catholic upbringing had anything to do with it. Luna could have addressed any of these or all of them, but he didn’t. Therefore, on-screen Chavez was left with an unexplained religious-based tenet to stake his life upon, which unnecessarily causes him to assume more saint-like qualities than is warranted.

Similarly to his unexplained commitment to nonviolence, Chavez engages in an unexplained hunger fast that causes him to appear inexplicably saint-like and confuse his audience. After incidents where farm worker demonstrations turned violent, Chavez announces his fast and insists that he won’t eat until the UFW vow to not use violence. In the following scenes, there are subtle moments where Chavez is clutching rosary beads.

---

73 Diego Luna, Cesar Chavez (Prime Video, 2014), https://www.amazon.com/Cesar-Chavez-Michael-Pe%C3%B1a/dp/B00M0HYZMU/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=cesar+chavez&qid=1616967922&s=instant-video&sr=1-1&keywords=cesar+chavez%2Cinstant-video%2C212&sprefix=cesar+chavez%2Cinstant-video%2C212&sr=1-1.
at night and he eventually breaks his fast by eating at Mass, but he never describes where he got the tactic from or why he believed it would be effective. Instead, he appears to be a “secular saint” for being willing to suffer for the sins of his followers. While this point bears an eerie resemblance to Gandhi’s Christ-type archetype, the on-screen Gandhi was shown to have uniquely engaged with the philosophies of Christianity and reference the example of Jesus to craft his own nonviolent activism. *Cesar Chavez* fulfills none of these prerequisites, leaving Chavez’s moral fortitude as the only logical answer to why he’s behaving this way.

From a secular point of view, one could at least argue that a commitment to nonviolence is a viable tactic for activism, but Chavez’s decision to initiate a hunger fast to convince followers to abstain from violence is something that secular logic can’t easily explain. This is an example of the type of disconnect that secularizing a religious leader brings. As a result, the audience is led to assume that the on-screen Chavez must be a greater and more righteous person than everyone else since he’s the only person in the UFW willing to take an extreme, life-threatening action for the mistakes of others. This conclusion doesn’t provide any explanation for how Chavez arrived at his decision to initiate a hunger fast, which creates confusion among the audience.

This same type of logic can be applied to Chavez’s pilgrimage to Delano to Sacramento, which does not make much sense without an explanation of Chavez’s own spirituality or demonstrating a connection between him and another religious activist like Rev. Dr. King Jr. The act of marching itself doesn’t mean much, with the primary benefits being the media attention it gathers and the presentation of a unified body

\[74\] Ibid.
advocating for equal rights. The supporters of the UFW were not being paid to participate and it wasn’t as if they were marching to Sacramento to attend the signing of a migrant farm worker bill in person. So, what would drive these people to walk 340 miles from Delano to Sacramento? Historically, the UFW used religious symbolism to imbue the pilgrimage with spiritual significance; yet, the on-screen UFW is sparsely shown engaging with the religious nature of their constituents and Chavez never addresses spirituality in any of his speeches. Thus, the famous UFW pilgrimage—devoid of any religious context—is credited entirely to Chavez’s ability to convince people to blindly follow his directions, regardless of the lack of incentives for them to participate.

**Why Secularization Undermines the Intentions of Biops**

Reading between the lines, I can understand why filmmakers may not want to engage with the spirituality of their subject. Some may believe that disregarding religion allows for their subject to be placed solely at the forefront of the film and others may consider religion to be a divisive phenomenon that can alienate portions of the film’s intended audience. Both of these may be true. Still, the purpose of many biopic films is to educate the audience on the legacy of the person and what elements contributed to their greatness. Of the four films examined in this thesis, all are focused on the lives of a person who historically used religion as a framework to facilitate their activism. By

---

75 Ibid.
choosing to secularize the subject of the film, filmmakers are unknowingly working against the intentions of their own film.

In Cesar Chavez’s case, Luna’s understatement of Chavez’s spirituality undermines his own purpose for making the film. Despite its classification as a biopic, it was meant to acknowledge the legacy of Cesar Chavez and aspire young people to take up activism, rather than biographically depict everything about Chavez or the UFW.78 Critics of the film have pointed out how the film doesn’t acknowledge Chavez’s shortcomings, and proponents of the film have responded by insisting a needless inclusion of Chavez’s flaws would have undermined the film’s intentions.79 In an interview with the Chicago Tribune about Cesar Chavez, Diego Luna says “film is not a history lesson….film is in fact about engaging emotionally” as an argument for why history can be distorted or retold selectively for the purpose of the film.80 If this is so, Chavez’s spirituality should have been a topic that was delved into more on-screen. Chavez was undoubtedly a gifted communicator, and he was also a member of the Latinx community that he was working to uplift; however, that alone did not create the imperative for people to join the movement.81 Young people looking to this film as a model of how to conduct community-based activism would not be getting all the information necessary to emulate Chavez’s style, and this makes the omission of religion especially problematic.

---

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 De Los Santos, “Diego Luna: ‘Cesar Chavez’ Is No History Lesson.”
At times, Luna’s *Cesar Chavez* sends messaging to its audience that contradicts what the historical Chavez would’ve wanted. This notion is supported by Michael Ganz, a labor organizer within the UFW for sixteen years, who describes the on-screen Chavez as “caricatured” and “departing from historical events to the point that ‘[the] lessons the film teaches contradict the real lessons of Chavez’s work.’” This most often takes form in the simplification of historical events to a duality of good vs evil, which is a symptom of the melodramatic style of the film. The historical Chavez was a relationship builder and a good team builder while Luna creates his Chavez to be a lone wolf who fights against the forces of oppression. This is another area where the film undermines its own purpose. The historical Cesar Chavez understood the value of cooperation and consulting with his peers to find the optimal response to their circumstances; the on-screen Chavez is instead portrayed as a “fully-formed wise man”. By portraying Chavez in this manner, not only is Luna doing a disservice to the people within the UFW who toiled to improve the lives of others, but he’s also communicating an unrealistic vision of Chavez’s movement to aspiring activists.

**How Religion Influenced Chavez’s Activism**

The film’s message would benefit from an accurate portrayal of Chavez, so that aspiring activists could see how Chavez truly understood the community he was helping and strategically leveraged his personal connections to Catholicism and Latinx heritage to

---

83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Chesire, “Cesar Chavez Movie Review & Film Summary.”
generate support for the movement. He is one of the most famous Latinos in American
history, regarded as an “authentic hero” by President Bill Clinton and considered as a
Latino Gandhi or King by former California senator Art Torres. Still, for how much he
is lauded for his work done for Latinx civil rights, his role as a religious leader is not
understood.

The historical Chavez wove religious and spiritual symbols prevalent in his
adolescent and young adult years into his political messaging. When he was a child, his
grandmother would tell stories about the heroes of the Mexican Revolution and his
mother would feed and shelter homeless people. These women in Chavez’s early life
instilled in him the ability to tell inspiring stories and the willingness to share resources
with those less fortunate than himself; as a result, the UFW would eventually also be
sharing stories to motivate people and dispersing necessary supplies among people who
needed them most. After joining the Navy, Chavez moved to San Jose and met Father
Donald McDonnell, a Roman Catholic priest who introduced him to a variety of different
Catholic readings. His experiences working with the clergy allowed him to be
knowledgeable enough about the Catholic faith to urge Pope Paul VI to support the UFW
in 1974.

---

86 Leon, “Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” 55
87 Ibid, 55
88 Ibid, 57
89 Ibid, 54
90 Adam Varoqua, “History Rediscovered: The Holy Alliance of the Catholic Church, Seton Hall
University, and Iconic Labor Rights Activist Cesar Chavez,” Seton Hall University – College of Arts and
displays-seton-hall-mark-on-labor.cfm.
Additionally, Chaves developed a relationship between political spiritually and the religiosity of nonviolence after encountering the philosophies of Gandhi. During his time with Father McDonnell, Chavez read a biography on Gandhi and how his religiously-motivated activism led to the liberation of an entire country from under British rule. This opened his eyes to the power of nonviolent activism and served as his initial inspiration to adopt it. Chavez would eventually preach “a similar gospel of self-sacrifice, nonviolence, and social justice; work ecumenically with both Catholic and Protestant clerics; ...manipulate religions to enlist the ultimate loyalties of the multitudes—including the rich and powerful in [the US] and in Latin America.” Cesar Chavez’s insistence on nonviolence was surely influenced by Gandhi, but that’s not the only aspect of his activism that he borrowed.

Cesar Chavez’s hunger fasts were another manifestation of his personal Catholic spirituality taking political form. He took communion every day when he was fasting, which involved consuming a small portion of bread and wine. This didn’t provide a great deal of sustenance for Chavez, but it served to keep God at the forefront of his mind while he was undergoing his suffering. During his famous 28-day fast, Chavez had a statement read aloud that insisted that “sacrifice, justice, and social change were central to the Christianity of the farmworkers.” With this statement, he was able to connect his personal suffering to the justice and social change the UFW was fighting for, suggesting that other Christian people in the movement should be willing to do the same. Chavez

91 Leon, “Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” 54
92 Ibid, 54
93 Ibid, 54
94 Ibid, 58
95 Ibid, 58
also encouraged Mexican-Americans to use the power of the whole church to achieve their ends. 96 Similarly to his personal fasts, he urged activists to utilize their spiritual connections to churches as an argument for why the institution needs to support their political ends. Chavez clearly sees his religion as being the driving force behind his activism and he was adept at finding opportunities to use his spirituality as a means to strengthen his political message.

Lastly, the UFW pilgrimage was a culmination of a pan-religion and The UFW signed a document on the start of the pilgrimage to Sacramento called “The Plan of Delano”, a document that declared the social movement’s goals and intentions to stay peaceful. 97 This document also provides proof of the religious nature of the pilgrimage and the UFW’s mission, with the third point reading “We seek, and have, the support of the Church in what we do. At the head of the Pilgrimage we carry La Virgen de la Guadalupe [the Virgin of Guadalupe] because she is ours, Patroness of the Mexican people.” 98 The UFW stated its cause was backed by the church and gives credence to La Virgen de la Guadalupe, who is a spiritual figure that meant a lot to the Mexican people in the farm working community that was not recognized by traditional Catholic bible readings. Regardless, its recorded that the procession was led by a priest in full collar and a flag of La Virgen de Guadalupe.99 This public cooperation between institutionalized Catholicism and syncretic Catholic spirituality was the first example of the pilgrimage’s pan-religion rhetoric that created powerful political messaging centered around unity.

96 Ibid, 59
98 Ibid.
99 Leon, “Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” 60
This pan-religious messaging also included appeals to non-Catholic religions and was focused on the theme of Judeo-Christian solidarity. Along with carrying La Virgen de Guadalupe, the pilgrims also carried both the Catholic and Protestant crosses and the Star of David; since the UFW was asking for support and prayers from all religions. They did this to increase the political impact of their movement and limit the degree of indifference the American public would feel towards them. Chavez and the UFW leadership recognized the potential for their activism to be compartmentalized as a “Latinx matter” or a “Catholic struggle” and then ignored by the majority of the American population. By using a pan-religious appeal, it put a moral imperative on Christians and Jewish people to support their cause. The UFW wanted their messaging to be that “all men were brothers, sons of the same God” as an appeal to people of good conscience.

Portrayal of Racial-Ethnic Minorities in Cesar Chavez

The primary goal Luna’s Cesar Chavez was to highlight the legacy of the man, however this happened at the expense of racial-ethnic minority intelligence. This is most apparent in scenes showing the interactions between Chavez and other members of the UFW. Whether it was talking to pre-UFW leadership about joining the strike of the Filipino workers or deciding to strategically pivot from demonstrating to boycotting Victorre fruit products, on-screen Chavez seemed to be the only Latinx person capable of utilizing strategy in the film. This dynamic would’ve been different if Chavez were in an executive role where he fielded opinions from his team and decided which one was

---

100 Ibid, 60
101 Ibid, 61
102 Luna, Cesar Chavez.
best; instead, Chavez often proposed his plan and argued down any differing opinions from his UFW companions. This was a missed opportunity for Diego Luna to showcase Latinx intelligence and utilize this film to counteract harmful stereotypes and create new positive portrayals.

In addition to a lack of positive Latinx representation, I believe there are instances where negative tropes of Latinx are portrayed, suggesting they are violent. In various moments in the film, members of Chavez’s movement struggled to uphold the commitment to nonviolence. In a particular scene where Bogdanovich’s son—the son of the main antagonist of the film—hits a Mexican demonstrator with a car and he is immediately assailed upon by the other demonstrators. Chavez intervenes immediately and yells at a man, telling him he’s out of the movement. 103 While the UFW’s struggle to remain nonviolent was the reason why Chavez underwent his hunger fasts, but it would’ve been better if he were not the only person trying to enforce the movement’s commitment to nonviolence.

On a more positive note, Luna shows scenes of family and community that insists that Mexican-American culture stresses the importance of strong familial bonds. As Chavez arrived in Delano to start his work, he decided that setting up a credit union and organizing legal representation for the farm workers would be a great way to bolster the ranks of the movement. 104 Throughout the film, Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and other UFW leaders would often meet in family-style setting to discuss the movement’s next strategies; there was no corporate boardroom or a strict policy on being formal during

---

103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
these gatherings and kids could often be seen playing in the background while they had these conversations over a beer.  

105 As an audience member, one could easily see what was motivating the UFW leaders to pursue activism, they wanted a better future for their children. Luna does reinforce the trope of Latinx communities being very family-oriented, but I would argue that this is a positive one and it is portrayed as such in Cesar Chavez.

**Director’s Commentary on Religion**

As a Roman Catholic, Diego Luna engaged religion with an ambivalent attitude during the film, acknowledging its potential to further social progression as well as impede it. 106 In Cesar Chavez, this contradictory dynamic is displayed between the UFW and the growers they are trying to secure their rights from. Luna names the Our Lady of Guadalupe church in Delano as being one of the meeting places during the beginning of Chavez’s movement and shows Mass being held at UFW rallies and during the pilgrimage. 107 While the majority of these scenes are brief and serve as a transition to a more impactful scene, they do indicate that Luna has an awareness of how influential Catholicism is among the migrant farm workers.

On the other hand, Luna makes allusions to growers’ Protestantism in a manner that acknowledges the potential for religion to impede social progression. The most prominent example of this occurs late in the film, when the growers meet to discuss how the UFW is affecting their businesses and if they should negotiate with them. The men decide to meet on a Sunday, their attire is very reminiscent of church-going attire, and

---

105 Ibid.
107 Luna, Cesar Chavez.
there are crosses in the dining room. In this scene, the growers—including the Bogdanovich family—refer to the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers as an entity they need to band together to stop from getting too much power. They didn’t mention any financial-related reasons for being unwilling to comply with their demands, rather they thought of the farm workers as beneath them and were reluctant to negotiate with them on that principle alone. When designing these interactions, Luna clearly recognized that the growers could find solidarity through religion in a similar manner that the UFW did.

109

**Director Affirmation/Refutation of Religious Tropes**

One main religious stereotype that was affirmed in *Cesar Chavez* was the notion that minorities depended on their religion more, thus it was integral to their activism. The lifestyle of a farm worker is not glamorous. Luna does a good job of displaying the long hours of back breaking work in sweltering heat and poor work conditions that amount to compensation barely capable of subsisting the farm worker’s family. When one takes this into account, it makes it easier to understand how religion and the promises of a hopeful future it provides might mean more to the farm workers than the growers. Catholicism was central to the United Farm Workers in the historical Chavez movement and it is still present in a religiously-subdued *Cesar Chavez*.

Conversely, *Cesar Chavez* challenges the notions that religion makes people passive. While Chavez’s personal spirituality is downplayed in the film, Catholicism’s impact on the actions of the UFW was still evident. When demonstrating at the farms,

\[^{108}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{109}\text{Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare, 211}\]
\[^{110}\text{Luna, Cesar Chavez.}\]
activists would often bring items bearing the likeness of *La Virgen de la Guadalupe*; at UFW rallies, Mass would be held.\(^{111}\) These religious symbols and activities were often found in the backdrop of the film’s activism scenes, disproving the notion that religion placates people into accepting their circumstances.

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
Chapter 3: Selma – Humanizing King
Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior is the full name of one the most celebrated men in American history. In schools everywhere in the United States, he is regarded as the greatest activist of the 1950-60’s Civil Rights Movement for championing nonviolent resistance methods as a means to achieve equality. To many, he had become a secular saint – effectively transcending above his humanity. Since the age of five, I’ve been accustomed to hearing about the exploits of King and how he ultimately gave his life for the betterment of black people everywhere in the States.

This set the stage for Ava DuVernay’s Selma, which told a story of King on the silver screen that sought to remove the metaphorical “halo” above his head. Selma differs from other films studied in this thesis project since it doesn’t try to summarize King’s life in its entirety; rather it focuses on King’s activism in Selma, AL and the events surrounding it. Similar to Malcolm X, the film was released in 2014 amid police killings of black people making frequent headlines, mass demonstrations and riots, and the nation’s first surge of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. However, unlike Malcolm X, DuVernay thought that the nation needed to hear the story of the historical King rather than the mythical one, not necessarily to hear what the best practices are to combat racism but to learn what has already been done and improve upon it. When asked about her hopes for what the audience’s takeaways will be after watching Selma, she responded, “‘O.K we have done that—NOW what do we do?’ I don’t want ‘Selma’ to advocate necessarily being ‘on the nose’ with the tactics that were done then. I think that there’s a lot to learn from that time that’s not being executed. The question is how do you
take what that was and move it to the next step?" [112] These motivations drove DuVernay to humanize King.

In this chapter, I will explain how Hollywood can humanize a racial-ethnic religious activist to retell their story under a different lens. This method of portrayal inherently involves a stripping of the subject’s spirituality to evaluate them critically. In Selma, DuVernay humanizes King by presenting an historically-alternative view of the King/President Johnson partnership, fixating on King’s shortcomings, and downplaying his spirituality as a means to make his legacy seem more attainable to aspiring activists. As she sees it, the reverential aura of King prevents his tactics and methods from being critically analyzed, which ultimately hurts people who want to improve upon those methods in contemporary activism contexts.

Redefining the King/Johnson Dynamic

In Selma, DuVernay started her humanization of King by retelling the partnership dynamic between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. The dominant narrative of the 1950-60s Civil Rights Movement paints both men as good characters that were responsible for leading positive changes during this time. [113] DuVernay’s Selma doesn’t necessarily disagree with this statement; the film instead portrays the King-Johnson dynamic as being contentious, with King pushing Johnson to take more aggressive pro-civil rights action and Johnson being reluctant to prioritize

---


113 Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare, 213
these concerns over other matters on his presidential agenda.\footnote{Ava DuVernay, Selma (Prime Video, 2014), https://www.amazon.com/Selma-David-Oyelowo/dp/B00S0X4HK8/ref=sr_1_1?crid=V2MB0C5B88NIO&dchild=1&keywords=selma&qid=1616967937&s=instant-video&sprefix=selma%2Cinstant-video%2C337&sr=1-1.} Overall, this relationship between the president and civil rights leader serves as one of the main and most impactful conflicts in the film.

In Selma’s iteration of the King/Johnson dynamic, the President is painted to be an amoral character that only responds to events in the manner that best serves his political ends. As King and the SCLC’s activity increased in Alabama, Johnson would often be seen reacting in an irritable manner to the headlines that King’s movement was making.\footnote{Ibid.} This manifests in Johnson sending men to dissuade King from marching from Selma to Montgomery and even enlisting the services of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to destroy King and his family’s resolve by harassing them over the phone.\footnote{Ibid.} In terms of his role in the film’s narrative, Johnson’s activities can mostly be described as antagonistic. These tactics were designed to attack King’s motivation to engage in activism and the FBI’s attempts to tamper with King’s marriage and family’s psyche can only be described as despicable. From an audience perspective, one finds it easy to harbor resentment for the on-screen President Johnson as they realize that he signed off on these deplorable methods to get King to stop his movement. However, towards the end of the film, Johnson sends a man to talk to King about his activism and how he’s putting himself in harm’s way by continuing to publicly advocate for civil rights.\footnote{Ibid.} Despite all that has happened prior to this point in the film, this comes across as the President truly
having King’s best interest in mind. After King’s activism puts Johnson in a position to publicly respond to the events in Alabama, the President privately meets with Governor Wallace to tell him to give the SCLC what they want. President Johnson’s conversation goes as following:

Well, why don’t you and I go out there, and let’s announce that you’ve decided to let the blacks vote undeterred and this whole mess will go away. And I don’t have to draft bills and force the issue and all that. Let’s do that, George. Why don’t you just let the n-----s vote? You agree they got the right to vote, don’t you?\(^{118}\)

Johnson is trying to convince Wallace not for the sake of the American people that he’s systematically oppressed, but to alleviate the White House from the public pressure it is receiving by not acting. When Wallace continues to not listen to the President’s demands, Johnson then tells him, “You and I shouldn’t be even thinking about 1965. We should be thinking about 1985…. You want them remembering you sayin’ ‘Wait,’ and ‘I can’t,’ and ‘It’s hard?’ I’ll be damned if history puts me in the same place with the likes of you.”\(^{119}\)

In both quotes, the President is not an immoral man nor is he a moral one, he’s reacting to his political environment in the manner that will best serve him. That’s what Ava DuVernay strives to show her audience.

DuVernay’s portrayal of President Johnson and his treatment of King in *Selma* received lots of criticism, specifically that her representation of the President was historically inaccurate. One writer from the Associated Press claimed that White House tapes suggest that historical Johnson was more agreeable with King than the one shown


\(^{119}\) Ibid.
Another writer from the Washington Post contends that the historical Johnson was not reluctant but enthusiastic to engage in voting rights reform and even urged King to make demonstrations. A third writer from PoliticoMagazine accused DuVernay of being irresponsible by presenting a historically-inaccurate President Johnson that stood in the way of the hallowed Civil Rights Movement. These questions about the historical accuracy of portrayals is a common one in biopics and it’s indicative of the nature of the genre. However, most of these criticisms center around DuVernay’s humanization of President Johnson, which involves the process of removing the metaphorical “halo” above the subject's head so the film is able to examine them critically. She uses the same process to portray King, however she was more nuanced with his representation. This thesis will not attempt to declare whether DuVernay or the film critics are right about Johnson, however it is worth noting that Selma’s controversial portrayal of Johnson received praise as well.

The critics that lauded praise upon DuVernay for her portrayal of President Johnson in Selma were often in academia and appreciated both her willingness to regard him as a complex historical subject. One scholar considered Johnson’s role in the film to be masterfully executed, given that he was—historically—a complicated man and would have likely demonstrated similar behavior towards King. This analysis is praising the humanistic lens that DuVernay is using to engage with Johnson’s legacy and

---

122 Ibid, 2
acknowledging that introducing complexity into the subject is necessary in order to do so. A similar view regarded DuVernay’s depiction of Johnson as different from the dominant narrative but not necessarily incorrect.\(^\text{124}\) If one were to look at his political career, his support for civil rights was primarily found during his presidency, not his Texas office holding.\(^\text{125}\) Therefore, it shouldn’t be unreasonable to assume that Johnson may have had reservations about publicly supporting King’s endeavors in the South. DuVernay saw the historical Johnson as a man who learned to sacrifice his own personal and professional interests for the betterment of the American people and she chose to display how this process may have looked. Still, it is worth asking what motivated DuVernay’s decision to humanize President Johnson in *Selma*, who was not the primary subject of the film.

DuVernay also redefined the relationship between King and President Johnson to increase the drama of the film and send a message to aspiring activists. In order to meet their financial goals, biopics often require drama to keep their audiences engaged throughout the otherwise historical nature of the films.\(^\text{126}\) One of *Selma*’s main sources of drama is the contentious relationship between King and Johnson, both of whom are regarded as being instrumental to the successes of the 1950-60’s Civil Rights Movement. DuVernay’s recharacterization of the King-Johnson dynamic is unexpected and it holds the audience’s attention throughout the film. Another writer from the Washington Post claimed that the most riveting parts of the movie are the dialogues between King and

\(^{124}\) Norris, “Dr. King and the Image of God: A Theology of Voting Rights in Ava DuVernay’s Selma,” 6
\(^{125}\) Ibid, 6
President Johnson. They appreciated seeing King engage in political jockeying with the President, since this made their interactions more interesting. This was intentional. DuVernay wrote this film with contemporary activists in mind; she wanted them to understand that inciting change was a process that was hard and required a strong resolve. Through redefining King/Johnson’s dynamic, DuVernay is telling activists that people in power are not going to give you anything unless you demand it from them.

**Highlighting King’s Shortcomings and Downplaying King’s Spirituality**

Similarly to her treatment of President Johnson, DuVernay humanizes King by highlighting his shortcomings and downplaying his spirituality. This process of humanization allows her to approach King as a subject eligible for criticism, rather than an untouchable civil rights icon.

For starters, *Selma* spends a lot of time focusing on aspects of King’s life that were not glamorous, particularly his relationship with his wife. DuVernay highlights Coretta Scott King and the dynamics between her husband amid harassment from citizens, the government and the cheating scandal. From the beginning of the film, Mr. and Mrs. King have a relationship that appears to be strained from events that happened off-screen, presumably before the film’s setting in 1950’s Selma. One early manifestation of this tension can be seen after Mrs. King decides to meet with Malcolm

---

128 Ibid.
129 DuVernay and Oyelowo, A Conversation with Director Ava DuVernay and Actor David Oyelowo.
131 DuVernay, *Selma.*
X. She visited with Malcolm X in lieu of her husband since Mr. King was in jail for belonging to a demonstration that turned violent.\textsuperscript{132} During their discussion, Malcolm X states that he is not an enemy of their cause anymore and that he wishes to represent the militant alternative that will scare people into being more receptive to King’s message.\textsuperscript{133} After Mrs. King relays Malcolm’s message to Martin in prison, he angrily states that he can’t believe she would be willing to cooperate with a person who publicly denounces them and accuses Coretta of being enamored with another man.\textsuperscript{134} The following moments are tense and awkwardly quiet, and King soon apologizes to his wife for his words.\textsuperscript{135}

This scene represents the lengths to which DuVernay goes to hone in on the shortcomings of King to humanize him. This Malcolm X scene had no impact on the plot of the movie, as he is assassinated a few scenes later and he is never mentioned again. The entire Malcolm X scene could have been cut from the film and nothing else in the plot would have appeared out-of-place or unexplained. Then why include it? Simply put, to highlight King’s character flaws. \textit{Selma} is a film that has been acknowledged by critics for being “less interested in affirming [King’s] greatness than in understanding its sources and limitations and in restoring his human dimensions.”\textsuperscript{136} This aforementioned scene serves as evidence for this philosophy, since it serves no other narrative purpose.

When the historical Coretta Scott King was asked about her interactions with Malcolm X

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Coretta Scott King, Interview with Coretta Scott King, interview by Jackie Shearer, November 21, 1988, Washington University Digital Gateway Texts, \url{http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/kin5427.0224.089coretascottking.html}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
in an interview about her, no mention was made of King being jealous. Yet, DuVernay used Mrs. King’s meeting with Malcolm as an opportunity to portray him as a jealous and accusatory husband.

However, some critics recognize what DuVernay is doing and believe that her steps to humanize King are warranted. Ann Hornaday of the Washington Post commends the director for presenting King as a person of flaws and human contradictions, effectively rescuing him from his role as a “worshipped – and sentimentalized–secular saint.” This motivation to present a flawed King on film stems from a desire to engage with him as a person in a manner not typically permissible by the public. By creating a biopic about one of his great accomplishments and honing in on his flaws, DuVernay was able to humanize King in a manner perceived as permissible by the public.

Along with focusing on King’s relationship with his wife, Selma spends time fleshing out the civil rights icon’s doubts as a means to inspire the audience to also pursue activism. Whether it was him becoming discouraged in jail by the number of barriers that black Americans face to achieve equality or becoming unconvinced if President Johnson would ever act, the film takes several moments to highlight King as a man who has doubts and is susceptible to faltering resolve. This is what makes Selma unique compared to other King films, it focuses on his doubts and the ways through which he persevered through them to inspire change. As one critic puts it, the audience starts “to realize how much of history is made up on the fly, even by its great men – how close to ordinary a great man can be and thus how close to greatness ordinary people

---

137 Ibid.
138 Hornaday, “‘Selma’ Movie Review: Humanizing Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.”
always are.”\textsuperscript{139} DuVernay wants her audience to acknowledge that King isn’t special, nor was he a saint, but he was a fallible man that still accomplished great things. If he was able to be the leader of a movement for national change, then anybody can.

From a certain perspective, DuVernay’s humanization of King allows for him to be appreciated more by the audience for his accomplishments. In Selma, King is no longer bound to his role as a civil rights icon without blemishes, he instead is given shortcomings that make him more relatable to the audience. As a result, he is credited for his ability to overcome both his own flaws and the racist voting practices of Selma, Alabama. As one critic says it, King is not a savior in the movie, rather he is “a wise man exercising the reaches of his power to the best of his ability.”\textsuperscript{140} DuVernay intentionally removes the Christ-type archetype that King is typically associated with by associating his success with the strategies that he used rather than the purity of his moral fiber. Another critic compares \textit{Selma} to Steven Spielberg’s \textit{Lincoln}, stating that both films “humanize history by showing us the horse-trading, the strategizing, the mistakes and breakthroughs, the many personalities involved, and the moments of soaring oratory – all of them needed to force the door of promised equality open a crack further.”\textsuperscript{141} DuVernay attributes King’s accomplishments to his strategies instead of his charisma, and she structures the film in a manner that displays the civil right leader’s decisions for all to see.

\textsuperscript{139} Ty Burr, “In ‘Selma,’ Man and Icon Are One,” Boston Globe, January 8, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2015/01/08/selma-man-and-icon-are-one/Y0Lwpo0igObbHSSFgIbYGN/story.html.

\textsuperscript{140} Coyle, “Review: ‘Selma’ a History Lesson That Throbs with Today.”

\textsuperscript{141} Burr, “In ‘Selma,’ Man and Icon Are One.”
In addition to the highlighting of King’s shortcomings, DuVernay downplays his spirituality so to make his philosophies as open to critical analysis as possible. One notable example of this humanization of King as a historical subject can be seen in David Oyelowo’s acting performance. One critic noted that Oyelowo channeled the essence of King’s character rather than attempting to replicate him on screen.\textsuperscript{142} The historical King was a preacher, and he would often utilize sermonic rhetoric and figures-of-speech to communicate in conversation. Oyelowo doesn’t do this, instead electing to reserve his preacher overtones for speeches that occurred during the film.\textsuperscript{143} These moments happened sparingly throughout the film, and Oyelowo’s King rarely referenced religion when outside of the public eye. Also, King would reference God primarily in moments of tragedy, like when the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing occurred and when Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed by policemen.\textsuperscript{144} Selma’s portrayal of King’s religion paints him as a man whose “faith in God kept him from utter despair”.\textsuperscript{145} He is not viewed as a leader who derived his activism philosophies from his Christian faith, he is only shown pleading with God when bad events happen in his life. There is little to no question that the historical King would have prayed and referenced God publicly in moments where bad events happened during the movement, but that’s not the only role that his spirituality served in his activism. By failing to recognize the ideological connection between King’s Christianity and his activism, DuVernay is harming one of the main goals she outlined for Selma.

\textsuperscript{142} Henderson, “Selma Movie Review & Film Summary (2014).”
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} DuVernay, Selma.
\textsuperscript{145} Henderson, “Selma Movie Review & Film Summary (2014).”
By failing to acknowledge how King’s activism strategies were sourced from his religious beliefs, she is unable to present a comprehensive view of his activism for her audience to engage with. In his letter titled “Stride Toward Freedom”, the historical King writes “the Negro has now been driven to re-evaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. His religion reveals to him that God loves all His children and that the important thing about man is not . . . the color of his skin but his eternal worth to God.”

In this document, King explains how the inequality of black people in the United States is not just illegal but against the will of God. By creating a religious imperative to get involved in activism, King is not only able to motivate himself through the hardships of the Civil Rights Movement, but he is also able to convince other American citizens to join the movement since God effectively commands them to do so. This letter demonstrates the depth of King’s understanding of the country that he lives in and his mastery of using Christian rhetoric to attract supporters and bolster the resiliency of his followers.

Furthermore, King’s fixation on getting black citizens the right to vote was influenced by Christian theology. Similar to how John Locke considered life, liberty, and property to be the fundamental protections of any government, King conflated the right to vote with human free will—which he considered essential to Christianity and the image of God. He felt that a government that didn’t allow black people to vote didn’t see black people as human and Christians shouldn’t tolerate a government that doesn’t treat people as humans. Subsequently, he designed his civil disobedience tactics to be nationally

---

146 Norris, “Dr. King and the Image of God: A Theology of Voting Rights in Ava DuVernay’s Selma,” 3
147 Ibid, 4
televised so that Christian America—white and black—would be incensed enough by their suffering to support the Movement. DuVernay does a good job of portraying SCLC meetings in Selma being held in churches and she even included the murder of James Reeb, a white clergyman from Boston, as a nod to the white Christians that supported King’s activity in Selma. Still, by failing to acknowledge the extent to which King used his faith to create his activism strategies, DuVernay is failing to give her audience a comprehensive view of how King conducted activism in Selma. This limits how effectively she is able to achieve her goal of illuminating contemporary activists about the tactics of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr.

**Portrayal of Racial-Ethnic Minorities in *Selma***

DuVernay does a great job of presenting anti-racist tropes of black people in *Selma*, particularly by showcasing black intelligence in the film. In the film, there is tension between SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the SCLC over how to best campaign for civil rights in Selma. The prior organization was one composed of black college students while the SCLC was a religious-based organization. While both groups are fundamentally different, they are portrayed as having intelligent members and being passionate about their goals. During one point in the film, John Lewis and his companion meet with King and the SCLC to discuss what their goals are in Selma; King explains that the keys to his movement are to negotiate, demonstrate, and resist. A conversation ensues about the validity of this approach, and the SNCC students leave while recognizing pros and cons of King’s framework.

---

148 DuVernay, *Selma.*
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
Additionally, DuVernay does not place all the burdens of intellectual ingenuity on King. Every black person on-screen is capable of articulating themselves and coming up with strategies, not just King. Also, on-screen King would often use other SCLC members as consultants rather than disciples of his own philosophy. There was a particular scene where King asks his SCLC companions about which Selma practices restricted the black vote the most, he received detailed analysis from multiple members arguing whether having the address of the registeree published in the paper, poll taxes, or voting vouchers were the most repressive. This deconstructed the notion of King behaving in a Christ-like manner, where he only imparted wisdom and never received it.

**Director’s Commentary on Religion**

DuVernay’s personal religious beliefs are not publicly known, but her stance in *Selma* is fairly pro-religion. The film treats religion as a glue that’s able to reach across race barriers and allow people to recognize each other’s humanity. The best example of this can be seen with James Reeb, the clergymen from Boston who ended up being martyred for the cause of black voting protections in Selma, Alabama. He had no personal stake in the events transpiring in the South, but his faith allowed him to empathize with the hardships that black citizens faced and morally obligated him to take action. From this example, DuVernay is telling her audience that religion should act as a bridge between communities, allowing them to recognize one another’s humanity and acting as a moral imperative to act against injustice.

---

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
Additionally, DuVernay subtly recognizes how important churches were for organizing the Civil Rights Movement. In *Selma*, most of King’s speeches and SCLC meetings occur in churches.\(^{153}\) Whether it was to bereave the loss of black lives or whether it was to plan an upcoming demonstration, on-screen King almost always communicates his community in a church setting. Even when the Muslim Malcolm X speaks with Coretta Scott King about reconciling with Mr. King, this takes place in a church rather than a secular building or more religiously-neutral site.\(^ {154}\) DuVernay makes a point to present the buildings of a church as a safe place for black people and thus it served as the basis for all sorts of community-focused efforts.

**Director Affirmation/Refutation of Religious Tropes**

Overall, despite her attempts to downplay King’s individual spirituality, DuVernay acknowledges how religion can bond together people and that Christianity was at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement.\(^ {155}\) She treats spirituality as a phenomenon that can unify disparate groups of people and encourage them to consider prioritizing the greater good over personal gain. Both the arrival of white Americans to support King in the South and President Johnson’s eventual support of the Civil Rights Movement serve as examples of how religion can cause people to acknowledge each other as fellow human beings rather than enemies. These events happened towards the end of the film and King’s religious-based activism was the conduit for willing indifferent bystanders to get involved in the struggle for civil rights.

\(^{153}\) Ibid.

\(^{154}\) Ibid.

\(^{155}\) Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare*, 17
Another religious trope that DuVernay affirms is that the Civil Rights Movement was a Christian movement at its core. This messaging is propagated by DuVernay’s usage of churches as settings and the treatment of Malcolm X and SNCC as tangential. As previously mentioned, churches in *Selma* serve as the backdrop of many important congregations, regardless of the reason. Whether it was members of the SCLC deciding to discuss their tactics with John Lewis and SNCC or whether King was talking about the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson to the community, the church was a meeting place for these events to occur. Organization is critical to the success of any movement and the role of the Christian church cannot be understated.

This Christian-centric view of the Civil Rights Movement is also supported by the film’s treatment of Muslim Malcolm X and the secular SNCC. Malcolm X only makes a short appearance in *Selma* but when he does, he appears alone and desperate.\(^{156}\) The man doesn’t appear very religious in the slightest and he even agrees to meet with Coretta Scott King in a church.\(^{157}\) It’s almost as if DuVernay is saying that Malcolm’s steadfast faith began to falter before his death and this acts to diminish Islam in comparison to Christianity. For SNCC, their main representatives in the film are John Lewis and James Forman. As the plot of the movie progresses, Forman continues to grow increasingly resentful towards the SCLC and eventually gives Lewis an ultimatum: to stop working with the SCLC or leave SNCC.\(^{158}\) Lewis chooses to leave SNCC and the audience is left to assume that Forman’s hostile and shortsighted leadership now controls the direction of

---

\(^{156}\) DuVernay, *Selma*.
\(^{157}\) Ibid.
\(^{158}\) Ibid.
The view of the Civil Rights Movement being a manifestation of Christian philosophies is supported by the frequent inclusion of churches for scenes and the dismissal of other religious beliefs.

Conversely, DuVernay strikes against the notion that religion makes people passive. There often exists a Hollywood trope that conflates spirituality with a lack of pragmatism, *Selma* demonstrates that this couldn’t be further from the truth. King’s religion makes him confront President Johnson about his demands to guarantee black voting right protections; King’s religious-based tactics encourage him and the SCLC to search for Southern regions that are blatantly racist enough to act out on camera, and King’s religious beliefs keep pushing him to organize a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge despite the amount of times that the SCLC has been pushed back. In DuVernay’s *Selma*, religion isn’t passive, it convinces people to leave the safety of their comfortable homes to campaign on the front lines for civil rights. It holds together the movement’s commitment to nonviolence and motivates people to persevere when the present circumstances get tough. Religion is equated with resiliency.

---

159 Ibid.
160 Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare*, 213
161 DuVernay, *Selma*. 

68
Chapter 4: Malcolm X – Iconization via Redemption
Malcom X (born as Malcolm Little) is one of the most controversial people to have lived during the 1950-60s Civil Rights era. Unlike Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he was not Christian and he did not insist on nonviolent-only resistance methods, so he has traditionally been regarded with scorn when compared to his civil rights counterparts. However, with the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter and the multitude of protests in response to incidents of police killings of unarmed black citizens, Malcolm X’s name is looked upon more admirably by activists now than in years past. The historical Malcolm X was intelligent, outspoken, and revolutionary; his willingness to explore violent means meant that he presented a threat to indifferent Americans who would’ve otherwise not acknowledged the demands of the strictly-nonviolent arm of the Civil Rights Movement. Arguably, Malcolm X’s work facilitated the successes of King’s movement, by presenting a scarier solution to racial inequality than the one King was striving for. Most racial-ethnic religious activists are controversial during their time and loved after their work is done; today, Malcolm X is still both regarded as a villain and a hero.  

Spike Lee’s iconizing portrayal of the man in Malcolm X can be credited for this conflicted legacy. When making the film, Lee was heavily influenced by Alex Haley’s and Malcolm X’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X and the director spent the majority of the film’s three hours and twenty-two minute run time trying to squeeze as many details from the source text as possible. His rationale was that he wanted Malcolm X to speak for himself and The Autobiography of Malcolm X is the written recollection of Malcolm X’s

---

162 Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare, 4
life as he saw it.\textsuperscript{163} As a result, the film presents both the glamorous and non-glamorous sides of Malcolm X. From his troubled childhood to his criminal past, \textit{Malcolm X} acknowledges the aspects of his life where he was selfish, violent, and depraved; in a similar manner, it highlights his accomplishments and gives credence to the struggles that he had to overcome. Lee’s \textit{Malcolm X} clearly doesn’t frame its subject into a Christ-type archetype, nor does it downplay his spirituality; instead, it credits Islam as being the sole purpose for his radical life change.

In this chapter, I will detail how Spike Lee uses iconizes Malcolm’s journey as a Muslim to both serve as a redemption arc and an alternative construction of the events of the Civil Rights Movement. Iconizing a subject uses their religion as a conduit through which character growth is facilitated; initially presenting the fallible nature of the activist and then showing their positive changes throughout the course of the film.

\textbf{Islam as Malcom’s Redemption}

In \textit{Malcolm X}, Lee creates a dichotomy between pre-conversion Malcolm X and post-conversion Malcolm X to construct a redemption arc for his subject. Christopher Deacy– a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Kent–proposes a theory of on-screen redemption that addresses a fundamental human truth, that “there is some aspect of humanity [within] every individual that needs redeeming, and without which we are trapped.”\textsuperscript{164} According to this definition, pre-conversion Malcolm X was in dire need of redemption. After leaving his job working for a railcar, Malcolm X found himself


running a gambling ring for a hustler in Harlem named West Indian Archie; here, he learned the art of the con and began to indulge in drug abuse and risqué sexual behavior. Eventually, he joins a burglary ring in Boston and robs the homes of wealthy people. Up to this point, Malcolm X has been involved in a series of unfortunate events, however Malcolm X’s conversations with Bembry mark the beginning of his journey towards redemption.

Once he is imprisoned, Lee makes it clear that Malcolm is someone who is in need of redemption. According to Deacy, a character’s redemption can only “take place when humankind is already enmeshed in evil or spiritual ruin and needs to be extricated or delivered.” In the film, Malcolm X is arrested for his illegal activities and gets served six and a half years in jail. He officially hits rock-bottom, and Lee represents this by showing a scene of Denzel Washington—playing the role of Malcolm X—going insane and cursing Jesus when kept in solitary confinement for several days. Malcolm X had lost a father, grew up in foster care separated from his family, was subjected to racism throughout his adolescence, escaped from the murderous West Indian Archie, and had gotten addicted to drugs in the process. Religion was not a focus in his life and his negative experiences with Christianity in the past had led him to believe it was a farse. Malcolm X was a man who had been victimized by evil and committed evil acts, which left him in a place of spiritual ruin.

---

166 Deacy, “Redemption,” 351
167 Lee, Malcolm X.
168 Ibid.
It is only at this point that Lee uses Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam to facilitate his redemption. In *Malcolm X*’s case, Bembry is the person who initializes his life-changing transformation from a prisoner to a member of the Nation of Islam. He approaches Malcolm in prison and challenges him to quit straightening product in his hair, claiming he’s only doing so because he hates his own blackness.  

Bembry confronts Malcolm about the cyclical nature of his lifestyle, insisting that he’ll forever remain in a mental prison unless he embraces the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. After this moment, Malcolm becomes impressed with the intellectualism and discipline of Bembry and asks him questions about his philosophies. As time progresses, Malcolm stops smoking, stops using cursing, and starts reading books available in the prison library. His conversion to being a Muslim is complete after seeing a vision of Elijah Muhammad in his room. This scene is narrated as being one of the most awe-inspiring moments of Malcolm X’s life and Lee makes sure to recreate the scene with a similar reverential mood.

Unique to *Malcolm X*, Lee engages with the NOI’s version of Islam seriously and he allows the audience to see how its philosophies shaped Malcolm into the man became after prison. As one critic puts it, Lee does not attempt to stand between Malcolm X and his audience, opting to allow the man to speak for himself. One of the best examples

---

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
of this can be seen in the prison scene when Bembry is teaching Malcolm X about the anti-black pedagogy taught in the “white man’s” American school systems. From a dictionary, Malcolm is asked to read the definition of the word “black”, and he reads “soiled with dirt, foul; sullen, hostile, forbidding...Foully or outrageously wicked, as black cruelty. Indicating disgrace, dishonor or culpability.” When instructed to read the definition of the word “white” from the same dictionary, he reads “Of the color of pure snow; reflecting all the rays of the spectrum. The opposite of black, hence free from spot or blemish; innocent, pure without evil intent, harmless. Honest, square-dealing honorable.” This scene introduces Malcolm to the anti-white mentality of the Nation of Islam, and Lee doesn’t say whether they’re right or wrong. Still, he acknowledges the role that Islam played in motivating Malcolm X to be the Civil Rights leader he eventually came to be and identifies aspects of the NOI’s philosophy that would’ve resonated with him. Malcolm X’s father was killed by white supremacists, his family was separated by a white Child Protective Services institution, and he was subjected to racism during his adolescent years by white people. It was through NOI’s version of Islam that he was able to recognize his internalized self-hatred and make conscious efforts to decolonize his mind.

Malcolm X’s passion for activism is lit and the entire tone of the film shifts from being one of chaotic spontaneity to being more structured and disciplined. One writer from the NY Times comments how the film’s tone parallels Malcolm’s life, starting from

176 Ibid.
177 Lee, Malcolm X.
a place of color and chaos and becoming more proper and somber towards the end.  

This can be seen even in Malcolm X’s attire. In one of the opening scenes of the film, we see Malcolm X wearing a vibrant red zoot suit walking down the street to get his hair straightened at a barbershop. After being released from prison, Malcolm X wears professional suits with traditional dark coloring. In addition to being more monochromatic, another writer comments about how Washington’s character becomes more regimented and structured. Lee no longer shows scenes of lively jazz clubs and criminal activity, he instead focuses on Malcolm’s public exploits and his relationship with his wife Betty Shabazz. The film’s formalization after the Malcolm X’s conversion corroborates the theory that Islam was the driving force behind his redemption, since his habits and behaviors look radically different than before.

Lee also uses Islam–particularly his sermons and speeches–to trace the ideological growth of Malcolm X throughout the film. After his release from jail, Malcolm believes that many black people were mentally-colonized in the same way he used to be. Therefore, Malcolm X sets out to become a minister and preach the black nationalism ideals of the Nation of Islam. This involves him only choosing to associate himself with black people, since the creed of Elijah Muhammad taught that white people were fundamentally evil. This manifests in on-screen sermons that read as follows:

“[The] the white man is the devil. Yes, God is black and you are made in His image and don't know it. That's how brainwashed you are.” This statement was the basis of Elijah

---

178 Canby, “Review/Film; ‘Malcolm X,’ as Complex as Its Subject.”
179 Lee, *Malcolm X*.
180 Gleiberman, “Malcolm X.”
182 Lee and Perl, “Malcolm X.”
Muhammad’s teachings and summarizes Malcolm X’s worldview at the time. One notable example of him acting upon this philosophy can be seen in his comments after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. At a press conference, he uses the analogy of the “devil’s chickens coming home to roost”, claiming that it never made him sad but glad.\textsuperscript{183} The nation was in mourning after the murder of the President, yet Malcolm X viewed the incident as a manifestation of the white man’s evil nature coming to haunt him. If Malcolm X’s growth were to stop here, it would be dubious to call his transformation an arc of redemption; however, Islam continues to serve as a vehicle for positive change after Malcolm X’s break from the NOI.

After separating from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X’s religion continued to be a conduit for personal growth and influenced his new position regarding white people. In the film, Malcolm X’s official break from the NOI is announced during a public press conference, where he claims to be willing to work with other black activists and white allies to fight for black equality.\textsuperscript{184} During pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm has another moment of spiritual enlightenment and has his perspective on white people radically changed.\textsuperscript{185} In this pilgrimage scene, Washington narrates off-screen how he became aware of how:

[All men] are brothers, truly; people of all colors and races believing in One God and one humanity. Once before, in prison, the truth came and blinded me. It has happened again….Because of the spiritual rebirth which I was blessed to undergo

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Lee, \textit{Malcolm X}.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
as a result of my pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to
sweeping indictments of one race.\textsuperscript{186}

From this point forward, Malcolm X preaches a Sunni version of Islam that does not have
any precepts of black nationalism embedded within it. When he’s killed in the movie, he
is ideologically between black nationalism and assimilation, which was historically
accurate.\textsuperscript{187} Lee uses Malcolm’s relationship with Islam—through his conversion and his
separation from the NOI—to demonstrate how his behaviors and ideals change throughout
his life in a redemptive fashion.

\textbf{Malcolm X as an Iconizing Non-Dominant Storyline of the Civil Rights Movement}

\textit{Malcolm X}, above all else, was one of the first examples of black filmmakers
exercising agency over their own historical myth-making. Gerald Horne, a professor of
History at the University of Houston, considers films that deal with retelling historical
material as engaging in myth-making.\textsuperscript{188} These myths are not necessarily lies, but
explanations of past events. While it's true that myths can be misleading for neglecting
certain facts or distorting the relationship between facts, the narratives they create
perform a symbolic function essential to the culture that produced them.\textsuperscript{189} Films that
include historical events effectively create myths about how these events should be
interpreted; on a large scale, similar retellings of the same historical events will create a
dominant historical narrative. Hollywood has been a major producer of myths for the

\textsuperscript{186} Lee and Perl, “Malcolm X.”
Communication} 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 452–65, \url{https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180128091}.
\textsuperscript{188} Gerald Horne, “‘Myth’ and the Making of ‘Malcolm X,’” \textit{The American Historical Review} 98, no. 2
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, 440
West and it has not typically had people of color in charge of directing films, effectively resulting in white people creating historical narratives for other people-groups. In 1992, *Malcolm X* was released as one of the first examples of a black filmmaker retelling events related to the Civil Rights Movement, a significant part of American black history. Spike Lee knew of the preexisting mythology surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and by making his movie, he is able to iconize one of the people that the dominant historical narrative villainizes, Malcolm X.

When making *Malcolm X*, Lee sought to replace the traditional mythology surrounding the Civil Rights Movement with an alternative one. This traditional mythology is fixated on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., climbing that he, Rosa Parks, and the SNN C decided to start marching in the 1950’s and elite attorneys and white allies backed their cause. Films like *Mississippi Burning* and *The Long Walk Home* are responsible for pushing these myths to the forefront of the historical narrative surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. Along with the fixation on King, these films will often feature heroic white people and Christian black people that are suffering but still peaceful and pious. Alternatively, *Malcolm X* references King tangentially and juxtaposes King’s view of nonviolent resistance with Malcolm X’s language of militant self-defense. In a similar contrasting manner, the black activists featured in Malcolm X are Muslims and they are angry about the treatment of American black people. Lee

---

190 Ibid, 440
191 Ibid, 440
192 Ibid, 440
193 Ibid, 440
194 Ibid, 441
picked Malcolm X as the subject of his film because it allowed him to demonstrate a different view of looking at resistance.

With this in mind, it’s important to consider Malcolm X as a work of alternative myth-making that’s intended to disrupt the universally accepted notions of the dominant historical narrative. Neither the dominant or alternative Civil Rights Era narratives are outright false, but they both ignore important truths and fail to acknowledge the contributions of other peers and predecessors of King and Malcolm X, respectively. In Malcolm X’s case, Lee lionizes Malcolm X and his legacy as a contrarian activist, at the expense of failing to acknowledge how King’s philosophies influenced the historical Malcolm X towards the latter portion of his life. The exclusion of this detail does not completely discredit Malcolm X from having historical credibility, however it's important to recognize that the film engages in myth-making of its own.

Still, Lee’s Malcolm X is a film that offers a divergent view of the Civil Rights Movement and challenges the existing media portrayals of the black experience and the life of Malcolm X. One of the best examples of this is how Lee treats Malcolm X’s most famous “by any means necessary” statement. Historically speaking, this statement was received by America–particularly white Americans–as a declaration of tactical militance and a violent alternative to the philosophies proposed by King. However, Lee is able to communicate in the film that this statement had an entirely different connotation to it. Rather than a declaration of war, Malcolm X chose his rhetoric purposefully to “slice through centuries of oppression and slave psychology” and tell

---

195 Ibid, 441
196 Winn, “Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X,” 463
197 Gleiberman, “Malcolm X.”
black people that: anyone who isn’t ready to fight for their dignity will never have it. Additionally, Lee uses Islam as the means through which Malcolm is expresses this philosophy. In the film, Denzel Washington voices “the right to defend ourselves is not teaching us to hate the white man, [Muhammad] is teaching us to love ourselves.” This statement embodies the nuance that the dominant historical narrative fails to give to Malcolm X, that the right to self-defense doesn’t equate to violence. Lee does a fantastic job of portraying Malcolm X as a devout Muslim of the NOI creed; thus, any discrepancies between the dominant historical narrative about Malcolm X and the alternative narrative he constructs is explained by the audience’s previous lack of knowledge of the NOI creed.

In addition to constructing an on-screen Malcolm X that differs from the one in the dominant historical Civil Rights Movement narrative, Lee also uses Islam to redefine blackness and counter racist tropes often featured in Hollywood films. In American mass media, there has long existed a struggle between racist ideology and “the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their own image.” The racist ideologies presented in films from D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation to Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction that depict black people as murderous, malevolent, and always involved in crime have presented themselves in films time and time again. In Malcolm X, Lee presents the multiplicity that exists within the black community. Prior to Malcolm X’s conversion, we see black people in barbershops, at fancy jazz clubs, and committing

---

198 Ibid.
199 Winn, “Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X,” 462
200 Ibid, 452
crimes; most of which were not novel representations on the silver screen. After Malcolm X’s conversion, we see many examples of him and his fellow Muslim activists being shown as “intelligent, morally upright, disciplined, and able to lead the fight against racism in the United States.” These positive representations of black people in Hollywood films were rare for its 1992 release, and Malcolm X’s ability to counteract the traditional, racist narratives found in previous films was because a black filmmaker was directing it. Lee portrayed the film’s black Muslims as a group of smart and self-assured people who were working against a racist white society in pursuit of the freedoms guaranteed to them by the Constitution, which is direct opposition to the negative stereotypes that regard black people as ignorant and lawless. Still, Lee does not consider the black community to be a monolith and presents both positive and negative facets found within it.

Lee’s Malcolm X grapples with the negative aspects of the black community by insisting there is a cause-effect relationship between the systematic discrimination and oppression perpetrated by white people and the destructive behaviors of black people. During the film, the audience hears Malcolm X’s words: “you can’t even get drugs in Harlem without the white man’s permission. You can’t get prostitution in Harlem without the white man’s permission. You can’t get gambling in Harlem without the white man’s permission,” voiced over scenes of these crimes. Lee acknowledges that problems exist in the black community and visualizes it on-screen, however he attributes these harmful

---

201 Lee, Malcolm X.
202 Winn, “Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X,” 461
203 Ibid, 456
204 Ibid, 462
205 Ibid, 461
behaviors to the poor conditions that black people have been forced to live with. In another voice over, Malcolm X voices this same sentiment when saying “this isn’t black supremacy, this is black intelligence” as scenes of white violence against black people are shown in a montage. This notion of black people reacting to the conditions that white people subjected them to is a consistent theme in *Malcolm X* and informs why Malcolm X turned out the way he did. He lived a crime of life because of white people murdered his father, split up his family, and discouraged him from attending school; he similarly joined the Nation of Islam after coming to this realization and desiring to liberate black people from these conditions. Lee does acknowledge that the black community has problems and that Malcolm X is not a perfect man, but he also accuses the racist legacies of white America as being culpable for creating both of them.

**Portrayal of Racial-Ethnic Minorities in *Malcolm X***

As previously stated, the black people in *Malcolm X* are not treated as monolithic in their portrayal. However, the presentation of black people in the film does vary drastically between Malcolm X’s pre-conversion life and his post-conversion life. The film opens with Shorty, played by Spike Lee, teaching Malcolm X how to dress in a zoot suit and walk across the street with swagger. In this phase of Malcolm’s life, he is surrounded by boisterous and joyful black people as he dresses in vibrant colors and attends jazz clubs.

---

207 Winn, “Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*,” 461
208 Lee, *Malcolm X*.
As he becomes more involved in crime, Washington’s character grows more serious and quick-to-anger as he involves himself in criminal activities. The film’s black characters become similarly shady and menacing and Lee uses this as an opportunity to reflect on how the oppressive conditions black people live under are responsible for producing this type of behavior.\footnote{Ibid.} One notable example is West Indian Archie, a hustler that employs Malcolm X when he is living in Harlem. In the film, Malcolm X voices how he believes Archie could have been a mathematical genius since he had the ability to remember complex sets of numbers without having to write them down, but his life of crime is the result of him being victimized by a white social order. \footnote{Winn, “Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X,” 459}

After his conversion to Islam, the prominent black characters in Malcolm X are presented as intellectual and disciplined. The first Muslim that Malcolm X encounters is Bembry in prison. Bembry reads constantly, refuses to swear, and tries to convince his fellow black inmates about the truth of Elijah Muhammad’s teachings. \footnote{Lee, \textit{Malcolm X}.} He is unlike any other black person that Malcolm X has met before and he foreshadows how black characters will conduct themselves for the rest of the film. The NOI black people dress in dark, nice clothes and will often wear suits. \footnote{Ibid.} They are presented as being incredibly disciplined and they help members of the NOI get over drug addictions as they monitor them during withdrawals. During one particular scene, a man known as Brother Johnson is beaten by the police and taken into custody. In response, Malcolm X commands fifty members of the Fruit of Islam, a militant group within the NOI, to march down to the
station where Brother Johnson is being held and demand that he receives medical attention.\textsuperscript{214} After the police comply and get him an ambulance, the Fruit of Islam march down the hospital and standby in front of the building until Malcolm X hears word that Brother Johnson is stable.\textsuperscript{215} Their activities have drawn a crowd of followers, so there is a mass of restless black people demonstrating behind a line of stoic Fruit of Islam members.\textsuperscript{216} When Malcolm X signals with his hand that the situation is under control, the entire group of people—Muslim and non-Muslim—disperse and leave the premise.\textsuperscript{217} Despite the context of the aforementioned situation, this scene is viewed as a positive representation of black power. When watching this scene, Lee intends for his audience to see how disciplined the Nation of Islam is and react in an awe-struck manner to their ability to get things done. It’s clear that black intelligence and power is something that Lee wanted to showcase.

**Director’s Commentary on Religion**

Spike Lee is a practicing Christian that does not go to church and he supports individualized, experiential religion and is distrustful of organized religion.\textsuperscript{218} Using Malcolm X as a mouthpiece, Lee is critical of both the black church and the NOI at different points during the movie. For the black church, Lee has Malcolm X comment on how the institution is flawed for having black people believe in the same god that their oppressors believe in; the same people who insist that Jesus is white and will don white

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
hoods to lynch black people in the name of God. After his conversion, Malcolm X’s sermons would often try to convince black people that Islam is the religion of black people and he would criticize the black church for the aforementioned reasons. In his opinion, Lee criticizes the black church for being an institution that encourages black people to not fight for their rights and this is a behavior that he finds reprehensible.

On the other hand, Lee also criticizes the Nation of Islam for its practices of silencing its own members and potentially having a hand in Malcolm X’s death. Soon after Malcolm X’s conversion, Elijah Muhammad is presented as a benevolent man who truly seeks to better the lives of black Americans. As Malcolm gains more notoriety as a minister of the NOI, Muhammad uses the forces of the Nation of Islam to attempt to silence him, eventually escalating to giving the Fruit of Islam a mission to assassinate Malcolm X. It is not clear if Lee believed that Elijah Muhammad was ever a good man, but his messaging about organized religion is clear: that people in power are corrupted by the desire to keep their power. By institutionalizing religion, one is subjecting the sacred to the whims of fallible human nature and this is a dangerous thing to do.

Overall, Spike Lee’s messaging about religion is that it is something to be paid attention to, since it can cause powerful and impactful things to happen. For example, Malcolm’s religion changed throughout his life and it allowed him to ideologically evolve throughout the course of his life. Religion can be a force that can placate the masses, subjugate people, or it can be the driving force behind activism efforts. In the film, Lee makes it a point to show Elijah Muhammad coming to visit Malcolm X in a

---

219 Lee, Malcolm X.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
vision, because he recounts this spiritual visit as one of the most transformational moments in his life. After seeing Elijah Muhammad, he becomes determined to meet him in-person and be a minister for the NOI. In both the King-centric dominant Civil Rights historical narrative and Lee’s Malcolm X-centric alternative narrative, religion plays a huge role in how each man went about changing America.

**Director Affirmation/Refutation of Religious Tropes**

In *Malcolm X*, Lee affirms two negative stereotypes: that Islam is sexist and Christianity is hypocritical. The Nation of Islam had an extremely restrictive ideology of how women were supposed to behave, and Lee demonstrates this in Malcolm X’s conversations with his wife Betty Shabazz. When speaking to her for the first time on-screen, he tells her that he’s a “hard man on women” and he justifies this behavior by insisting that women are deceitful and “untrustworthy flesh.” 222 During this conversation, the film cuts to Elijah Muhammad telling explaining that a man has found the ideal woman if she “is the right height for a man, the right complexion, if her age is half the man's plus seven, if she understands that man's essential nature is strong and woman's weak, if she loves children, can cook, sew and stay out of trouble….“223 In Malcolm X’s eyes, Betty Shabazz was an ideal woman for him and Lee shows us the criteria by which he reached this conclusion. Needless to say, this language is highly gendered and affirms the stereotype that Islam is sexist.224

---

222 Lee and Perl, “Malcolm X.”
223 Lee and Perl, “Malcolm X.”
224 Ramji, “Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11,” 10
The other stereotype that was affirmed in *Malcolm X* is that Christianity is hypocritical. Throughout the film, Lee shows scenes of Malcolm X’s father being murdered by racist white men who claimed to be Christian and the prison chaplain’s abandonment of Malcolm X when he was in solitary confinement as examples of Christian hypocrisy. During a scene where he’s attempting to convert black Christians, Malcolm X echoes this same sentiment when saying the following:

> You think you are Christians, and yet you see your so-called white Christian brother hanging black Christians on trees. You say that white man loves you and yet he has done every evil act against you. He has everything while he is living and tells you to be a good slave, and when you die, you will have more than he has in Beulah's land. We so-called Negroes are in pitiful shape. Get off your knees praying to a picture of a white, pale blond, and blue-eyed Jesus. Come out of the sky. Build heaven on earth. Islam is the black man's true religion.

In Malcolm X’s case, he specifies his accusations to just white Christians being hypocritical as he points out the inconsistencies between their beliefs and their practices. However, Lee is supporting the pre-existing notion that Christian people are hypocritical, in that they don’t “practice what they preach”.

> On the other hand, *Malcolm X* dismisses the notions that religion makes people passive and that Islam is inherently violent. Despite his commentary regarding Christians,

---

225 Lee, *Malcolm X*.
226 Lee and Perl, “Malcolm X.”
227 Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare*, 20
the black religious people in *Malcolm X* are the most adamant about fighting for black equality. Malcolm X’s on-screen ministry, while he was with the NOI and afterwards, was always focused on getting black people realizing their self-worth and convincing them to do everything in their power to uplift other black people. Moreover, The Fruit of Islam’s actions to get Brother Johnson out of jail and into a hospital also demonstrated how religion empowered people to take action and address the injustices in the world around them. Religion in *Malcolm X* does not make characters more timid, it emboldens them.

Despite the actions of the Nation of Islam and their suggested involvement in the assassination of Malcolm X, Lee does a good job of countering the idea that Islam is inherently violent. Whenever he asked by reporters if he was violent or advocated violence, Malcolm X always responded by saying that he supported black people who desired to defend themselves from white aggression. The historical Malcolm X did not encourage black people to inflict violence upon white people and Lee makes this distinction very clear in the film. Additionally, Lee contrasts Malcolm X’s pilgrimage to Mecca with the Nation of Islam gradual descent into utilizing violent means to achieve its ends. By doing this, Lee is making the point that true Islam—what Malcolm X is experiencing on his pilgrimage—is not violent but the institution of the NOI is inherently flawed. This supports the alternative history that Lee has been trying to tell with this

---

228 Lee, *Malcolm X*.
229 Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare*, 17
movie: that has been misunderstood by white America. Malcolm was a devout Muslim, and since he was not violent, then Islam is not violent.\textsuperscript{231}

\textsuperscript{231} Ramji, “Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11,” 3
Conclusion

Religion in Film

Religion is a hard subject for filmmakers to engage with, especially in the genre of biopics. The nature of the biopic genre is to biographically view the subject’s life while having elements of drama that keep the audience entertained throughout the narrative. In this sense, religion is not great material for film. A critic reviewing *Gandhi* noticed that the director, Sir Richard Attenborough, portrayed Gandhi in a humble and conventional manner since trying to truly capture his “rigorous self-denial” may have been too tall a task.\(^\text{232}\) The “rigorous self-denial” was referencing the historical Gandhi’s obstinance regarding his fasts, his vow of celibacy, and his other religiously-motivated abstinences. Having him be too didactic about this side of his beliefs would’ve contrasted with the hagiographical message that Attenborough was trying to create, therefore the director decided that making Gandhi a meeker character and downplaying some of his more unconventional beliefs was in the best interest of the film. This reflects an available strategy utilized by Hollywood directors when dealing with a subject’s religion, especially religions that are not Christianity; they will omit components of that religion.

On the other hand, including religious elements in a biopic, despite the religiosity of the subject, can still draw criticism from viewers. In *Malcolm X*, critics have criticized the scene where Malcolm sees a spiritual manifestation of Elijah Muhammad in his prison cell for being an odd and flawed scene.\(^\text{233}\) The historical Malcolm X recounts this

\(^{232}\) Canby, “Review/Film; ‘Malcolm X,’ as Complex as Its Subject.”

\(^{233}\) Adams, “Malcolm X.”
astral visitation as being one of the most transformational moments in his life in his autobiography, and Spike Lee makes sure to acknowledge this and treat it with a similar manner of significance.\textsuperscript{234} However, this well-intentioned and relatively well-executed scene can still leave members of the audience perturbed or confused about how religion is being presented on-screen. Thus film makers are presented with a series of choices: to Christianize their subject, downplay the religion of their subject, to emphasize the fallible human nature of their subject, or to weave the subject's religion into the narrative.

In \textit{Gandhi}'s case, Attenborough decided to Christianize Gandhi since he did not want to engage with the challenges of representing his Hindu beliefs on film. In the first chapter, I define what a Christ-type archetype is and explain how Attenborough’s construction of Gandhi fits within that mold. The aforementioned archetype is one that many writers of Western films–think Yoda from the Star Wars movie series or even Superman–will utilize to construct their characters as heroes. At its core, it borrows from qualities that the Apostles described Jesus within the Bible and uses them to create characters that will prevail against nearly-insurmountable odds. Attenborough designs Gandhi with this archetype in mind to avoid engaging with his complex religious beliefs and to make Gandhi’s character favorable to the film’s Western audiences. As a result, Gandhi’s on-screen beliefs are often described using Christian notions, which makes him more relatable to Western audiences but also makes Kingsley’s Gandhi a Christ-like caricature of the historical man. When attempting to compare the Christ-type archetype to the other methods that Hollywood filmmakers use to engage with racial-ethnic religious activists, the important distinction to keep in mind is that the affected character can still

\textsuperscript{234} Canby, “Review/Film; ‘Malcolm X,’ as Complex as Its Subject.”
utilize religious rhetoric and belief systems on-screen, but any concepts discussed will be through a Christian lens.

After *Gandhi*, the second chapter of this thesis discussed *Cesar Chavez* as a case of a biopic featuring a racial-ethnic religious activist that tries to secularize its subject. This chapter focuses on how this type of portrayal creates confusion for the audience, since the character will conduct themselves in a strangely disciplined manner to achieve their means yet this behavior isn’t explained. In *Cesar Chavez*, the best examples of this are on-screen Chavez’s insistence on his movement remaining nonviolent and his decision to go on long hunger fasts to get the UFW to recommit to being a nonviolent organization. From a secular point of view, this behavior doesn’t make sense. Following a non-religious logic, the members of the UFW should be allowed to physically defend themselves against violence being perpetrated against them and Chavez’s decision to starve himself to get people to stop reciprocating violence seems odd. The historical Cesar Chavez was a practicing Catholic and the UFW was an organization that often created solidarity between its members through rituals like holding Mass. At the time of Chavez’s activism, the historical King was using a Christian-motivated version of nonviolent resistance in the southern US that was working to great effect. The historical Chavez noticed this and decided to adopt the Gandhian-King method of nonviolence and modify it for a Catholic context.\(^{235}\) *Cesar Chavez* fails to make this connection clear, so some of the secularized on-screen Chavez’s decisions don’t make much sense. When comparing secularization to the other three types of portraying a racial-ethnic religious

activist discussed in this thesis, it differs by decontextualizing the activist from motivating principles and the ideological basis for their tactics. This is arguably the most harmful version of representing a racial-ethnic religious activist, since the absence of religion will often leave the audience to misunderstand the activist’s reasoning and methodology for fighting for equality.

The third chapter of this thesis project discussed how DuVernay’s *Selma* serves as an example of biopic filmmakers choosing to humanize a racial-ethnic religious activist by fixating on their fallible human nature. This type of representation is utilized by filmmakers who wish to examine their subject critically but have to dismantle the notion of the subject being “selfless and blameless” to accomplish this. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a man that is regarded as a secular saint by many in our society, with his “I Had a Dream” speech being one of America’s most recognizable works of literature. In DuVernay’s case, she humanizes King in *Selma* as a means to disrupt the dominant American narrative of the SCLC’s efforts in Selma, AL and offer an alternative view on the events that happened during King’s campaign in the town. By choosing to fixate on King’s doubts and shortcomings—like his marital unfaithfulness, DuVernay hopes to tell her audience that King was a normal man who was able to change America and anybody can do the same. DuVernay humanizes King to encourage people that they don’t need to be perfect or saintly to get involved with activism, they just need to possess a desire to see positive change.\(^\text{236}\)

Despite her intentions, humanizing a racial-ethnic religious activist has the potential to mislead the audience into believing that the activist was pretending to be

\(^{236}\) DuVernay and Oyelowo, A Conversation with Director Ava DuVernay and Actor David Oyelowo.
more devout than they actually are. In *Selma*, there were moments where members of the SCLC and Coretta Scott King would reference the Bible and God in conversation, however King would only mention God when giving a public speech.\textsuperscript{237} The absence of God and Jesus from King’s conversational rhetoric then provides negative evidence to support the notion that he wasn’t as devout a Christian as he seemed to be. Instead of showing how King tactfully constructed his plan of nonviolent activism using Christian tenets, the director chooses to depict King as a political tactician who worked to improve the livelihoods of black Americans.\textsuperscript{238} DuVernay’s intentionality behind diminishing King’s legacy was to make his deeds and tactics seem more approachable to criticism, yet she simultaneously undermines the role that religion played in forming King’s tactics. In this way, her humanization of King both supported and opposed her goal of equipping current activists with the knowledge and motivation to employ their own versions of King’s resistance methods. Overall, when comparing humanization to the other three types of ways to depict a racial-ethnic religious activist, it differs by its aim to intentionally diminish the religious nature of the activist in order to construct an alternative retelling of their story. While this approach is similar to the secularization seen in *Cesar Chavez*, DuVernay’s humanization of King in *Selma* places an emphasis on criticism and alternative myth-making that Luna’s *Cesar Chavez* does not possess.

Lastly, the fourth chapter of this thesis project discussed how Hollywood filmmakers can choose to use religion to trace a racial-ethnic religious activist’s personal growth and help to facilitate the film’s myth-making process. The case examined to

\textsuperscript{237} DuVernay, *Selma.*  
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
explore this phenomenon was Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*, and the chapter explained how Islam helped to track Malcolm X’s path to redemption and aid in the construction of an alternate Civil Rights Movement historical narrative. In the film, Lee creates a dichotomy between pre-conversion and post-conversion Malcolm X. Pre-conversion Malcolm X lived the life of a person who had fallen victim to the destructive habits and conditions of that plague black urban communities; while post-conversion Malcolm X was disciplined, knowledgeable, and willing to do whatever was necessary to get black Americans to open their eyes to the racist structures meant to keep them oppressed. Pre-conversion Malcolm X didn’t subscribe to any religion, and he lived a hedonistic lifestyle that ultimately led to him serving jail time. This version of Malcolm X is replaced by Muslim Malcolm X, who abstained from alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex and went on to garner national attention for his radical views on black nationalism. Later in the film, after separating from the NOI, Malcolm X makes a pilgrimage to Mecca and he comes back from this experience with a new conception of Islam and a changed mindset. He no longer considers all white people to be evil, instead acknowledging that he had encountered Muslims of all racial-ethnic backgrounds during his travels and has been enlightened to the error of his ways. Using Islam, Lee is able to trace and explain the ideological development of Malcolm X through his life.

Similarly, Islam gave Spike Lee the flexibility to construct an alternative timeline of the events of the Civil Rights Movement. At the time of *Malcolm X*’s release in 1992, the philosophy of the Nation of Islam had never made it onto the silver screen before. Lee was able to use the public’s ignorance of the NOI and its belief system to present positive blackness in a manner not seen in any previous Hollywood film about the Civil Rights
Movement. The rank-and-file members of the King-centric dominant narrative often insisted on showing suffering and pious black people marching in southern states for their rights; this is contrasted with Lee’s presentation of the NOI as an organization of intelligent, disciplined, and soldierly men and women. Muslim people were shown as utilizing black intelligence to initiate change, and this was often done in a nonviolent manner. Similarly to the positive portrayals of black people, Lee was also able to use Islam to redefine Malcolm X’s legacy as an activist. In the past, Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary” quote has been used as evidence to suggest that he actively advocated for violence between the black and white communities of America. Lee uses Malcolm’s speeches, sermons, and commentary regarding the teachings of Elijah Muhammad to suggest that Malcolm wasn’t averse to using violence means but he didn’t advocate people to use them. Also, through the development of the NOI, Lee shows the audience how the Civil Rights Movement operated in the New England region of the United States, showing how black activism wasn’t just isolated to the American South. When comparing the use of religion as a narrative device to the other methods of portraying a racial-ethnic religious activist, this approach is able to clearly demonstrate a connection between the subject’s belief system and how it influenced their actions. The NOI’s creed encouraged Muslims to defend themselves using physical means if necessary, so Malcolm X adopted a similar stance regarding nonviolence in activism.

239 Lee, *Malcolm X.*
240 Ibid.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
Additionally, this approach gives the filmmaker lots of agency to reshape the narrative around the subject, provided that they are familiar with the religious tradition.

**Role of Religion in Social Activism**

As demonstrated through the four films discussed in this thesis, religion played a significant role in the campaigns that each man historically led. The names Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are renowned for their work in social justice and each of them relied upon religion to construct and facilitate their activism. Often referred to as liberation theology, each leader adopted a common framework that insisted that their racial-ethnic group were God’s people and that God wouldn’t want them to live like this. When looking at all their cases in totality, religion either acted as an ideological foundation for activism styles or as motivation to persevere through hardship.

For Gandhi and King in particular, their respective religions were the ideological basis of their activism. In Gandhi’s case, his tactics were a manifestation of *satyagraha*, his Hindu-derived philosophy of nonviolence; and embedded in Gandhi’s conception of nonviolence is the word *satya*, which means truth. He believed that violent means would ultimately lead to a violent end, so he abstained from using violence. Instead, he saw peaceful demonstrations as an attempt to convince people to see your side of an issue. For his activism campaign, Gandhi thought that getting enough Indians to break the law and demonstrate would eventually diminish the British’s desire to occupy India. At its

---

243 Gaston Espinosa, “Liberation Theology” (Claremont McKenna College, March 27, 2019).
244 van Goelst Meijer, “The Power of the Truthful: Satya in the Nonviolence of Gandhi and Havel,” 19
core, Gandhi utilized the numerical advantage of Indians over British people to his advantage and successfully convinced the Crown to give India its sovereignty.

In King’s case, Gandhian nonviolence was modified by the SCLC to use in an American context. For starters, black people in the United States did not constitute a majority of the population in 1969 so King’s ability to galvanize the nation to support their cause was limited. They couldn’t hope to wrest control from an occupational power like the Indians did, so the SCLC focused on assimilation.\textsuperscript{245} This presented a dilemma, the Movement had to seek the assistance of white people to facilitate the process of getting black rights protected from white people. Essentially, King had to not only get his oppressors to acknowledge that they were oppressors, but he also needed to convince them to join the SCLC’s fight against other oppressors.\textsuperscript{246} To do this, he used Gandhian nonviolence to appeal to America’s Christian population and persuade them that ignoring blatant injustices against fellow Christians was an affront to God.\textsuperscript{247} King’s strategy of weaving a theological imperative within Gandhian nonviolence tactics was genius, and it resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 getting passed and his name being etched into American history.

In addition to religion acting as an ideological basis for activism, it served to motivate leaders and their followings through hardships. Cesar Chavez, in particular, responded to comments about his followers resorting to violence by fasting. During his famous hunger fasts, he would take communion every day to ensure that God’s will was

\textsuperscript{245} Cone, \textit{Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare}, 31
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid, 31
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid, 17
at the forefront of his mind while he suffered for the mistakes of his movement.\footnote{Leon, “Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion,” 58}

Similarly, Chavez’s decision to make a pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento was religiously-motivated and spiritually-propelled. The Plan of Delano was a document signed by UFW leadership before the pilgrimage commenced and it detailed they were walking in penance for their failings.\footnote{Ibid, 60} Throughout the journey, the UFW held mass frequently and their procession was led by a priest in full collar and a flag of La Virgen de Guadalupe.\footnote{Ibid, 61} Chavez’s movement sought to get Americans to acknowledge the right of farm workers who were often not American citizens, which is arguably more difficult than what the SCLC set out to accomplish. The road to getting laws passed to protect the rights of these people was long, and religion was integral to the movement’s ability to maintain hope during this process.

**Intersection of Race and Religion**

When looking at the four films examined in this thesis, *Malcolm X* stands out as a film that explores the intersection of race and religion. Lee accomplishes this by conveying an understanding of the role that religion serves in racial-ethnic communities and casting the role of Malcolm X to an actor that has personal experience with this dynamic. This is not to say that the three other films don’t engage with the intersections of race and religion, but they don’t to the extent that *Malcolm X* does.

In *Malcolm X*, this interaction between race and religion is demonstrated by the discrepancies between Malcolm’s Nation of Islam views and his later more-moderate Sunnis Islam views. The NOI preaches a version of Islam that teaches its members that
all white people are evil and Malcolm X believes this to be true for a large portion of his life. The on-screen Elijah Muhammad taught this as a way to decolonize the minds of black people and consider building up their community as the only way things can get better, since the nature of white people is to destroy things and accepting them was to invite destruction. These extreme views represent a larger phenomenon: how racial-ethnic minority religious institutions will often shape their rhetoric to be more activism-oriented. In Malcolm X’s on-screen speeches, he would tell his audience that Christianity wouldn’t help black people because white Christians were the ones persecuting black people, and by becoming a Muslim, black people have the opportunity to join a religion that only has their best interests in mind. In racial-ethnic minority communities, religious spaces often serve as places of congregating and community; this makes it a natural place to engage in self-aware dialogue about the state of the racial-ethnic group. In Malcolm X, black Muslims were able to freely discuss issues and organize their plans for activism within temple walls; this behavior is not unique to the NOI or Muslims, but Malcolm X does a great job portraying how religion can support a racial-ethnic minority community in a different manner than the majority community.

This distinction is made clearer after Malcolm X’s pilgrimage to Mecca. Before deciding to make his pilgrimage, Malcolm X still retained his views regarding the malevolent nature of white people, despite having separated from the NOI. When he returns to America, this mentality ceases to exist. Malcolm X explains how he views all people as equal and that anybody from any race can be a Muslim, even white people.

251 Malcolm x film
252 Lee, Malcolm X.
253 Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream Or a Nightmare, 17
This drastic change of view is the result of Malcolm X’s experience in Mecca worshipping with diverse people outside of an American racial-ethnic context. The racial-ethnic minority and religion dynamic doesn’t exist in this new location, and the version of Islam he receives is free of any pro-black theology that he’d been accustomed to. This is not to say that every religion is as inclusive as the version of Islam that the on-screen Malcolm X decides to practice, but every racial-ethnic minority community will use their religion as a means to foster community and mobilize for their benefit.

Apart from Lee’s understanding of how to represent a racial-ethnic minority religious community on film, Denzel Washington’s standout performance of playing Malcolm X’s character is influenced by his personal experience with racial-ethnic minority religion. Denzel Washington is a Pentecostal Christian, and he was raised by a father who worked as an ordained Pentecostal minister. He had even considered becoming a preacher before deciding to become an actor. Today, around 80% of the Pentecostals who attend churches that are classified as historically black churches identify as black. It’s likely that Washington has experienced the conditions of attending a racial-ethnic minority church and is familiar with the type of dialogue that churchgoers will resonate with in this space. His personal experiences in a black religious space gave him the insight to tap into the emotion that the historical Malcolm X harnessed during his speeches, and this allowed Washington’s Malcolm X to command

---


the attention of the audience. Every critic that reviewed *Malcolm X* thought that Washington’s performance “breathed life into the film” and captured Malcolm X’s “electrifying sense of articulation and control.” Lee’s decision to cast Washington as Malcolm X, regardless of his Christian beliefs, still resulted in a great performance because Washington is talented and he understands how race and religion intersect in black spaces. If other directors of racial-ethnic religious activist biopics factored an actor’s experiences with religion into their casting decisions, perhaps the film's actors would be able to engage with their material in a more believable and captivating manner.

**Making the Case to Study Religion**

An analysis of these four racial-ethnic religious activist biopics has indicated that religion merits more attention from Hollywood. These activist biopics often have goals of telling the story of their subject and inspiring people to learn from the subject’s history to improve the present. In particular, the directors of *Cesar Chavez*, *Selma*, and *Malcolm X* have all expressed an interest in encouraging their audience to emulate the activism of their respective subjects in a contemporary context. For this goal to be achieved, a comprehensive assessment of the historical subject and their strategies would need to be shown on film, including a look at how each activist utilized their religious views to empower their own movements. Currently, around 77% of American adults identify themselves as being religious and this constitutes the majority of the intended audience for most Hollywood films.256 Therefore, if a biopic wants to impress the most effective

---

call-to-action proposition possible on its audience, then filmmakers need to familiarize themselves with the religious traditions their subject is engaging with.

First and foremost, studying religion will allow filmmakers to be more intentional about the type of stereotypes they affirm. In *Gandhi*, Attenborough represents Jinnah and the proto-Pakistanis as being divisive, violent and the primary cause of Indian separation. When this portrayal of Islam is directly contrasted to the Christianized Gandhi, Attenborough ends up affirming the Western notion of Islam being a violent religion. One critic praised *Gandhi* as being a great biopic but acknowledged that a more critical film would’ve raised more questions about India-Pakistan relations and Gandhi’s role in their separation.²⁵⁷ I do not believe that he intended to propagate this type of messaging, however his reliance upon generic negative Islamic stereotypes results in his film contributing to Islamophobic sentiments. Additionally, it ruins an opportunity for the audience to see how Gandhi engaged with Islamic ideology to convince Jinnah that a Hindu-Muslim India was possible; instead, only American audiences are led to believe that Muslims are inherently decisive and thus can’t be reasoned with.

Also, studying religion will allow filmmakers to more confidently tell the story of a people-group, even their own people group. Diego Luna, the director of *Cesar Chavez*, was born in Mexico City but he still doesn’t demonstrate an understanding of how integral Chavez’s spirituality was to the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers in the UFW.²⁵⁸ The film features scenes where people gather into a church to meet or Mass is

being held, but they are brief and there’s no attempt to connect these settings to the mission of the UFW. Historically, the UFW’s decision to make a pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento was a religious-based one, as were Chavez’s hunger fasts. By not exploring the religious dimensions of these actions, they appear to be odd and Luna undermines his intentions to share the legacy of the renowned Chavez with aspiring Latinx activists.

**Comment to Hollywood**

If I were to speak to Hollywood as an entity, I’d have two recommendations. The first would be to not secularize racial-ethnic minority religious activists. Out of the four films examined in this thesis project, the secularization of Cesar Chavez had the worst effect on the ideological cohesiveness of the narrative. Religion serves a purpose for people, especially in an activism context where maintaining hope for a better future is vital to the movement’s continued operation. By trying to omit or subdue the religious elements of a religious activist movement, filmmakers risk negatively affecting the story they are trying to tell.

My second recommendation would be to remember that having a character with a spiritual component gives depth to their character. In this thesis project, Lee’s *Malcolm X* does the best job of representing how religion can be used to facilitate a character’s growth throughout a narrative. In the beginning of the film, Malcolm X was living aimlessly and found himself associating with pimps, drugs, and thieves. After his prison conversion, he was able to abstain from past vices, but he now harbored an intense hatred for white people that was taught by Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Then,

---

259 Luna, *Cesar Chavez*. 
when he separated from the NOI, Malcolm X became aware of a more inclusive version of Islam and acknowledged that all people can be Muslim and not every white person is evil. During this story, Malcolm X was constantly asking questions about his beliefs and trying to address his doubts, but it was never the focus of the film. Lee spent a lot of screen time communicating how Malcolm’s religion influenced his activism, but he made Malcolm X a religious film. Lee’s willingness to engage with the NOI’s creed and what the historical Malcolm X found enticing about their beliefs allowed him to create a much deeper character than the other on-screen activists were in their respective films.

If Hollywood filmmakers were to consider avoiding secularization and engaging with the spirituality of their biopic subjects, I’m sure future biopics’ narrative integrity and character depth would benefit.

**Further Research**

When looking at the cases examined in this project, all of the racial-ethnic religious activists are male. In my opinion, this is a function of a patriarchal society undervaluing the roles that women performed in these movements. As of writing this in May of 2021, there are not many full-length Hollywood films that feature female racial-ethnic religious activists. However, I believe a project similar to this one should be conducted once more films highlighting the historical contributions of women get made.
Bibliography


http://books.google.com/books?id=hQg9DAAAQBAJ


“Professor Rachel Dwyer | Staff | SOAS University of London.” Accessed May 2, 2021. [https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30894.php](https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30894.php).


