

Storying for Urban Dwellers: Evangelism via Film Discussion Groups

by *Edward Smither*

As our group was finishing up, I was pleased by the rich discussion we had had over the significance of the scapegoat (Lev. 16:1-34), Jesus being the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 NIV), and the fact that Jesus chose not to verbally defend himself before Pilate (Matt. 27:15; Mark 15:5). Only this was no Bible study group; rather, these were subjects that naturally surfaced during a discussion following Peter Weir’s film “Dead Poets Society” (1989) starring Robin Williams. In the current missions movement, a great deal of emphasis and energy is being placed on orality and storying in presenting the gospel. While this important and strategic effort is generally geared toward rural and often illiterate people who have not been formally educated, some of the principles of storying have proved helpful in our outreach to urban university students in North Africa. Instead of recounting Bible stories, we have made use of others’ stories (films) to raise issues from our story (the gospel) toward presenting the gospel through discussion. In this paper, I would like to discuss the strategic nature of this form of evangelism in our context as well as relate some practical aspects of what we are learning.

Strategic Nature of Film

They Are Already Watching Films

Why is the use of film strategic and relevant in communicating the gospel in our context? First, despite living in a society under girded by Arab-Muslim cultural values, students and youth in the cities are quite influenced by the outside world. I purposefully use this vague term because it would be simplistic to assert that North African youth are merely impacted by the West. Among the female students in the university, some are influenced by French and Italian fashions while an increasing number are donning the veil to practice a more traditional Islam like that of Saudi Arabia or Iran. Still others are following the fashion trends of “modern” eastern countries like Lebanon and Turkey. While surveying students about their tastes in music, I have been surprised that in the same breath a student will list among his/her favorite artists: Bryan

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Adams and Abdhalim al-Hafid (Egyptian singer of the 1960s); Celine Dion and Oum Kalthoum (another traditional Egyptian singer); or Eminem and Cheb Mami (Algerian pop singer). The same students are also watching Oprah Winfrey on a channel from Cairo or Dubai and then flipping over to watch the news on Al-Jazeera.

While the diverse influences are resulting in a developing and sometimes confused worldview, it is the means of influence—the media—that is the common factor. Nearly every home in our country has a digital satellite dish capturing television shows, films, news channels, and religious broadcasting (both Christian and Muslim) from around the world. While far fewer families have a home computer, a majority of students in all academic disciplines regularly visit internet cafés for research, reading the news, entering chat rooms, and checking their email. Finally, if one is looking for a recently released Hollywood film that has not yet made it to DVD in America or Britain, they should browse the video shops in our capital city for a pirated copy available for as little as \$1.

University students in our country are into films. Often, I am the one needing to consult my student friends about whether a certain film is any good or worth watching. Hence, to invite a student to watch and discuss a film or to launch a film club is quite a strategic point of common ground in light of the interest in film that already exists.

People Like Stories

A second strategic reason for using film in evangelism is that people like stories. Not only that, narrative has the unique ability to contain precious spiritual truths and then store them in the mind and heart of the listener. People get bored by lists, facts, and dates; yet they perk up when someone tells a story. This includes children in Sunday School gathered around a flannel board depicting Noah's Ark, an illiterate group of village women listening to a dramatic presentation of the Prodigal Son, or a post-modern European stu-

dent listening to a Christian's personal experience of faith.

Film is also a form of narrative or story-telling (Nelmes 2001, 54). Its closest relative in the artistic realm is the novel (Monaco 2000, 44-48). Though generally lacking a narrator and much more condensed in content, a film takes the novel's narrative from the page and projects it onto a screen. Film, like story, has the ability to communicate spiritual truth in a way that mere propositional statements cannot. Having served among Muslims for nearly fifteen years, my gospel presen-



tations have often come to a screeching halt once the subject of Jesus' death on the cross was raised. "This is false" .. "This could not happen because Jesus was a prophet and a good man" .. "They killed him not, nor crucified him. Only a likeness of that was shown to them" (Qu'ran 4:157-58) have been some typical responses. In light of this experience, I was somewhat surprised that after showing "Passion of Christ" (Mel Gibson, 2004) two times in our home to different groups of students, not one person spoke up in the discussion time to say that it was false. It seems that a visual and dramatic presentation of the passion narrative had a compelling effect on people who would normally object to this account.

Film is a Neutral Story

While evangelistic storying strategies, including film resources like the "Jesus" film, "God's Story," and *Allah Mubaba*, emphasize communicating Bible stories in a relevant language and form, film based discussion groups

invite students to look at a story that is not purposefully or directly spiritual. Hence, any spiritual discussion that results actually originates from a film that is a neutral story.

Why is this important in our cultural context? Though North African Muslim students are generally more comfortable talking about matters of faith than European youth, there is nevertheless a growing tendency among students as they continue in academia to become wary of religious propaganda and proselytizing. Some of this probably results from the European influence on North Africa—particularly from North African professors who have completed their studies in Europe. In addition, there seems to be a general hesitation about groups who are proclaiming a message be they political (communists, opposition parties) or religious (Islamic fundamentalists). Indeed, in our context, the terms *tabshereen* (Christian evangelism) and *mubashareen* (missionaries) are understood in a negative sense and in one university; a notice is posted warning students about the efforts of Christian missionaries.

Film, literature, and art in general are narrative forms developed by artists who are not necessarily Christians that often raise important life and spiritual issues. As the story form and the story-teller have no evangelical agenda, the listener's resistance to traditional forms of proclamation may subside. This point was made most clear to me several years ago while working with European and Muslim university students in France. On one occasion, we invited a small group of non-Christian students to go on a walking tour of the Louvre museum in Paris and a Christian student in Art History agreed to be our guide and talk about several paintings. Because the majority of the Louvre's works are religious in nature, she was able to talk about the painter, the period, and the style, as well as the story in each painting. As we sat in the museum's café afterward drinking expensive coffee, she had successfully recounted a few Bible stories and

key aspects of the gospel without the slightest hint of resistance. Hence, it was quite acceptable that anyone, including a Christian, could interpret the message of a painter and a painting even if it included significant allusion to the Bible and Christian faith.

In a similar manner, one North African professor was complaining to his Christian colleague about the presence of missionaries in the city spreading Christian propaganda. While being open about his own faith, the Christian professor invited his colleague, a professor of English Literature, to discover more of Christianity through his own field of study by offering him David Jeffrey's *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. The professor responded, "This is what we need—education not propaganda," and the book was added to the university library!

Like literature, films are neutral stories that often raise spiritual issues. Roland Emerich's "The Patriot" (2000), depicts Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson), a man living with regret for past sins and longing to find forgiveness. Nicolas Cage's character (Jack Campbell) in "The Family Man" (Brett Rahner, 2000) is forced to come to terms with his convictions on material and family values. The spiritual and Biblical themes in the "Matrix" trilogy (Wackowski brothers, 1999, 2003, 2004) could be explored for months. Hence, to engage in a spiritual discussion after viewing of one of these films is nothing more than one viewer dialoguing about his interpretation with another viewer. Again, in a contemporary North African context influenced by west and east where students are suspicious of propaganda, the neutral stories contained in film are a strategic common ground for rich discussions—including ones that lead to presenting the gospel.

Some Practical Thoughts

After several years of using film discussion groups as a means of initiating spiritual conversations with students, we have learned much through trial

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and error. More importantly, we have gleaned some insights about the people that we are trying to impact with the gospel. Consider the following practical suggestions.

1. Focus on one issue. Though some films have multiple spiritual themes in them, it seems more helpful to focus on one of them and pursue a more in depth discussion. In Ron Howard's "Cinderella Man" (2005), the value of not stealing, even if one is in extreme poverty, is raised early in the film. Spiritual purification is a key theme of Nathan Algren's (Tom Cruise) experience in "The Last Samurai" (Edward Zwick, 2001). Grace is probably the most important element in Jean Valjean's (Liam Neeson) development in Bille August's film version of "Les Misérables" (1998).

Film discussion groups are merely one strategy for ministry in the context of on-going personal relationships. With this approach, we should resist the urge to "get the whole gospel in" during one sitting. In my personal experience, I have found that friends can only digest so much content during one visit. Hence, we have learned to celebrate sharing one or two aspects of the gospel (i.e. grace, forgiveness, sin) in light of helping a friend progress to the next stage in the spiritual journey.

2. Film clips. Because most films are at least two hours in length and most students in our city are unable to meet for much more than that, it has often been a good idea to show a portion of a film and then discuss it. This is strategic because the group facilitator can choose the clip around a precise discussion topic. In a two-hour film club, we have shown thirty second to ten minute clips followed by at least an hour of discussion.

Another possibility is to use shorter films. Since 2001, the Damah Film Festival has invited promising filmmakers to submit short films devoted

to spiritual experience. Though the founders of the festival are evangelical Christians, the films are not limited to Christian faith or spirituality. With films ranging in length from less than a minute to twenty minutes, an ensuing discussion would have a natural spiritual emphasis. In our experience, a nine-minute film entitled "Light of Darkness" (Michael Cargile, 2001) yielded a one-hour discussion on themes such as prejudice and trust. The Damah Festival film submissions are made available each year on DVD for purchase at www.damah.com.

3. A couple of good questions. A key assumption in this paper is that films are neutral stories that often contain spiritual content, which can naturally be addressed through discussion. Though the riches are there, it does take a couple of good questions to mine them effectively. While focusing on one or two issues in the film, it is also key to launch the discussion with two or three questions. For instance, in "The Patriot" we might ask: Why does Benjamin Martin feel such regret for his sins? How does he seek to find forgiveness? Is he successful?

Though the discussion is initially framed around a couple of questions, we want to be flexible and pose follow-up questions for the purpose of clarification or to amicably challenge thinking. At the same time, we should resist the urge to "lead the witness" with overly directed spiritual questions. Rather, as discussion group facilitators, let us allow the conversation to have a natural life of twists, turns, disagreements and digressions.

Facilitating a discussion group requires faith and discernment. At times, a film like "Dead Poets Society" will take us far down the path of sharing the gospel; while at other times, we might only challenge some presuppositions. Sometimes, a wonderful gospel presentation will happen one on one in a café after the

group is over. In addition to faith and discernment, flexibility and an honest curiosity to learn will always be helpful principles in this approach to evangelism.

Conclusion

When Paul engaged the people of Athens in dialogue on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-33), he managed to boldly proclaim Christ by initially making reference to local philosophy, poetry, and religious practice. Paul's bridge to the gospel was not so much of a leap because these philosophies and practices were already pointing to the human condition in need of redemption. In the same way, film narratives often raise important issues that the gospel addresses. Hence, these neutral stories have the great potential to lead us into our story.

Urban dwelling students in North Africa, not unlike their grandparents from the village, are more impacted by the power of story than propositional statements. Due to the increasing availability of media forms like DVD and satellite television, film has become a preferred form of narrative. Hence, we are learning that film-based discussion groups are a strategic evangelistic storying strategy among North African university students who live in an urban context. **IJFM**

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