

Serenity

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor (Originally written for New Zealand, Methodist Taonga, December 2005. Reprinted with their permission.)

Buckle in for a wild ride. The movie *Serenity* is a fast-paced science fiction thriller that weaves the viewer through the complex debris of space junk and intriguing moral choices. Simon rescues his sister, River, from the all-powerful Alliance. They hide among a renegade bunch of thieves aboard the space-ship *Serenity*. River is a disturbed adolescent who gradually reveals a frightening mix of psychic and fighting powers. Pursued by the Alliance in the form of the powerful Operator, the crew of *Serenity* stumbles upon an evil secret and face a complex array of moral dilemmas.

Serenity is good art. The dialogue is witty. The characters are human enough to draw empathy. The action keeps the pace cracking. The movie has an aesthetic simplicity. Perhaps it is the meeting of east and west in samurai swords, asian language characters, Tokyo-like street scenes and strong female martial arts experts. *Serenity* is *Kill Bill* science-fiction.

Serenity is also intellectually satisfying, offering the thoughtful much to ponder over a post-movie coffee. Take the following probe of fundamentalism.

The Operator: "I believe in a world without sin."

Captain of *Serenity*: "So we die for your world."

And so the face of fundamentalism is laid bare. What is the impact of an optimistic belief in a better world on human people? When are idealistic actions actually a manipulative meddling in innocent lives? Mix these questions with the manifestation of evil in the form of an aggressive cannibal tribe and the movie offers a thoughtful probing of the nature of sin, evil and belief. It is a probing that Christianity must face, for our history includes pockets of religious violence that lie in stark contrast to the gospel message proclaimed by a peace-seeking Jesus.

What of the divine in this science fiction future? Whoever announced that "God is dead" and toasted the triumph of secular rationality obviously forgot to tell the contemporary science-fiction industry. For the movie *Serenity*, "tomorrow's God" is certainly not a "Christianity without God" (to quote from two recent Lloyd Geering publications). Rather future spirituality it is a complex interplay of peace, strength, intuition and emotional empathy.

Religion is present in the movie in the form of Shepherd Book, the peace-loving leader of a Christ-believing community.

So is spirituality. Captain Jean-Luc Picard launched *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a journey to the final frontier of space and a mission to "explore strange new worlds... To seek out new life; new civilisations... To boldly go where no one has gone before!" Accompanying Picard on this futuristic voyage was Counselor Deanna Troi. Her presence affirmed the need for spirituality and emotional intuition on any human exploration.

Similarly in *Serenity*, spirituality turns up trumps. The adolescent River is both psychic and fighting machine. It is the interplay of this complexity - her intuition, emotional empathy and feminine strength – that adds depth to the plot and muscle to the moral dilemmas.

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