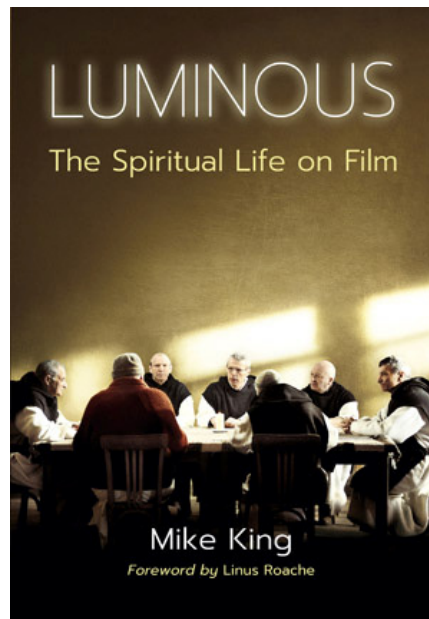


Luminous: The Spiritual Life on Film



Appendix: Sixty Must-See Films for the Spiritual Life

1 *Agnes of God*. Norman Jewison, 1985.

A materialist-minded lawyer is hired to defend a young nun accused of killing her baby, but is soon confronted with a religiosity she cannot so easily dismiss. In her encounter with the determined Mother Superior the chain-smoking lawyer pits science and Freud against religion, but is deeply affected by the young nun's piety and the older nun's wisdom.

2 *American Beauty*. Sam Mendes, 2000.

A satire on affluent suburban America, in which a man's midlife crisis provokes not a nihilism but a rhapsodical appreciation of the beauty of ordinary life.

3 *Anchoress*. Chris Newby, 1993.

Stunning black and white cinematography conveys something of Nature and "goddess" spiritualities, though its setting is medieval Christianity. It follows the spiritual vocation of a young woman who firstly becomes an anchoress but then realizes that her true spirituality is with the religions of the earth.

4 *The Apostle*. Robert Duvall, 1997.

A Southern preacher in an American church is on the run after violence. As a journey of atonement "The Apostle" rebuilds an old church and inspires his congregation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and St. Paul.

5 *Bad Lieutenant*. Abel Ferrara, 1992.

A corrupt officer is confronted with a nun whose forgiveness of her rapists jolts him out of his comfortable assumptions. A shocking drama that shows how layers of habitual corruption can be suddenly peeled back to discover integrity and the ability to act decisively for good.

6 *Baraka*. Ron Fricke, 1992.

Richly beautiful nature film with a debt to Reggio's *Qatsi* trilogy, but taken several steps further in its direct references to the spiritual life, and the contrasts with industrialized society.

7 *Cave of the Yellow Dog*. Byambasuren Davaa, 2005.

Gentle portrayal of the life of nomadic herdsmen in Mongolia, the film is shot in stunning landscape. A girl wants a dog as pet but the ramifications for the family are considerable. Will it reincarnate as a human, she asks? In subtle ways the shamanic-Buddhist background to their culture is portrayed.

8 *The Chosen*. Jeremy Kagan, 1981.

Two young Jews from different backgrounds grapple with their faith, modernity and the founding of Israel in a New York drama that provides some vivid insights into the essence of Judaism.

9 *Dead Man Walking*. Tim Robbins, 1995.

A docu-drama following the efforts of Sister Helen Prejean to save a man on death row. The killer is not easily likable and Prejean's New Testament conviction that State killings are wrong makes her few friends among the prison service or the victims' families. Yet her perseverance suggests that her Christianity is truer than that serving the needs of retribution.

10 *Dersu Uzula*. Akira Kurosawa, 1975.

Follows the life of a Siberian animist hunter who finds all things in Nature to be alive. Shot in scenes of outstanding natural beauty, it prompts reflections on an ancient form of spirituality.

11 *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Robert Bresson, 1950.

A young French priest takes up a post in a village that has no time for him, his religion, and his ill health, but against all odds he brings God's grace to a bitter old woman. As he declines further in health and struggles with his own doubts he realizes that everything is indeed grace. Extraordinary.

12 *Dogma*. Kevin Smith, 1999.

Bouts of toilet humor in this film should not disguise serious religious intent, in a story of angels punished for their Old Testament violence. Redeemed by a rendition of God as a woman capable of both dishing out ultimate justice and cartwheeling in the flower beds.

13 *Donnie Darko*. Richard Kelly, 2001.

Surreal meditation on the transition from life to death for a teenager who cannot conform, informed by a giant rabbit who insists that the world is about to end. It's not every day that a jet engine lands in your bedroom.

14 *Drunken Angel*. Akira Kurosawa, 1948.

A classic meditation on compassion, in which a doctor—who is no saint—attempts to treat a gangster with little gratitude or any other saving grace. A study in how lives are bound together by unexpected acts.

15 *Elmer Gantry*. Richard Brooks, 1960.

A showman who is not quite a charlatan turns to the religious life out of love for a lady preacher. Successful at first, he is brought low in the end, but not before his calling begins to convince. Includes thoughtful dialogue across the religious-secular divide.

16 *Enlightenment Guaranteed*. Doris Dörrie, 2000.

A wonderful story of two German brothers who set out for a Zen retreat in Japan. Their journey is beset by mishaps, and their encounter with enlightenment unconventional in a study of "beginner's mind."

17 *The Fisher King*. Terry Gilliam, 1991.

Surreal atonement and redemption story concerning a selfish radio DJ confronted with the man driven to vagrancy after losing his wife. Two men make journeys home under the benign shadow of the Red Knight and the Fisher King story.

18 *Friendly Persuasion*. William Wyler, 1956.

Costume drama story of American Civil War Quakers with a serious ending. The film becomes a fine study in the

ethics of pacifism and the realities confronting its adherents.

19 *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964.

The universally recognized "must-see" Jesus film. Beautifully shot in black and white with non-professional actors, superb music. Altogether an utterly unconventional approach that leaves the gospel to speak for itself.

20 *Groundhog Day*. Harold Ramis, 1993.

This is a story of the moral development of a caddish weather forecaster plunged into the nightmare of a repeated day. In a world that he no longer controls the only constant is the lovely Rita, who cannot understand his circumstances but rejects his repeated advances. Gradually all that changes ...

21 *Haibane Renmei*. Yoshitoshi Abe, 2002.

Gentle and beautiful TV anime series on the theme of purgatory and redemption. Young people arrive in a midway world in strange cocoons. Some are penitent in their nature, others less so, but all await "the day of flight."

22 *Hail Mary*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1985.

A beautifully filmed meditation on women's spirituality and the mysteries of conception by a reputed atheist. Set in a world of French basketball and petrol stations it retells the virgin birth story without either skepticism or theological correctness.

23 *Himalaya*. Eric Valli, 1999.

A glimpse into the animist-shamanic culture of Nepal in a story of rival leaders of the annual salt-caravan. One leans to the new ways of the West, influenced by changes blowing up from far away, while the other holds to tradition.

24 *Ikiru*. Akira Kurosawa, 1952.

A minor bureaucrat fights the system to create a small children's park in postwar Japan. He is dying and this is his gift to life.

25 *Into Great Silence*. Philip Gröning, 2005.

A poetic documentary about life in a Carthusian monastery in France. It follows the lives of the monks in their reclusive order, creating with its stunning cinematography of mountain and cloister the very silence that the initiates are seeking.

26 *Jacob's Ladder*. Adrian Lyne, 1990.

A film that defines the "rubber reality" genre. What, if anything, is real in Jacob's life, and why does his chiropractor quote Eckhart at him? This is a demanding but very rewarding journey through the "bardo" of dying.

27 *Jai Santoshi Maa*. Vijay Sharma, 1975.

A rare glimpse into Hindu goddess devotionality in a low-budget production that was a seventies hit in India. A young woman's path to betrothal despite the jealousies of her sisters-in-law is guided by her devotion to the goddess.

28 *Kundun*. Martin Scorsese, 1999.

Masterful portrait of the life of the Dalai Lama with many glimpses into the spiritual life of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion. From his discovery as the reincarnated former lama to the moment of exile, the spiritual leader of Tibet is

shown grappling with the contradictions of an ancient religion confronted with the forces of modernity.

29 *The Last Wave*. Peter Weir, 1977.

A glimpse into the spiritual world of the Australian Aboriginal as a lawyer faces the parallel inundation of his civilization through the forces of Nature and the invasion of his mind by an ancient culture that seems to call to him.

30 *Latter Days*. C. Jay Cox, 2003.

A gay Mormon and a Los Angeles gay party boy fall for each other in a film that is initially sensationalist but develops into a thoughtful exploration of how a gay Christian faces contradictions and prejudice, and also how religion touches the non-religious.

31 *Little Buddha*. Bernardo Bertolucci, 1993.

A story of the life of the Buddha interwoven with the search in America for a reincarnated Tibetan lama. How does an average couple cope with the idea that their boy is meant to be a religious leader in a tradition a world away from their own?

32 *Maborosi*. Hirokazu Koreeda, 1995.

A hauntingly beautiful Japanese film which meditates on loss, love and compassion. A widow remarries and moves to a remote fishing town where her new husband finds the few right words at the right time and in the right setting of sea and sky to bring her healing.

33 *A Man Called Peter*. Henry Koster, 1955.

Biopic of the Rev. Dr. Peter Marshall, a preacher who twice served as Chaplain of the United States Senate. His sermons have an edge that make him stand out.

34 *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Peter Brook, 1979.

Film version of spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff's autobiography follows his early years, culminating in his esoteric training in a remote monastery in the Middle East. Includes superb scenes of the sacred dances and movements that were to become an important part of his teaching.

35 *Monsieur Ibrahim*. François Dupeyron, 2003.

Delightful story of a Muslim shopkeeper in Paris who becomes guardian to a Jewish boy whose parents abandon him. The old man introduces the boy to the practice of Islamic ablutions and Sufi whirling, leaving him with a profound spiritual legacy.

36 *My Neighbor Totoro*. Hayao Miyazaki, 1988.

Enormously popular with children, this film gives insight into the Japanese empathy for Nature and its animist understanding of it as a world peopled by spirit entities. In their new house in the country a young family become acquainted with a variety of helpful spirits.

37 *My Night with Maud*. Eric Rohmer, 1969.

A very French exploration of the conflict and common ground between Catholicism and socialism, explored through the love lives of young people and the challenge of Pascal's wager.

38 *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Hayao Miyazaki, 1984.

Animated film with profound animist implications, beautifully visualized. This is a story of humans, forests, and the spirit world in which the presence of good and evil in the protagonists is not clear-cut, and in which Nature claims dominance over such human concepts.

39 *Northfork*. Michael Polish, 2003.

A magical story of angels and a dying boy set in the mountains and plains of Montana. A hydroelectric scheme will sweep away a community, just as the white man swept away the world of the Native American. Perhaps.

40 *The Nun's Story*. Fred Zinnemann, 1959.

A nun's faith is challenged by war and by her commitment to medicine. A fine study of what it means to serve in a healing order when one's first loyalty is to medicine, not religion.

41 *Of Gods and Men*. Xavier Beauvois, 2010.

Based on the real-life story of Trappist monks endangered by Islamist forces in Algeria, we follow the choices made by each monk to stay and serve their community and their religion. A gripping insight into monastery life in the 21st century, and into the power of a genuine calling.

42 *Pi*. Darren Aronofsky, 1998.

A mathematical genius encounters corporate powers, the Kaballa, a 216-digit number that links an ancient religion with the stock market ... and an electric drill. An unusual exploration of the role of numbers in esoteric religious history, with an unexpected resolution.

43 *Powder*. Victor Salva, 1995.

A young man has paranormal gifts due to a lightning strike, which make him an outsider at school where all he wants is to fit in. But he helps people "see" their connection to other living things, which draws him close to some but further alienates authority.

44 *Princess Mononoke*. Hayao Miyazaki, 1997.

A spectacular parable of the battle between the Forest Spirit and the advancement of industrialization, this film conveys the Japanese sensitivity to Nature and its spirits along with the insight that no player in a drama is either wholly good or wholly evil.

45 *The Quarrel*. Eli Cohen, 1991.

Two survivors of the Holocaust meet after many years and dispute about religion, the war, and guilt. Many elements of the Judaic religion are present here. The world-renouncing rabbi and the secular Jew of literature cannot reconcile their differences, but are still bound by deep ties of religion and culture.

46 *The Razor's Edge*. Edmund Goulding, 1946.

Film version of Somerset Maugham's novel. It follows the spiritual journey of a demobbed World War I soldier unable to take up a purely material lifestyle, who travels to India in search of wisdom.

47 *Seven Years in Tibet*. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997.

The story of Austrian mountain climber Heinrich Harrer and his friendship with the young Dalai Lama. He instructs the Buddhist leader in Western ways, while

absorbing the ancient religious traditions of the “roof of the world.”

48 *The Son*. Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2002.

A Belgian carpenter is provoked into an extreme reaction when he takes on a young offender. Forgiveness is the theme of this somber film, a forgiveness made unforgettable yet having no obvious religious source.

49 *The Song of Bernadette*. Henry King, 1943.

Biopic of Louise Soubirous, the young woman whose visions of the Virgin Mary led to Lourdes becoming a place of pilgrimage. Notable for the rueful skepticism of the local Prosecutor, and the dynamics between them.

50 *The Sixth Sense*. M. Knight Shyamalan, 1999.

“I see dead people,” confides a young boy to his psychiatrist. Together they take a gamble, that the spirits of the dead need understanding as much as if not more than the living. Will listening to them resolve their torment? They need to move on ... all of them.

51 *Spirited Away*. Hayao Miyazaki, 2001.

Extraordinary animated film of the spirit world inhabited by giant radishes, witches and frogs all serving in a bathhouse for spirit guests. In stumbles young Chihiro whose integrity is her only resource as she negotiates this bizarre world, hoping to rescue her parents from a spell.

52 *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... and Spring*. Ki-duk Kim, 2003.

A meditation on the cyclical progress of the master-disciple relationship in Korean Chan Buddhism reflected in the changing seasons of Nature. Set mostly on a small floating temple in a lake fringed with forests and mountains it is also a poetic investigation of the laws of karma.

53 *Thunderheart*. Michael Apted, 1992.

A young FBI agent called to a Native American reservation becomes entangled in the past: visions of the Ghost Dance and a glimpse of a non-white identity give him insight into the tragedy and spiritual life of America’s original peoples.

54 *To End All Wars*. David L. Cunningham, 2001.

The same setting as in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* provokes a Christian pacifist to argue for compassion over vengeance in a POW camp run by a harsh administration.

55 *21 Grams*. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003.

Meditation on culpability, bereavement, religion, life and death in an intertwined narrative of ordinary people confronted with tragedy and the violent emotions that follow. Life wins.

56 *Vanilla Sky*. Cameron Crowe, 2001.

A wealthy young man can afford to live in a virtual reality world which erases his disfigurement and elements of his past. But why does his beautiful girlfriend keep changing into another beautiful woman and cause him so much despair? His unconscious guilt erupts into his fake world and forces him to make an ethical choice.

57 *Whale Rider*. Niki Caro, 2002.

A young Maori girl challenges the sacred male tradition, secretly learning the martial arts forbidden to women. Her grandfather resists her right to be spiritual leader of their group until her action in saving a whale shows her power.

58 *Why Did Bodhidharma Leave for the East*. Yong-Kyun Bae, 1989.

An exploration of facets of Chan Buddhism in Korea, following teacher and pupils in a remote Zen temple. It contrasts the ancient wisdom of the Buddha in its application to the morality of a child and to the conundrum of the adult seeker in attempting a renunciation of modern life. Beautifully shot in natural settings.

59 *Wings of Desire*. Wim Wenders, 1987.

Astonishing meditation on the nature of angelic beings, their task in recording all that is of beauty, intellect and love in the human world of postwar Berlin, and the descent into human form of one of their kind, encouraged by a former angel: Peter Falk.

60 *Witness*. Peter Weir, 1985.

A Chicago cop is thrust into the world of the Amish, a religious group holding to 18th-century ways, who are in turn drawn into both the violence of the modern world and to learn respect for the policeman’s integrity.