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Race, Film, and Reconciliation
(English / College of Arts & Sciences)

When white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017, it forced Americans to deal with the very real fact that racial issues and narratives about race continue to define us today, as they have for our entire history. Three minutes into D. W. Griffith’s 1915 blockbuster film The Birth of a Nation we find this title card: “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seeds of disunion.” For our founding fathers and for many since, that has been a truth; slogans shouted by the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville were expressed in narrative form in The Birth of a Nation.

Religion and culture both represent primary ways that people make meaning about essential human questions. One is a formal quest, the other is generally informal and often unknowing, but both shape our perceptions, beliefs, and identity, and thus it is important to study both— for me, in concert with each other. All my work is interdisciplinary, and this research on race and film has been marked from its outset by collaboration and shared discussion. For this book, I intend to analyze the last century of so of American film and culture to determine how it has depicted race and prejudice, how those depictions have affected us individually and as a society, and how those depictions square with the teachings of faith and wisdom traditions. I’ll be focusing on important films in each era that illustrate changing opinions, mores, and cultural movements, from the militantly-racist The Birth of a Nation to the #oscarssowhite controversy 100 years later, and placing them within a context of religious teachings that bring wisdom to bear on the issues. My research process will involve conversations with critics, filmmakers, theologians, and audiences, and archival research. The finished project will, I trust, be a well-received book synthesizing current scholarship, and the results will contribute to a larger ongoing dialogue about faith and culture, both in media appearances and reviews, and in public programs employing this research.