

Movie discussion resource **Murder on the Orient Express (2017)**
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Drama, mystery, suspense

Rating: PG-13 (for violence and thematic elements)

Length: 1 hour 54 minutes

Starring Kenneth Branagh (Hercule Poirot), Penélope Cruz, Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Daisy Ridley and Josh Gad.

Director: Kenneth Branagh

Based on the book of the same name by Agatha Christie (1934)



Brief synopsis

Hercule Poirot cleverly solves a crime in Jerusalem in front of a huge crowd, which involved "a rabbi, a priest, and an imam" (surely there's a joke there?). Poirot plans some time off in Istanbul, but is unexpectedly called to solve another mystery. A cabin is located at the last-minute on the Orient Express from Istanbul to Calais. The 3 day journey should offer a time of rest but this changes when a passenger is murdered in the compartment next to Poirot. The very same passenger who had attempted to recruit Poirot to protect him as he feared for his safety, but he had been turned down. An avalanche stops the train in an isolated place, and Poirot rises to the occasion to solve the murder mystery.

Kenneth Branagh directs and stars in this movie, and filmed it in 65mm, and it is best viewed in a cinema screening it in 70mm. The strength of this movie is the ensemble cast of wonderful actors. Official trailer here: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/murder_on_the_orient_express_2017/
Plot summary: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_on_the_Orient_Express_\(2017_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_on_the_Orient_Express_(2017_film))

General questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

The following is less about the film plot specifically which unfolds as one would expect from the novel or previous films. It is not a review but offers questions as a catalyst for discussion.

A black and white world

Early in the film, Poirot pronounces authoritatively that "There is right and there is wrong." No room for grey in his black and white world. He likes to have things 'lined up', symmetrical and in order. As the film unfolds and the conclusion reached, that worldview is challenged for him and for the viewer. What is justice? What is truth? Is retribution appropriate to bring a just outcome? It is interesting to explore Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_W._Fowler). It is said that most Christians remain within Stage 3, arising in adolescence and characterized by conformity to authority and the religious development of a personal identity. Any conflicts with one's beliefs are ignored due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies. Stages 4-6 involve recognition of complexities and paradox, and take on board that there is more 'work' to do to make sense of life's difficult questions. But many Christians balk at dealing with this and prefer the 'black and white' answers to moral and ethical questions (a simple 'right' and 'wrong' approach to avoid complexities).

Stage 4 - (usually mid-twenties to late thirties) is a stage of angst and struggle. The individual takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. As one is able to reflect on one's own beliefs, there is an openness to a new complexity of faith, but this also increases the awareness of conflicts in one's belief.

Stage 5 - acknowledges paradox and transcendence relating reality behind the symbols of inherited systems. The individual resolves conflicts from previous stages by a complex understanding of a multidimensional, interdependent "truth" that cannot be explained by any particular statement.

Stage 6 - the individual would treat any person with compassion as he or she views people as from a universal community, and should be treated with universal principles of love and justice.

=> Discuss your own journey and where you are these 'stages'. What may have been a catalyst for

change or an invitation to think differently? How have you dealt with the times of confusion and troubling questions. Have you found times that have been liberating, and enlightening?

=> Identify also some of the issues in our contemporary world that may require a different world view than 'right and wrong'/'black and white' and invite approaches to life characterised in Fowler's Stage 4/5/6 eg:

* In some USA states, abortion is illegal for a victim of rape and that the victim may be forced to face her attacker over custody rights for a child conceived during an assault (often referred to as "parental rights for rapists")? Without legislation stopping a sexual assailant from claiming parental rights of a child, rapists are free to pursue custody or visitation rights of their biological offspring. What 'tools' may be helpful to engage with these ethical issues?

* One of the issues in the 'same sex marriage' discussion in Australia relates to legal rights for same sex couples, including issues about what happens to property and other assets when a partner dies. Superannuation is also a contentious area. It poses unique problems for same-sex couples, especially older couples. Heather McKinnon, an accredited family law specialist at Slater and Gordon, says, "They are less likely to make their relationship public because of homophobia and family opposition so family members might say 'they are just housemates, they're not spouses' and shouldn't get (proceeds from) the estate or superannuation. If a will leaves everything to a partner, siblings or other family members may refuse to accept it was a defacto-like relationship. Gay or lesbian partners may be less likely to be invited to family events like weddings and graduations, and the lack of public recognition of relationships makes it harder for them to prove defacto status". Superannuation funds are problematic because a trustee determines who gets the money and they don't have to follow wishes expressed in a will. "In some cases people in relationships for 30 or 40 years have been denied de-facto status by superannuation trustees. Unlike heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian partners don't have the option to clarify their relationship status via marriage. The marriage equality debate seeks to enable people to have the same legal status. The law is not keeping up with what's happening within the broader culture." When it comes to emergency medical situations, it's even harder. Without recognition of same-sex marriage, partners can be excluded from hospital visiting rights, exercising automatic medical power of attorney for one another, making decisions on organ donation and signing the death certificate.

=> Discuss these and other examples that come to mind.

Turning to religion

One of the characters on the train has turned to religion, unable to forgive herself for something she sees as her fault. Religion has become her surety. She says things like, 'sin doesn't agree with me'. She sits in judgement on others, including their drinking habits (classic 'Stage 3' in Fowler's framework). Within the various Christian traditions, and within particular churches, what is your experience of being in fellowship with others who have approaches to faith that include Stages 3-6 of Fowler's framework ('black and white' at one end and 'enlightened' as polar opposites). How does unity in diversity/being 'one in Christ' work in this context? What does it ask of each of us?

Race matters

There is a 'staged' encounter between two passengers - a white professor and the African-American doctor, centering around attitudes on race. White privilege and particular ways of reading the biblical narrative may convince people that 'black people' are second best. Hence the campaign in the USA that #blacklivesmatter, adopted in Australia in cases like Elijah Doughty's death in Kalgoorlie when he was deliberately chased and run over by a white driver, or black deaths in custody. 'Casual' as well as overt racism remains endemic in contemporary society. Discuss.

Biblical narrative

While chapter and verse may be quoted to 'prove' a point of view, there may be counter chapters and verses in the biblical narrative. There is 'black and white' and plenty of 'grey' in the biblical narrative. Rather than the 'grey' proving a stumbling block, it invites us to a different way to do our theological reflection and exploration of the biblical narrative. It can be liberating!

Example: the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 had just been to Jerusalem, to worship God. Eunuchs had been excluded from temple worship by the Torah (Deut 23:1-3; Lev 21:18-20), because they were understood to be "blemished," excluded by the purity laws. Leviticus said they could not serve as priests; Deuteronomy said they could not be admitted to the assembly of God's people at all. Isaiah 56.4 specifically *includes* them. They are welcomed like everyone else who keeps the sabbath and holds fast the covenant. 'Cherry picking' verses and 'proof texts' may mask the complex questions the biblical narrative invites us to explore. Discuss.