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Jesus Camp

Michael Friesen
University of Toronto, mfriesen@utoronto.edu

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Jesus Camp

Abstract

This is a review of *Jesus Camp* (2006).

Though Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* received the 2007 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature for which *Jesus Camp* had been nominated, Heidi Ewign and Rachel Grady's documentary is neither a lesser exemplar of current documentary film-making nor less contentious within the current American political fray. *Jesus Camp* uncovers a rarely considered side of ultra-conservative American Protestant Christianity, exploring the identity of children of "strong religion."¹

Ewign and Grady follow three American children – Levi, Rachael and Tory – as they wrestle with growing-up in a socio-political climate that is presented and perceived as being hostile to their emerging religious identities and commitments. The film chronicles the three children as they engage in a spiritual battle to "take back America for Christ" as they interact with their peers at summer Bible camp, participate in pro-life rallies, attend home-school, discuss musical preferences, pray, and generally strive to become moral persons and citizens.

Identity is not formed without influence, as Ewign and Grady are aware, and this is where the film's import to the study of religion is seen. Becky Fisher, leader of Kids on Fire, a Pentecostal children's summer camp in North Dakota, is an integral figure in the shaping of Levi, Rachael and Tory's faith. Fisher's interactions and reflections provide insight into the complex and influential interactions between children and the social structures that inform and order their

lives. This is not to say that the children in *Jesus Camp* are without agency; the attentive viewer will recognize "normal" pre-teen concerns and behaviours in these three children developing their own voices. However, *Jesus Camp* does raise important questions about the children's psychological development in a milieu of strong religion.

As to be expected, the documentary is not without controversy. Charges that Ewign and Grady misrepresent and polemicise their subjects are in no short supply. A simple internet-search is revealing in this regard. Nevertheless, it is worth noting Ewign and Grady's attempt to present as judgement-free a documentary as possible was met with positive assessment by the documentary's featured subjects, save the recently deposed president of National Association of Evangelical and former pastor of Colorado Springs' New Life Church, Ted Haggard (so reported the directors after a screening of the film in Toronto, Canada). Be that as it may, what *Jesus Camp* is good at doing is provoking viewers' responses and reflecting their level of dis/comfort with so-called fundamentalist religion. Covering a contentious religious social movement embroiled in contemporary American (and global) politics, *Jesus Camp* sometimes provides viewers less insight into the workings of strong religious identities than their own feelings; *Jesus Camp* becomes a valuable reference point by which to measure and assess one's own subjectivity.

As per Ewign and Grady's alleged neutrality towards their subjects, viewers should be aware that though the directors do not offer any narrative or interpretive commentary themselves, the documentary is framed with critical commentary by Air America Radio host, Mike Papantonio. While such a framing is intended to establish a wider socio-political context for the film, questions as to execution (and even necessity) might be considered in light of its overall effect on the documentary's tone. Likewise, the appropriateness of background music should be assessed considering the psychological power music has. While watching a film without background music might appear absurd (not to mention unappealing), so might claims to neutrality in a documentary that uses music at all! The emotional mood or effect of the electronic ambient music used in *Jesus Camp* may be perceived as unsettling by some while mysterious to others. Whatever the effect, the director's choice of background music is curious. Might a more "neutral" choice have been some popular Christian music with which Ewign and Grady's subjects would be familiar?

Providing a unique glimpse into the religious experience of children of strong faith, *Jesus Camp* explores a facet of strong religion that is often overlooked for all the political and social uproar surrounding the kind of religious identity documented there. In the midst of the current American Culture Wars, *Jesus Camp* presents an insightful (even if biased) picture of an influential socio-political

movement from a rarely considered perspective. If presented with sensitive awareness to the politically loaded nature of its subject matter, *Jesus Camp* could be a useful resource in the classroom to students of contemporary trends in American religion, strong religion, and children's religious identity and experience.

¹ For a description of "strong religion" see Almond, G., Appleby, R. S., & Sivan, E. (2003). *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.