"The Apostle": An Interview with Robert Duvall

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Abstract
The Journal editors recently had the opportunity to interview Robert Duvall about his new movie, "The Apostle". The interview was especially interesting because it is so much Duvall's own film. He wrote the script, starred as the lead character, and directed the film. When no Hollywood studio would produce it, he also turned to his own production company (Butchers Run Films), put up his own money (five million dollars), and produced the film himself.

Many people have interviewed Duvall in recent months about the film and about his entire movie and stage career. We focused our interview more narrowly on the picture of religion in the film and on the morality of the lead character Duvall plays, the preacher, Eulis "Sonny" Dewey.

Author Notes
The Apostle was the winner of 1998 Spirit Award (independent films) for Best Film, Best Direction, and Best Male Lead.
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**Some Fake; Some Great**

What does Duvall think of southern Christianity and revivalist preachers in general? He has a fascination for them which began more than thirty years ago when he visited a Holiness church in the small town of Hughes, Arkansas. He says that he was intrigued by the cadence, rhythms and honest faith he witnessed in the songs and tent-meetings there. For Duvall, these revivalist tent-meetings are "an important part of American culture." The preaching is "a distinct American art-form."
"The best preacher I ever met," says Duvall, "was a 96 year-old black man from a little church in Hamilton, Virginia. He seemed to me more spiritual than the Dalai Lama or Mahatma Gandhi. This guy was great. He had a great cadence of preaching, a great honesty." Duvall invited a Jewish film-director friend and his Catholic wife to hear him preach. "It was terrific," Duvall recounts. "The director told me a year and a half later that he could never get the preacher entirely out of his mind. He was that impressive."

"A lot of these preachers are phony, but a lot of them are not."

It was from the same black preacher that Duvall borrowed an introduction and a song. The preacher ended every sermon with the same words: one day he expected, he said, to get into a little airplane. He would fly off not to London or Chicago or New York or any earthly city. He expected on that day, his last day, to fly past the sun and the stars and directly into heaven. Then the preacher would pause and the whole congregation would begin to sing, "I'll Fly Away."

That kind of borrowing, from the actual preachers and congregations of Holiness churches, is typical of the film.
Sonny is an ordinary guy

What about the lead character, Sonny himself? Sometimes he seems pretty good, sometimes he is pretty bad. What was Duvall saying about Sonny?

He pointed out there have been other movies about Pentecostal religions, but they never gave the people and their religion their due. Movies such as "Leap of Faith" (Steve Martin and Debra Winger) and "Elmer Gantry" (Burt Lancaster) were fakes. "They patronize," Duvall says. "They put quotation marks around the preacher. They don't give the minister or his congregation their due."

"Some religious people might ask why I would make such a movie and emphasize that this evangelical preacher has weaknesses. And my answer is that we either accept weaknesses in good people or we have to tear pages out of the bible. I would have to rip the Psalms out of the bible and never read them again. Because no one less than the greatest king of Israel, King David, the author of the Psalms, sent a man out to die in battle so that he could sleep with his wife. And that was a far more evil thing than anything Sonny would ever, ever do.

"So here's King David, the great poet of the Psalms that we laud and he did something that was far worse than anything this present preacher would do. But because this is today, and not removed romantically to the past, we judge Sonny quickly and harshly. But, you know, he's just an ordinary guy. He did not commit
premeditated murder. He didn't go to that church social and the baseball game with the intention of killing the young preacher. It just happened. Smack!

"I still wanted to show that crime doesn't pay. He didn't have a great lawyer, and he didn't get off without punishment. No more than Karla Faye Tucker should have gotten off without punishment in Texas, despite what Pat Robertson might have thought. Crime does not pay. If you are saved and accept the Lord, you cannot use that as an excuse to avoid punishment.

"Sonny doesn't escape punishment. But he's a man of action. After killing the man, guys like us would probably wait around to be caught, but Sonny takes action. He knows he's done something wrong. It happened involuntarily, and so he leaves. He kneels at the crossroads and prays, 'Lord, lead me.' He abandons his car and goes off to do something to make himself better.

"No, he was never a bad guy. He was a good guy. But he did something bad. So he is full of good and bad. Sonny's a good guy; he believed he had a calling from the time he was twelve; and he errs like most characters do, you know?

"He's a kind of percentage mixture at the beginning and at the end. There's a certain percentage chance he will do good and a percentage chance he will again err. But he knows he has erred and that he needs confession and redemption.
"He's working in the restaurant in Bayou Butte, Louisiana and he sees his new woman-friend, Toosie (Miranda Richardson), whom he has dated a couple of times. She's together again with her family at the restaurant. That really hits him. He suffers a broken heart. Humanly, he knows he has defeated himself. He has himself sent her back to her husband, back to her family. But that "success" hurts him. He has the pain of a man losing something, his relation to Toosie. It was something he had thought might become beautiful. But he knows it's right that she's back with her husband and her children.

The Power of the Holy Ghost

We asked what Duvall thought about the value of the Pentecostal revivalist religions. In the movie's beginning, Sonny stops at an accident scene, finds a wrecked car, and a guy and girl lying motionless inside it. He reaches through a window, puts the girl's hand on the boy's, prays for them, and then her hand moves. Was there a message in that?

Duvall: "Definitely. When we did it, I said to the cameraman, 'Frame down to her.' And so we showed her, and I put her hand on her boyfriend's hand so we are all connected. And I wanted that look: her hand to move, to show that the power of prayer works. The healing of someone. The movement of something. God moving in mysterious ways. Exactly. This power is based on the biblical authority,
'Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there'. Every time I saw that I got goose pimples on my arms. That scene really tells a lot: that Sonny is doing good work and that the power of the Holy Ghost was there.

"Sonny knows he is serving the Lord. He walks back over to his own car, where his mother is waiting. 'Mama,' he says, 'we made news in heaven this morning, we made news in heaven!' Yeah, that scene was meant to be there. It was the power of the Holy Ghost.

"There was a guy there, a tough old Holiness church guy, watching us film. And he said later that when he heard Sonny say those words he also got chill bumps. That told me those were the right words. It meant something to those people themselves, in their churches. It was definitely meant to be there. The power of the Spirit.

"The scene sets the stage for the rest of the movie. Sonny tries to help people and God can heal. God does guide the lives of individuals and does fill them with the Holy Ghost."

**People's Own Religion**

In "giving people their due," Duvall used many non-actors who were part of the small-town Holiness churches. What was the objective there?
Duvall: “I tried to mix the non-actors with the actors. I tried to turn the whole film-making thing around as much as possible. I didn't want to come in and tell them what to do. I wanted them to show me what they do. That is why we used non-actors with that kind of background.

"The assistant director, who helps coordinates the scenes, holds the non-actors within certain limits, but within those limits their performances are a very spontaneous thing. Like those little twin boys, playing in the church aisle. How are you going to direct them? You don't direct them. They were born into these churches. So when they want to jump up and down, they are going to jump up and down. That's why we used so many non-actors. We tried to let the story come out from their own community.

We asked Duvall about two of the most prominent characters in the church scenes, Sister Johnson and Sister Jewell. We learned that neither was a professional actor and that both exemplified the religion to which they belonged.

Duvall: "One we got from one of the Holiness churches in Lafayette and one came from Shreveport. There was a state-wide convention of churches. Ed Johnson, the casting director, and I went there and watched. And the whole Louisiana mass choir -- we got them for the movie. We chose a guy who had just
been confirmed as a minister and another from way out in the country in Louisiana. We tracked him down after he had been at the state convention.

"And Sister Jewell, who gave testimony, that was all her own testimony. She came up with it herself. That is what the people in the Holiness churches do. So we just planned it as much as we needed. We put the camera on long lens and just let things happen. We wouldn't say 'Now it's your close-up time. Are you ready?'. Instead of doing it that way, like in most movies, these people never necessarily knew when the camera was coming on them."

**Off the bulldozer and accept the Lord**

We asked where Duvall had gotten material for the script. Again it came from the people themselves. He said he had been collecting stories and phrases for more than thirteen years, in pretty disorganized fashion. But he collected a lot of stories and phrases he used in the film.

Duvall: "Yeah, I know a preacher, Paul Baggett, who was with us in the team-preaching scene (in New Boston, Texas, outside Fort Worth). He told me that years ago a guy came on a bulldozer, planning to destroy his meeting tent. So Paul took out the bible and put it in front of the bulldozer. He said, 'Go ahead and go over my bible.' And the guy wouldn't do it. He had a pistol and everything, but he wouldn't do it. Later he was saved, but the reason he was coming there with the
bulldozer was because his girlfriend had already come to the tent and been saved. And so now she wouldn't shack up with him anymore! That's why he was so mad.

"So I pieced Paul's story together with another one that reinforced it. This story was about a guy who was going to put a firebomb in a church in the Bronx. The preacher dared him to come in and the guy got down and accepted the Lord. So maybe we are all on a kind of search . . ."

Sonny's strength

We asked about Sonny's strength. He seemed to weather so many storms and disappointments and yet come out with happiness and re-dedication.

Duvall: "Yeah, he does. He sees things positively. You are the first ones to say that, but I remember way back, when I first thought of the character, I knew I wanted him to be really sanguine. I envisioned a guy who would just keep going, seeing the will of the Lord, and not be like those that might just sit on their hands.

"Sonny always has one foot in really trusting what he believes in, even though he errs. If someone took your church, like Jessie took his, and if someone took your wife, like the youth minister took Jessie, it would be a hard thing to deal with. He didn't intend to kill anybody, but it happened on the spur of the moment. 'Oh, my God!', he knows he's done something wrong."
'I gotta leave,' he thinks; 'what do I do?' 'Lord, lead me,' he says. He still depends on the Lord, you know, even though he has sinned. So he begins an odyssey, the whole film is an odyssey journey.

Both loud and soft

We saw there was a lot of shouting in the film, loud singing and Sonny shouting personally at God. And yet there also were some important moments of quiet. Did that have special meaning?

Duvall: "You're sure right. It did. Sonny shouted as loud as Job ever did. There was nothing wrong with shouting at God. I like that scene where I go through the commandments. And then I say, 'The 11th commandment, "thou shalt not shout,"' (pause) does not exist!' Yeah, I made that up. Right there. That's the way he felt and the way these people felt.

"But I wanted to make something else obvious. Sometimes these people yell and carry on, and sometimes they get quiet and are sincere. There's that time I was sitting alone in the borrowed pup-tent. We re-edited that scene to make it clear. I am sitting there, meditating, listening for "the still, small voice" [1 Kings 19] of Jesus. As it says in the bible, there is a time to 'Go in thy closet and the Father will reward thee openly.' There are two sides to these guys.
"And then, just before I go into the church to preach with Brother Blackwell (John Beasley from Omaha), I step back. I just want a moment to myself. I got that from watching these preachers. They often want to be alone for a second. They turn around and bow their heads. And then they go to do something."

**Different religions, same goal**

"Another thing I want to emphasize is the cultural contrast I saw between religions. By the time we were finished cutting, that was not obvious. Like Catholics have a lot of mediators, going through saints and Mary or whatever. But I love the directness of these people. They relate directly with God, not going through anything.

"Protestants in general, but especially these people, say things to God directly, like I do in the film: 'I always call you "Jesus"; you always call me "Sonny". I'm on the devil's hit-list; I'm gonna get on Jesus' mailing-list!' 'Holy Ghost explosion,' 'Short-circuit the devil!' 'I'm a genuine Holy Ghost Jesus-filled preaching machine here this morning!' I use those phrases in the film. I heard them from the preachers and from the people. These were their terms. God is immediate to their lives.'

"Sonny sees a Catholic priest blessing fishing boats as they leave the harbor. He says, 'You do it your way, and we do it mine. But we get it done, don't we.'
That's the tension between religions. There are different forms and prejudices, but I wanted Sonny to show an acceptance of another religion because both were trying to achieve the same end.

"Faith helps Sonny feel positive about the future. That was something I wanted to show in the movie. We all have a cradle-to-the-grave journey to make and, in between, what do you do? There's got to be something hereafter. And I think, underneath, what Sonny wants to do is constantly to make amends so that he is ready for that day when he is called home. So that's kind of like the underlying thing and we all think of it."

The Final Product

Last of all, we wanted to know if Duvall was happy with the final product. How did the final editing go?

Duvall: "Just before release, we got another opinion, and thirty minutes were cut, but the cuts stung me. We lost the ethnic points, the religious differences. Previously, things had added up and it's so easy to mess them up. So it was a tough time for me. I had painted myself into a corner: the shorter the film the more showings you can get and the more money it would make. But some things I didn't want to lose."
"So, I sat down and addressed sixty things I didn't like about the cuts, explaining them, and so on. Then the final version went to about two hours and fourteen minutes and it was, to my eye, like a trimming process rather than a degutting, which is what I felt before had happened. That would've been death. I would've gone crazy.

"But this way I like it. It's more trimming than slashing. Cutting here, this, that, taking a little out of the flat patter scene. Oh, it's okay. It's better.

"But the thing about it, which is really nice, is that people understood the film. Like in New York, in hip New York, they got it. And then I was worried about the religious side, but the 700 Club wants me to talk on it. So like, you know, it's being accepted. It is a strange crossover. Very often some of the religious miracle plays you see on television can be very corny, I find. And so simplistic. But here's one that's different.

"Somebody said, 'Well, maybe you're finally showing the south the way it is instead of making L'il Abner out of it.' And you know, that was my intention. I wouldn't even want to go near the subject if I didn't give people -- these people -- their due. Whether you totally agree or not, you don't have to. There's a lot of it I do like, a lot of it, but I want to give them their due and once again turn film-making around so that the story comes out from them. It is very important to me.
"I even heard that David Denby, in the *New York Review*, said it was the best film ever made in America on a religious subject. He's a guy who usually rips everything and he really ripped *Tender Mercies*. But he knows you can't write those people off. You get below the Mason-Dixon line and you have some of the best music, culture, the two races, the literature, and it's so rich, so deeply rich in many things. So why not try to get it right if you're going to make a film of southern religion? That's what I wanted to do."