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Come Sunday

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Come Sunday

Abstract

This is a film review of *Come Sunday* (2018) directed by Joshua Marston.

Keywords

Christian Universalism, Pentecostalism, Carlton Pearson

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Come Sunday (2018), dir. Joshua Marston

Carlton Pearson was an extremely successful Pentecostal preacher at a large church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but some two decades ago he began to doubt what he was preaching. He could not reconcile God's love with the idea that countless people are sent to hell for being non-Christian. The film represents this change through two events that affected him: his unsaved uncle kills himself in prison, and he learns of countless non-Christians dying during the Rwandan genocide.

Faced with this challenge, he prays. He then believes that God has revealed to him that no one goes to hell, no one is finally rejected, because Christ died for all. Needless to say, most of his church rebels, as they find this insulting: why then have they been coming to church all these years? Does it really not matter whether they sin or not? Pearson says that sin is still wrong, but God's grace forgives all sins, and God will find a way to save all. His continuance in this doctrine eventually leads to a heresy trial and his excommunication from the church.

Pearson is not the first Christian minister to become a universalist: both the leading Protestant (Karl Barth) and the leading Roman Catholic (Karl Rahner) theologian of the 20th

century essentially had this view, and their views have influenced many others. As recently as 2011, Evangelical Christian leader Rob Bell wrote *Love Wins*, which advances the thesis of universal salvation. Still, most churches have not embraced this view, as it seems to them to make faith and moral reform irrelevant. During his trial in the film, Pearson asks the bishop whether he wouldn't save his sinful father from hell, if he could; the bishop says no, demonstrating a condemning and judgmental attitude too often seen in Christianity. Pearson believes God would be a monster if he did not save all he can, and as God is all powerful, God does not need to condemn anyone to hell.

Pentecostal Christianity, like most of Evangelical Christianity, believes that we are free to choose to follow Christ and to become morally regenerated. In this way, they avoid the predestinarian view that God has arbitrarily chosen to give faith to some and not to others. But it still may appear arbitrary that some have the chance to hear the gospel, and others do not, and those who have greater difficulty turning from their sins may not be entirely to blame for their actions. Pearson's struggles with this lead him to his new views, and although he loses many parishioners, he has the support of his wife and many others. Today, he preaches in Universalist Churches in Chicago and Tulsa.

The film is interesting in that it does not depict a minister giving up his faith to become less judgmental, but rather expanding his faith as a way to become less judgmental. The story was originally broadcast on the radio show *This American Life*, but more people will hear it by seeing this film on Netflix when it airs there in a few months. It's a story that will challenge some and surprise others: and if it creates more understanding of Christian Universalism, it will have done its work.

