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Interview with Carlton Pearson

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Interview with Carlton Pearson

Abstract

Editor John Lyden had the opportunity for a conversation with Rev. Carlton Pearson, the subject of the Netflix film *Come Sunday* which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2018. They discussed Pearson's theology of inclusion and what led him to it.

Keywords

Universal Salvation, Gospel of Inclusion, Biblical Theology

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.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Carlton Pearson, subject of the Netflix film *Come Sunday* (2018) which I reviewed when I saw it at the Sundance Film Festival this year. The film dramatizes the true story of how Rev. Pearson embraced the view that God will ultimately save everyone and that no one will be condemned to eternal damnation, although this resulted in the loss of his large congregation and his expulsion from the Pentecostal Church after he was tried for heresy. He was then accepted as a United Church of Christ minister and also preaches in Unitarian Universalist Churches.

I asked Rev. Pearson what he thought allowed him to be open to this view, it being so at odds with everything he had been teaching and preaching up to that point. He noted that he always had trouble reconciling eternal damnation with God's mercy, especially because he had family members who appeared to have died "in sin."

"I saw the erosion happening in me, and in people around me, which was becoming like a mental illness," he said, as he saw members of the community die after living "unholy lives" who were then assumed to be doomed to hell, including his own grandparents. He recounted a conversation with Billy Graham after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 in which Graham noted that the Christian message did not seem to be improving the world. As Pearson reflected on this conversation, he concluded that fear of damnation was no incentive to good behavior, and that reassuring people of God's love did so much more for them.

At the same time, most Christian preachers do not come to this conclusion, and one rarely hears the doctrine of Universal Salvation expressed. Pearson attributes this to economics: "A lot of it is finance, when it comes to the church. People will pay any amount to get a ticket out of hell and a pass into heaven." Church leaders make a "business decision" to preach about hell, because they think this leads to greater success for their ministries. He paraphrases their view as, "If we

don't have any fear in our gospel, our offerings shrink." This view has become so accepted that it is unquestioned, but perhaps we need to change our views. Even the punishing God depicted in some parts of the Bible changes His mind about how to deal with humanity, Pearson points out, after He initially calls for the destruction of humanity in the flood.

Speaking of the dominant view of eternal damnation, Pearson says that "we don't need to repair this theology, we need to replace it with something that really makes more sense." When people ask him if they can do "anything" and still go to heaven, he asks them what they want to do, and why they want to do it. We can make our lives into hell right now for ourselves and those we love, or we can choose to live differently. Just as we expect children to learn to choose good because it is the right thing to do, rather than just out of fear of being punished, maybe we should expect the same of ourselves.

Pearson has found the film to be an extremely accurate version of his story; although some details were changed as is always the case, it is a witness to his journey to the Gospel of Inclusion. He looks forward to its premiere on Netflix this month as a way to convey this message to new audiences.