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God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today

Dan Wells
Florida State University, dew13c@my.fsu.edu

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God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today

Abstract

This is a book review of Terry Lindvall's *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

Author Notes

Dan Wells (Ph.D., Florida State University) researches the relationship between religion, race, politics, and media in the United States, with a particular focus on conservatism in the twentieth century. Follow him on Twitter @TheRealDanWells.

Lindvall, Terry. *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today*. New York: NYU Press, 2019.

“Donny was a good bowler and a good man, he was one of us,” Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) said as he held a Folgers coffee can atop a Malibu cliff. The “modestly priced receptacle” held the ashes of Walter’s bowling partner Donny (Steve Buscemi). Joined by the eternally abiding Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), Walter continued his eulogy with an address to God. “In your wisdom Lord you took him, as you took so many bright flowering young men at Khe Sanh, at Langdok, at Hill 364,” Walter continued, “These young men gave their lives. And so would Donny. Donny, who loved bowling . . . Good night, sweet prince.” Walter opened the coffee can and spread Donny’s ashes. The Dude, noticeably irritated and now covered in his friend’s remains, exploded in an expletive-ridden rant. “What was that shit about Vietnam?” The Dude exclaimed. Wrapping The Dude in his arms, Walter concluded his eulogy, “Let’s go bowling.” Throughout the Coen Brothers’ 1998 cult classic *The Big Lebowski*, Walter wrestled with the anxieties of surviving the Vietnam War, remembering his “friends who died face down in the muck,” decrying his worthy adversary “Charlie,” and brandishing a loaded pistol in a bowling alley. Walter’s eulogy expressed the anxieties highlighted throughout the film and the questions that God left unanswered. How could God allow Walter’s friends to die face down in the muck? How could God let Donny pass away of a sudden heart attack? How could God allow someone to

ruin The Dude's rug, which really tied the room together? Bowling provided the answer that God could not. More than twenty years after its release, *The Big Lebowski* still poses those same questions, inspiring dudes everywhere to "take it easy, man" in the face of chaos and uncertainty.

Like the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, Hollywood films have employed prayers in their narratives since the creation of the moving picture. Analyzing the full length of film history, Terry Lindvall's *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today* examines how films have helped shape popular ideas about the belief and practice of prayer. Lindvall argues that for over one hundred years, Hollywood films have functioned as "cinematic catechisms," prescribing how one is called to pray.¹ Examining the demographics, function, and context of how prayer is presented on film, Lindvall also seeks to place the use of prayer in film into a general historical context. Through detailed and lively description, Lindvall invites the reader into the film. There Lindvall paints a clear picture of how Hollywood simultaneously reflects and helps construct religious belief and practice from the early twentieth century to today.

Before reading the almost innumerable examples of prayer in film provided in *God on the Big Screen*, I realized that my life was a living confirmation of Lindvall's thesis. In 2013, my dear friends requested that I officiate their wedding. Not an ordained member of the clergy, I panicked. While bowling and mulling over

whether I could fulfill my friends' wishes, I turned to the gospel of The Dude. *The Big Lebowski* is the inspiration for the "slowest-growing religion in the world – Dudeism." Visiting dudeism.com, I became an ordained Dudeist Priest in the Church of the Latter-Day Dude. I joined over 450,000 other Dudeist Priests around the world, confirming the eulogy scene in *The Big Lebowski*: life is complicated, so just take it easy, man, and go bowling. There is no doubt, I completed my catechesis in the Church of The Dude, a process started years ago when I saw Walter Sobchak address God on the silver screen. Though my anecdotal evidence is enough to convince me that Lindvall's work "abides," *God on the Big Screen* is an important volume on the history and significance of prayer in Hollywood films.

Organized in eight chapters, Lindvall provides detailed descriptions of the presence of prayer in film through eight distinct eras. Lindvall organizes each era to reflect the popular function of prayer and its relationship to cultural trends: Silent Prayers (1902-1927), Censored Prayers (1927-1939), Foxhole Prayers (1939), Postwar Secular Prayers (1946-1964), Cynical Prayers (1964-1976), Revival of Prayer (1976-1988), Postmodern Prayers (1989-2000), and Millennial Prayers (2000-2017.) Each chapter features Lindvall's careful retelling of the most significant representations of prayer in the history of film. For example, in Chapter 5: Cynical Prayers (1964-1976), Lindvall claims that prayers in Hollywood reflected the cultural anxiety and upheaval associated with anti-war protests and demonstrations for civil rights. Films such as *Dr. Strangelove* (1964),

Slaughterhouse Five (1972), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) each communicated the doubts and debates of a culture failed by the government and the Almighty. In Chapter 7: Postmodern Prayers (1989-2000), Lindvall argues that prayer in films communicated the looming end of the millennium and a coming apocalypse. *Titanic* (1997), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and even *Angels in the Outfield* (1994) told audiences that one could face uncertainty and death with prayer. Each chapter features descriptions of prayer scenes accompanied by analysis that points to broader cultural or religious trends. Lindvall has a talent at capturing the essence of a prayer scene, while accounting for the intersectional portrayals of race, gender, and class.

In each chapter, Lindvall attempts to place the use of religious expression in film into a general context of American religious history. Lindvall utilizes Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People* and Martin Marty's *Modern American Religion* to frame his understanding of the broader historical context.² Like Ahlstrom's magisterial 1972 *Religious History*, Lindvall has written an "Ahlstrom-like history" that tells a century story of prayer in American film. Though Lindvall gives greater room for incongruity and difference, his narrative tells a story of progression from Silent Prayers (1902-1927) in the first moving pictures to contemporary Millennial Prayers (2000-2017), much like Ahlstrom's march from the colonial period to "The Turbulent Sixties." Additionally, Lindvall argues that an examination of prayer in film is central to understanding American

religious history, much like Ahlstrom argues that religion is central to understanding American history. Martin Marty's influence is also evident in the way Lindvall constructs each era of film in correlation to the theological trends of the day. Marty's three volume work, *Modern American Religion*, addresses the role of religion in shaping the social and political life of America from 1893-1960. Lindvall adopts a similar approach in "chronicling faith," connecting theological trends to developments in American history as a means to understand how religion is represented on film. Finally, Lindvall employs similar categorical constructions used by Ahlstrom and Marty, by which American religious history is synonymous with "church history." Lindvall acknowledges the dynamics of race, gender, and class in the history of prayer and film but, like Ahlstrom, much of this religious history is dominated by Christianity. For example, representation of Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu prayer is particularly sparse. Lindvall admittedly notes that "Uniquely Jewish prayers deserve another book."³ However, a reconfiguration of how this text employs the category of "religious history," might offer a significant contribution to how Hollywood shapes popular understanding of what religion is in America.

In the final chapter, "Millennial Prayers (2000-2017)," Lindvall discusses the effects of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks on the portrayal of prayer in film. Using examples such as *United 93* (2006) and *World Trade Center* (2006), Lindvall recognizes that post-9/11 prayer "functioned as nostalgic reminders that God

responded in the past, that He heard prayers and responded to His people.”⁴ What Lindvall does not discuss, however, is the manner in which Muslim prayer is portrayed in popular post-9/11 war films such as *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *American Sniper* (2014), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and others. This volume would benefit from a more thorough reading of the broader historiography on American religious history. These omissions aside, Lindvall provides a useful framework for other scholars to expand beyond the categorical boundaries of church history, engaging issues of race, gender, and class as they relate to prayer outside of Christianity.

A model of scholarship that examines the relationship between film, race, and religion not squarely situated in Christian history is Judith Weisenfeld’s 2007 *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in America, 1929-1949*.⁵ Weisenfeld analyzes the film industry as a site where religion is manufactured, and brilliantly demonstrates how film invests skin color with religious meaning. For Weisenfeld, Hollywood movies rendered religious experience as a racial characteristic, and policed racial and religious boundaries. As a result, the production of religion on the silver screen extended a white Christian vision for America, constructed against a Hollywood portrayal of African Americans as morally lax or religiously incompetent. Though Lindvall does not place a discussion of race at the center of the volume’s argument, Lindvall acknowledges Weisenfeld’s work and adopts a similar framework. For Lindvall, film is the site

where Americans learn how to pray, and maintain and extend the boundaries of their belief and practice. Lindvall presents an opportunity for reflection on the dynamics of racial boundaries and their relationship to the performance and portrayal of prayer. This volume acknowledges the importance of race, which leads the reader to question how the representation of prayer might police racial and religious boundaries. Lindvall provides an archive of sorts, open to those interested in mining the depths of race, film, and prayer.

As previously mentioned, a strength of this volume is the detail in which Lindvall describes each representation of prayer and its connection to broad cultural or religious trends. S. Brent Plate in *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* utilizes the framework of aesthetics to demonstrate how cinema employs the aesthetic devices of religious ritual.⁶ Lindvall's work interacts with the aesthetics of film and religion quite well, highlighting in detail the role of sight, sound, the body, and communal experience. Lindvall echoes Plate's thesis that film and religious practices share similarities that re-create the worlds they inhabit. *God on the Big Screen* brings film and religion together in an intimate way, opening the door to questions of how religion and film simultaneously cooperate to construct ways of knowing and being in the world.

Analyzing over one hundred years of film history, Lindvall provides a valuable archive of examples on the presence of prayer in American film. The volume achieves its aim, highlighting how Hollywood simultaneously shapes and

is shaped by popular ideas about prayer, religious belief, and practice. Additionally, Lindvall offers valuable historical and religious context that allows the reader to recognize how film often serves as a barometer of a religious climate. Lindvall's work asks valuable questions for further exploration on the roles of race, gender, and class, and how prayer and film inform those categories. *God on the Big Screen* is a well-written, entertaining, and informative read. This volume will function well inside and outside a classroom as an introduction to the intimate relationship between religion and film. Lindvall has produced a fine volume, one that elicits a response learned through the catechism of Hollywood, "the Dude abides."

¹ Terry Lindvall, *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 2.

² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed (New Haven, [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2004); Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

³ Lindvall, *God on the Big Screen*, 339.

⁴ Lindvall, 274.

⁵ Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949*, A George Gund Foundation Book in African American Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁶ S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).