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Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit

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Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit

Abstract

This is a book review of Terry Lindvall, J. Dennis Bounds and Chris Lindvall, *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit*, New York: Routledge, 2016.

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Serious films demand thoughtful responses. *Sight and Sound*'s list of "The Greatest Films of All Time" is loaded with deep, complex, and probing explorations of the human condition.¹ Oscar winners generally fall within a certain dramatic range: historical dramas of personal triumph amidst tragedies. The burgeoning field of religion and film has expanded understanding of what makes these kinds of pictures so moving. Our canon salutes high minded and rigorous religious films like *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *The Seventh Seal* (1957), and *Tender Mercies* (1983).² Yet, religion and film scholars tend to overlook comedies, which also probe and maybe even expose the human condition.

A search for "comedy" on the *Journal of Religion & Film* website reveals one essay on *Life of Brian*, a couple on holy fools, and one historical overview of the neglected comedies of Leo McCarey. The theological bite of the Coen Brothers gets mentioned in reviews, but where should students researching spiritual impulses in the films of Pixar, Nora Ephron or Seth Rogen turn for guidance? Mark Pinsky explored *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (and *South Park* and *Family Guy*) back in 2007. How many more comedies have audiences devoured since then? As a comedy writer (dive deep into the bins of Walmart and one might find a copy of *The Duke* [1999] or *Extreme Days* [2001]), I have been just as guilty of not taking the genre seriously.

Frankly, there is a paucity of resources on comedy within film studies as a whole. I've read so many students' papers about romantic comedy rooted in the research of Leger Grindon³, Tamar Jeffers McDonald⁴, and Kathleen Rowe⁵ perhaps because they are amongst the few to engage in a serious study of comedy. Their work dovetails strongly

with discussions of gender and power dynamics, but religion and film scholars have yet to fully embrace the enduring genre. Where are the appreciations and critiques of characters played by Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, and Reese Witherspoon? What to make of films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), which begins and ends in church? African American filmmakers have depicted *Jumping the Broom* (2011) and what it means to *Think Like a Man* (2012) but our analyses are scant (even when Bishop T.D. Jakes serves as a producer on the project!). My students are quite interested in why arrested development drives the work of Adam Sandler, Will Ferrell, and Vince Vaughn, but religion and film scholars haven't figured out how to place the bromances of Judd Apatow or Ben Stiller within a faith context.

Thankfully, Terry Lindvall, Dennis Bounds, and Chris Lindvall provide an alternative canon to religion and film criticism in *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit*. The authors reach across film history to resurrect the spiritual themes animating Charlie Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* (1923), Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941), and Peter Sellers' in *Heavens Above!* (1963). They also divide such comedies into distinct sub-genres like the slapstick, the screwball, and the picaresque. Lindvall, Bounds, and Lindvall also invite readers to consider the religious insights contained within seemingly slight, box office hits like *Home Alone* (1990), *Nacho Libre* (2006), and *This Is The End* (2013). *Divine Film Comedies* fills a gaping hole in the religion and film discipline.

Plenty of literary scholars have delved into the religious comedies of Flannery O'Connor and Frederick Buechner. Why have religion and film scholars often veered away from comedy? In their introduction, the authors note how religious organizations have

often resisted or suppressed the comedic impulse. They recall how St. John Chrysostom “warned that it was the devil who gave us the chance to play” (3). The Rule of St. Benedict banned jest, which leads to laughter. Authorities of all types have often been the butt of satirists’ jokes. Perhaps the power and scope of the Church made it an easy target. Bill Maher takes up old arguments against religious institutions and beliefs in *Religulous* (2008). What about the brilliant comedic criticism of St. Francis of Assisi’s renewal movement? It involved street theater, which earned him the title of “God’s jester.” Traces of his confrontational style can be found in the work of Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping captured in *What Would Jesus Buy?* (2008). Roman Catholic journalist G.K. Chesterton called a good joke, “The one ultimate and sacred thing which cannot be criticized” (5).

Lindvall, Bounds, and Lindvall suggest comedy is a leveling gift that puts us in our place: “laughter can help save us from being pompous or pretentious or proud” (13). They invite readers to develop a comic worldview in which happy endings make dramatic and spiritual sense (6). As they outline the theological assumptions that undergird their study, they suggest that comedy ‘brackets’ the tragedy of being human: our “miserable imprisonment is not final, but will be overcome” (12). Forgiveness, reconciliation, and the redemptive are celebrated as comedic religious concepts—alternative endings.

Fifteen types of film comedies are surveyed, from Chaplinesque slapstick to contemporary mockumentaries. Each chapter offers some historic background and definitions that are then supported by four or five examples. The authors reach back to the silent era of Chaplin in *Easy Street* (1917) and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. in *The Gaucho* (1927) to illumine the roots of cinematic comedy. One or two films are discussed in greater

detail to typify the genre, for example, *Keeping the Faith* (2000) for romantic comedies, and *Sister Act* (1992) for musical comedies. The choices are not always obvious. They turn to *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936) for screwball comedies, *Little World of Don Camillo* (1952) for *picaro*, Bunuel's *The Milky Way* (1969) for satire. Some may quibble with the authors' subdivision of romantic comedy from screwball comedy or wonder whether parody and satire deserve separate chapters. We aren't used to getting into the finer points of what kind of comedy we are watching.

Divine Film Comedies does split hairs and genres in an effort to understand why certain subjects, like angels, appear so often in comedic plots that they warrant their own subtitle, "film blanc." And what of the manic comedies of the Marx Brothers which often devolve into chaos? Lindvall, Bounds, and Lindvall argue for the *Reductio ad Absurdum* in *Dr. Strangelove* and *Bruce Almighty* as a comedic sub genre. But not all the sub-genres get the attention they deserve. The chapter on clergy comes across as quite thin beyond *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) and the brief chapter on multi-leveled ensemble comedy focuses upon two French films, *The Baker's Wife* (1938) and *L'auberge rouge* (1951) rather than the comedic British houses described by Jane Austen or even Julian Fellowes. Yet, for those who admire the art of comedy, the opportunity to delve into such detail and debate is refreshing. With institutions like the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts now offering a minor in comedy, the need for attention to such sub-genres will likely grow.

Poking into what elements create an effective comedic soufflé can be a deflating experience. Analyzing a joke may often puncture the surprise that sparks our spontaneous laughter. So how to honor the art of comedy without draining it of the delight that makes

it float? The authors take a light approach to their analysis, striving to retain the comedic impulse that animates their subject. They offer plenty of plot description, but attempt to capture the *joie de vivre* inherent in comedy. They recognize that comedy is often given short shrift but do not make the mistake of overdoing the academic language in an effort to earn peers' respect. Their research is rigorous and wide-ranging but not cumbersome. This book is a valuable contribution within the academic field, but written in a manner that is also accessible to fan boys and fan girls or seminarians.

With their emphasis upon biblical narratives, the authors narrow their focus to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. They celebrate Catholic filmmakers like Frank Capra, Protestant storytellers like Tyler Perry, and Jewish comedians like Woody Allen. The Buddhist roots of *Groundhog Day* (1993) are acknowledged, although the Bill Murray comedy is used to illustrate a *kairos* versus *chronos* understanding of time. References to world cinema range from classics like Rossellini's *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950) and Bunuel's *Nazarin* (1958) to contemporary examples like Israel's *Ushpizin* (2004) and Mexico's *Pastorela* (2011). Smaller, independent mockumentaries like *The Making of "...And God Spoke"* (1993) and *The Proper Care and Feeding of An American Messiah* (2006) are studied alongside infamous satires like *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

One of the most valuable contributions of the book is how it connects biblical stories to particular genres. For example, the authors link Jacob's romantic misadventures in Genesis 29 to the screwball comedy tradition. Jacob gets so drunk at his wedding that he ends up in bed with her older sister, Leah. Yet, the complications are only beginning for Jacob when he's given responsibility for both of the sisters, their handmaidens, and lots of sheep and livestock (59). The prophet Isaiah uses satire to mock the Israelites fealty to

false idols. The authors point out, "For Isaiah, the Lord makes fools of such diviners and idolaters. How stupid are they?" (162). The Book of Jonah is singled out as a parody of traditional biblical prophets' stories. Called by God to go to Nineveh, Jonah heads the opposite direction to Tarshish. Jonah's prayer from within the belly of a fish parallels Psalm 130, where the faithful cry out from the depths. The depth of Jonah's contrition and commitment is parodied throughout the book, as he offers the minimal sermon to the Ninevites and does not expect any positive results. When the king and even his cows repent, Jonah fumes at his success, hiding under a tree. This anti-prophet is the hard-hearted object of comedic scorn and parody throughout the book.

Divine Film Comedies concludes with tales of two feasts. The authors' recall the two baffled disciples on the way to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke. They failed to clue into the identity of their post-crucifixion travel companion. Only when Jesus restages the Last Supper by breaking bread with his thick-headed disciples do they recognize the one who stands before them. In a similar way, the Danish film, *Babette's Feast* (1987) brings a dour religious community together for a luxurious meal. Sisters who have denied themselves earthly pleasures are blessed by the culinary wonders of their new cook, Babette. The authors describe the transformation that her feast unleashes in the twelve guests: "As they sip and partake of these earthly pleasures together, they not only get tipsy, but begin to confess their sins to one another and to forgive one another. Old resentments are made right; ancient barriers are broken down; old squabbling enmities erased; loves rekindled; fellowship renewed through a meal, and a glorious redemption of lost and broken communion overwhelms the table, as if Jesus Himself reminded all, 'Do this in memory of me.'"

Divine Film Comedies could serve as a helpful spine for a semester-long study of comedy. It may also guide religious groups gathering in homes or church basements for film nights. I circled several of the films for future viewing, which were not on my radar until reading the book. For those looking for a more detailed argument for the biblical roots of satire, I recommend Terry Lindvall's 2015 book, *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert*.⁶ In the meantime, a generation of students raised from the ashes of 9/11 has also been doused with three rounds of *The Hangover*. Religious imagery abounds in the solace they seek in *Talladega Nights* (2006) or *Sausage Party* (2016). Multi-ethnic images of Jesus pop up in each cinematic edition of *21 Jump Street* (2012). Lindvall, Bounds, and Lindvall have provided a starting place for the conversation that is already raging on playgrounds and in locker rooms. They've offered scholars an opportunity to join in the revelry with some much needed religious reflection.

¹ In 2012, *Vertigo* finally snapped *Citizen Kane*'s long-running reign atop the critics' poll, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/50-greatest-films-all-time>

² For example, see Arts & Faith's list of the "Top 100 Spiritually-Significant Films," composed in 2004, <http://www.filmsite.org/top100spiritual.html>

³ Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History and Controversies*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

⁴ Tamer Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Wallflower Press, 2007.

⁵ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, University of Texas Press, 1995.

⁶ Terry Lindvall, *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Prophets to Stephen Colbert*, New York University Press, 2015.