

parishioners alike. The book uncovers a wide array of tools preachers used to compose and memorize sermons, exploring trade lingo like “heads” (quick, bullet-point like summaries of what was to come listed at the opening of a sermon and returned to as mnemonic devices throughout) or “memoriter” (a form of delivery in which a preacher would memorize an entire sermon). For the most part, an antebellum preacher would work from “chief heads,” a short list of key points that could be expanded as an audience seemed to need—particularly if, as many preachers did, one had command of a wide array of Bible verses, anecdotes, and short discourses on Christian topics, like baptism or repentance, developed over the course of a long ministry that could be marshalled on the fly.

The meat of the book comes as Davis applies these models to Joseph Smith, and particularly to the Book of Mormon. Exploring the scanty record of relatively intact Joseph Smith sermons, Davis finds that Smith seemed to be aware of these techniques and used them. He posits that it makes sense, then, that the Book of Mormon might have been produced in the same way. He delves into the text of the book, finding evidence of the use of “heads” in the sermons various characters deliver (and indeed, at one point finds the actual word “heads” used in this way). He also finds evidence of the mechanic used in the book’s narrative, as several times in the narrative brief outlines of what is to come are given, followed by expanded discussions of each event and another citation of the outline. In the years preceding the actual dictation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith may well have composed the text in his mind as a minister might compose a sermon, hanging a series of “heads” throughout to guide him as he preached to his scribes.

Through much of the introduction Davis seeks to thread a needle between “critics” and “defenders” of the Book of Mormon, an argument that is becoming increasingly irrelevant as students of Joseph Smith and the religious tradition he founded grow less interested in debunking or validating the faith than understanding it as a key part of the landscape of American religion. Despite the context he presents in the introduction, in his exploration of antebellum preaching culture Davis has gone a long way toward uncovering some of its terrain.

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God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today. By Terry Lindvall. New York University Press, 2019. 384 pages. \$99.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper; ebook available.

In the opening pages of John Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, two key events happen: Mary Pickford faints while filming her next

movie, and the Presbyterian pastor Clarence Wilmot loses his faith like “dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward.” The setting is 1910, and Updike juxtaposes these two moments as he begins a sketch of twentieth-century religion in the United States and particularly the way that film began to supplant traditional Christianity for the imaginations of Americans.

But what if religion wasn’t supplanted but transplanted from our country’s pulpits to the silver screens of our movie houses, specifically through cinematic prayers? And what might that mean for our understanding of American religion? Terry Lindvall’s book isn’t simply about prayer—despite the subtitle—but about the forms that American religion has taken since the emergence of silent films around the turn of the century. *God on the Big Screen* examines three primary issues: the themes represented by these cinematic prayers; how these prayers and worship are presented according to demographics, function, salience and valence in the context, and efficacy; and finally, where these prayers fit in their historical context (3–4).

It is amazing to see how many places Lindvall found prayer in film. Put one way, in order to enjoy this book, readers need to be sufficiently fascinated by film and American piety to make it through this exhaustive treatment. Put another way, because of the book’s wide scope, this review will focus on just three notable eras that Lindvall highlights: the Silent Prayers of the silent era of film (chapter 1); the Postwar Secular Prayers of the Eisenhower Revival years (chapter 4); and Millennial Prayers of the last two decades (chapter 8). Let it be noted that the book ends with movies from 2017.

The silent era does indeed comment on the same Mary Pickford that Updike did, particularly her film from 1917, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. In it, Rebecca (played by Pickford) is forced to choose between “Thou Shalt Not Steal” and “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves” when deciding whether to eat cherry pie that her aunt has, as an act of punishment, denied her to eat. This is perfect Americana: the Ten Commandments versus folk wisdom, namely, “an American proverb, from the rascally Benjamin Franklin . . .” (9). The dilemma, and Rebecca’s decision to eat the pie, “reaffirms the underlying principle of the Hollywood classical narrative film paradigm—namely, that a protagonist makes things happen” (9).

Lindvall summarizes the films of the Eisenhower Revival period (1946–1963) thusly: “During the postwar boom, everything on the big screen seemed bigger, from historical dramas to biblical epics to sex” (157). The iconic film, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (released in 1946) begins the era. In it, the director Frank Capra “coordinates a series of tender intercessory prayers” (116). Although George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) makes the most famous prayer alone—and to an angel no less—“Clarence, help me get back”—when he returns to the town, he

is restored to community. Religion, in a Tocquevillian way, beautifully harmonizes American individualism and community.

I'd argue that *Talladega Nights* offers as good an example as any for the era of millennial prayers. When Ricky Bobby prays to the "eight-pound, six-ounce newborn infant Jesus," he can't help but move almost immediately to "We just thank You for all the races I've won and 21.2 million dollars—Woo!" (291). A prayer that's ultimately self-congratulating and includes product placement captures the essence of American popular piety. The latent dig at Christian culture in the South shouldn't be missed, nor Lindvall's more general comments about this period. "Humor in prayer in the millennium reflects a more informal approach to faith" (291). I would add that a pervasive irony concerning religion makes such humor palatable.

Certainly, in a COVID-19 world—but even before—Americans had moved from the big screen to the small ones we have in our homes and in our hands. I'd personally like to hear more about this development in the book. Lindvall does note *Esquire's* 1970 analysis "that movies shaped the moral and spiritual condition of American youth more than schools and churches" (159). He also discusses Robert Wuthnow's work on the shift in the 1960s away from religion to spirituality (158), and the transformation from "spiritual dwellers to spiritual seekers" (5). I am certainly persuaded that students of American religion need to look toward popular culture to see the actual religious practices of Americans. Still, while the author shows how film *reflects* prayer, he's not as strong on how cinematic transcendence shapes and may even replace piety.

Lindvall concludes that, in some ways, American films teach us what to do, religiously speaking. "Alas, so it is that movies," laments Lindvall, "in aiming at authenticity and verisimilitude or sheer fantasy and satire, indirectly, and mostly unintentionally, provide a primer on how one is to pray" (328). That seems accurate to a degree, and yet my concern, as a student of contemporary American spiritual life, is whether we as moviegoers end up taking this cinematic advice. Or whether films, as Updike pointed out, provide us with a version of transcendence, which we sit back and experience. And then we let the films do the praying for us.

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Since the twentieth-century shift in cultural studies away from a positivist scientific objectivity in fieldwork toward a model of naturalism,