

Sofia Sjö

Book Review. Terry Lindvall, God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today

2020

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19533>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sjö, Sofia: Book Review. Terry Lindvall, God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Religion and Popular Music, Jg. 6 (2020), Nr. 2, S. 110–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19533>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/229

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Book Review

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, 367 pages, ISBN 978-1-4798-8674-6

Can we learn something about church history by watching films? That films can be used to reflect on theological questions has been illuminated by a range of scholars. The ability of film to tell us about the role of religion in society and about attitudes towards religion today has also been made evident. Still, considering film's short history, any discussion of Christian beliefs and film would be limited to about a century. However, that films can offer noteworthy insights is illustrated by Terry Lindvall's *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today*.

As the title suggests, Lindvall's perspective is clearly defined and highly focused. Lindvall explores the North American context and looks specifically at Christian prayer – at how characters pray, the consequences of their prayers in the film narratives, what prayers bring to character development, what the prayers suggest about attitudes to religion, particularly for Christianity and the Christian churches, and to the approach to a divine being in different periods. These various stages are related both to the chronology of film history – thus, for example, the first chapter, titled “Silent Prayers (1902–1927)”, focuses on silent films – and to history more broadly, whether in changing experiences of religion or external events. Chapter 3, titled “Foxholes Prayers (1939–1945)”, thus explores how World War II came to influence the depiction of prayer in film, while chapter 5, titled “Cynical Prayers (1964–1976)”, draws on a critique of institutional religion and aspects of religious decline.

These broad time periods and titles might suggest a rather generalizing approach to the material, with varied films brought together to tell one story. However, the titles of the chapters function to highlight a common sense of the era they address, while the subsections illustrate a great deal more interpretative variety, noting, for example, how genre affects the use and portrayal of prayer. These subsections are not just genre-specific but also tie in with aspects of belief and trends in American Christianity. Thus, for example, subsections in chapter six, “Revival of Prayer (1976–1988)”, include “Country Prayers”, “Adventure Comedy Prayers”, “Mischievous Prayers”, “Liberation Theology”, “Horrible Prayers” and “Muscular Christianity”.

What can we learn by focusing on prayers in films? Lindvall’s study is clear that prayer changes over time. Prayers are more common at certain times and somewhat less usual at others, more sincere in one setting and less so in another. However, this work highlights that prayers remain prevalent throughout the history of Hollywood film. That framework might make this conclusion less surprising: these films do after all emerge from a North American context that has long been marked by religiosity more than many other Western contexts. Still, the recurrent use of prayer in films also underlines how prayer quickly became a staple of film language. Prayer can express central aspects of a character, whether the prayer is linked to true devotion or not. As Lindvall discusses towards the end of his impressive cinematic overview, today people even seem to turn to film to learn how to pray. Prayer may be becoming less common in the “real world”, but it lives on on the silver screen, shaping its audience’s views on faith and religious practice.

Lindvall’s study is impressive on many counts. He discusses a remarkable number of films, but he also places those films in a wider context, an approach that brings the study to life. Perhaps not surprisingly, since this volume treats hundreds of films from a period of almost 120 years, it cannot explore in-depth. It still manages, however, to highlight many noteworthy points, relating to both genre and historical events. To take one example, in chapter 2, “Censored Prayers (1927–1939)”, Lindvall shows how films could offer escape through both family-friendly dramas and horror stories, but notes that some filmic representations also captured the feeling of the time that something was amiss. The Production Code restricted how religion could be represented, but films still managed to hint that churches were not attending to the problems of the time and to the many marginalized people in need. Children’s prayers in particular were at times allowed to express both devo-

tion and critique of religious hypocrisy and the thoughtlessness of people of power.

As Lindvall discusses towards the end of *God on the Big Screen*, the volume is intended not as the final word on its complex topic, but as the beginning of many possible conversations. With its broad strokes and multi-faceted material, this study opens the door for future studies with a more detailed approach. Those projects might explore, for example, the gendering of prayer, the child as a symbol in stories about faith, genre and prayer, and continuity and change in contemporary religious life as seen through the lens of film. Films are able to shape how aspects of faith are understood in a given time and at a given place, and Lindvall's study also highlights the need for more research on film reception.

I do not always agree with Lindvall's interpretation of the films that he discusses. Connections he makes between a film story and historical events or processes of change can seem to me somewhat far-fetched, and his understanding and interpretation of aspects of religious change that are represented are not mine. Lindvall is clearly more personally invested in Christian beliefs and the changes he discusses than am I. Films can also always be read in different ways. What we see is shaped by who we are, and it is unlikely that two people will interpret identically the very many films that Lindvall addresses. Thus, my disagreements with Lindvall's thinking and interpretations only make me engage more strongly with the volume.

I really have only one serious issue with *God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today*, and it relates to the title: this volume is not about God on the big screen. True, prayer can tell us about faith in God and about what one believes God can accomplish, and Lindvall highlights some of these questions. But by no means is God the central motif of the volume. This work is rather, as the subtitle highlights, a history of prayer, and, not evident from the title but clearly the case, Christian prayer. It discusses the role and construction of prayer in films and aspects of religious change, particularly changes in reference to Christianity and Christian churches in North America. The title is thus misleading and runs the risk that many readers who might find this volume interesting and useful will overlook it.

Who, then, is this volume for? Anyone involved in the study of religion and film will be able to engage with the volume, but more specifically, this work could be brought into courses and studies on church sociology and church history. It offers ample material for discussions of specific periods and questions related to certain times, without suggesting that it is a detailed histor-

ical or sociological account. It is also a volume that could work in a course on film studies that focuses on film narrative and language, as it highlights how certain aspects of religion, in this case prayer, can be used to represent elements in a story, to construct a character and the feel of the time. This volume will surely be of interest to many readers, and I hope it will find those readers, despite its misleading title.