

Book review

Lindvall, Terry, et al. (2016). *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit*. New York: Routledge.

Divine Film Comedies is a study of the relationship between biblical stories and the sub-genres of comedy used in popular film narratives. It looks for both comic patterns in religious narratives and religious meanings in film comedies, splitting the work into fifteen chapters devoted to sub-genres of comedy from slapstick to the mockumentary. The authors – Terry Lindvall, currently occupying the C. S. Lewis Chair of Communication and Christian Thought at Virginia Wesleyan College, J. Dennis Bounds, a media specialist at Margaret Bounds Presents in Austin, Texas, and Chris Lindvall, currently an Associate Writer at Disney Consumer Products in Southern California – believe that not only can the awareness of the inherent existence of comedy in holy texts broaden our understanding of religion in general, but that by adapting them into film comedies we can “gain a heavenly perspective on the texts themselves” (p. 3).

As the majority of the existing secondary literature on films containing theological narratives tends to concentrate on the more serious works (p. 1), the authors have succeeded in filling in a gap within the study of theology and film as well as in highlighting the impact film comedy can have when synthesised with religious themes. Comedy and laughter experienced through film are in this study considered a crucial aspect of our lives, which is why the analysis has a strong potential to be meaningful, especially as we are finding ourselves in an era where insights into the perception of religious narratives are needed more than ever and understanding the ability of comedy to “provide a corrective remedy to what ill us” (p. 1) can be seen as pivotal.

For those seeking an analysis that skilfully marries humour studies, film studies, and religious studies, *Divine Film Comedies* can be a stimulating read. Of course, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the study, there is the danger that, for example, humour studies scholars might find themselves lost in the text if they are not familiar with research on the matter of film adaptations or possess extensive knowledge of the Bible. That is not the case here, however, as the authors manage to equip the reader with all that is necessary in the book itself, providing helpful commentary along the way. For example, the introduction details a brief history of laughter within the context of Christian faith, which demonstrates the inherent presence of comedy in religious narratives and thus gives the reader an idea of what the authors may be looking for in the analysis itself. In a similar manner, the book’s first chapter (“Theological assumptions of religious film comedies”) familiarises the reader with the authors’ perspective on film comedies dealing with religious topics and their essential role as the “icons” through which one may see “the goodness and grace of a God who revealed himself in words and in flesh” (p. 8).

The further demonstration that there have always been elements of comedy in Christian scriptures and that humour is therefore inherent to Christian culture is, from the point of view of humour studies, perhaps the most interesting. While humour studies scholars (including Freud 1963) have long stressed the importance of humour in Jewish culture and even traced its

roots back to the Old Testament (Ziv & Zajdman 1993), the connection between Christianity and comedy has not been quite as emphasised. For example, one may not make the immediate connection between slapstick comedy and the New Testament due to the frivolous and often superficial nature of the slapstick genre, yet *Divine Film Comedies* not only provides historical background for the existence of *slapstick* in the Scripture (p. 16) but also defines its role there and then offers examples of film productions where slapstick and Christianity intersect. This is for example the case of Charlie Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* or the 1990 film *Home Alone*, notoriously known for Kevin McCallister's booby-trapped house and all the slapstick that ensues as soon as the burglars enter it. In *Home Alone*, the link to Christianity is represented by signs of divinity (such as old man Marley's – the mysterious man Kevin brother calls the South Band Shovel Slayer – injured hand reminding the spectators of Jesus Christ or Kevin's visit of the local church on Christmas Eve) that regularly confront Kevin's originally gleeful feelings about him being alone and away from his family. The juxtaposition of these passages and the slapstick passages then “remind the spectators of a violence of life, of a war on earth and in heaven” (p. 29).

Other sub-genres of comedy receive the same treatment in the following chapters, as the authors always make sure to specify how particular characteristics of each sub-genre fit in with the religious discourse before proceeding to analyse the films within each the sub-genre. Again, it needs to be said that *Divine Film Comedies* is a unique study because of this, as no one has yet attempted to blend film theory, humour studies, and theology in a focused study such as this one. This book's specificity in its interdisciplinarity is its greatest asset. While for example *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities* (Geybels & Van Herck 2011) also explores the connection between religion and laughter, it has several foci (it is a collection of papers rather than a monograph) and its radius is extremely broad (it explores various religions in various points of view). The blend of the humorous and the spiritual is also the topic of *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humour* (Capps 2005). This book shares several arguments with *Divine Film Comedies*, including the idea that humour can play an illuminating role in religious narratives; however, it seems to be focusing more on the general role of humour in a person's life rather than being an analysis of cultural products of humour, such as films or jokes. *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humour in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (Feltmate 2017) is on the other end of the spectre when it comes to narrow focus and specificity. It is similar to *Divine Film Comedies* in a way that it focuses on particular works (in this case the three animated TV shows) and examines the blend of the religious and humorous within them. But, since it focuses only on three works of the same genre, the reader does not learn about this blend in the context of other sub-genres of film comedy in the same way that is possible (and appreciated) in *Divine Film Comedies* as each sub-genre has a specific rhetoric that blends with religion in a different way.

When it comes to the choice of the particular sub-genres of comedy included in *Divine Film Comedies*, it can be said that the authors have managed to cover almost everything. Apart from slapstick comedy, *Divine Film Comedies* also covers *adventure comedy*, pointing out comic adventure parallels in the Bible – such as the story of Jonah and the whale (p. 32) – highlighting the common theme of going through a rough time only to emerge a better person; *romantic comedy*, where it focuses on the concept of love as evidenced by kindness as “the way of Christ is evidenced by kindness” (p. 56); *screwball comedy*, a comedy sub-genre that “traces the uneven trajectory of love between peculiar people” (p. 58), where the authors liken the “rollercoaster” of such relationships to a kind of divine supervision and intervention – i.e. “the odd ways in which God works in the lives of His children” (p. 67); *musical comedy*, where the sub-genre is seen as a tool reconnecting people with each other as well as with God in any form – e.g. in the form of nature as seen for example in *The Sound of Music* (p. 75) or in the form of prayer as seen in *Sister Act* (p. 77); *family comedy*, where “fractured families

and religion and comedy blend together quite snugly” (p. 81) as demonstrated in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or in *Keeping Mum* in which Maggie Smith’s character Grace, again, acts as a reconnecting tool within a fragmented family whose father (Rowan Atkinson) is a humourless vicar incapable of finding comedy within his life, let alone God’s word (p. 91); *picaro comedy* where laughter is connected with forgiveness and where different types of picaresque heroes take the “road less travelled” (p. 95) and are then contrasted with the biblical *picaro* Jonah as they, unlike Jonah, “rejoice in God’s grace” (p. 106) rather than complain; *film blanc comedy* where the connection between the divine and the humorous is quite obvious as the study focuses on angelic comedies in which angels (e.g. Clarence in the 1946 film *It’s a Wonderful Life*) help human characters who have found themselves at the end of their wits by “holding up mirror to their predicament” (p. 109) while also finding themselves in a fish-out-of-water situation; *clergy comedy*, which in many ways overlaps with *film blanc* and in which the cleric characters (e.g. priests or nuns) assume ambiguous roles that are “merely pawns on the stage of comedy” (p. 124); *reductio ad absurdum*, where the absurd hero ends up being guided by the divine as it happens to Bruce in *Bruce Almighty*; *multi-levelled comedy* where the existence of the ensemble of characters “highlights the truth that everyone is important and everyone is comic” (p. 148) and that everyone is therefore equal in God’s eyes; *parody* with its ability to provide self-reflection even to the divine; *satire*, where the authors highlight the use of humour a tool for illumination; *Dionysian/transgressive comedy* where the depicted transgressions also represent a point of illumination which reminds us that “God can make straight the crooked paths of life and living” (p. 178); and finally, *mockumentary* with its ability to reveal the good and the bad of “God’s films” (p. 193) of our lives.

The chapter on satire is particularly enticing. As the authors mention, when it comes to satirical treatments of the divine, the emphasis is “not primarily upon the laugh, but upon the reformation of the target” (p. 169). While this is also true of parody and transgressive comedy, satire brings in elements of seriousness as well as certain psychological quality which, when blended with the religious, results in substantial illuminating effects, especially for individuals who are struggling with their faith. In this chapter, the authors focus, for example, on the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Buñuel’s satire naturally subverts religious habits and addresses concerns such as one’s desire of flesh or one’s struggle with faith and loss of faith. His films thus automatically challenge the audience’s faith with the aim to actually *deepen* it by the end of the film with the use of satirical strategies. This particular case study thus becomes the perfect illustration of the illuminating role of “divine comedies” in religious discourse. Furthermore, as *Divine Film Comedies* often draws upon sources associated with the lives and philosophies of the writers and directors examined in the study, the fact that the blend of the satirical and religious in Buñuel’s works is said to be so effective makes a perfect sense as he was a man with a complicated relationship with religious faith and was not afraid to proclaim it (p. 163).

As for the arrangement, the book is relatively easy to navigate from Introduction to Index. Each chapter focuses on one particular sub-genre of comedy, and although the sub-genres often blend into each other and overlap, the authors have done their best to sort them into the category best suitable for a nuanced and interesting analysis. It may have been useful to include the film titles in the table of contents for even easier navigation and so that the reader’s brain becomes stimulated even before turning to the particular page (although the reader can search for a particular film or a keyword in the Index, putting the titles in the table of contents would be more helpful). The use of illustrations (still shots of scenes from the films) is especially appreciated as they represent particularly poignant scenes relating to sacred narratives and are accompanied by captions offering further illumination on the subject.

Ultimately, *Divine Film Comedies* succeeds at raising awareness about the connection between the comical and the religious and offers valuable insight into the canon of film comedies dealing with religious topics. It also undoubtedly accomplishes what it sets out to do in the introduction by demonstrating how humour can serve as an effective illuminating tool in the sense that it provides a different – new – perspective on religious narratives.

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