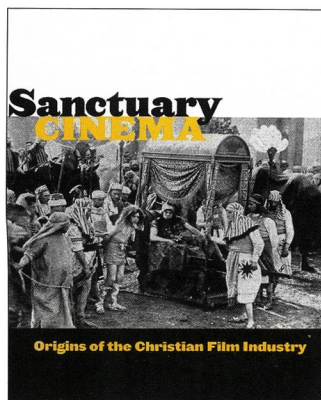


*Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* by Terry Lindvall. New York and London: New York University Press, 2007. 303 pages, illustrated. ISBN: 978-0-8147-5210-4. \$45 hardcover.

### Review by Gail Leggio

The Hollywood film industry has frequently been denounced as a tool of the world, the flesh and the devil. The Hays Office's Production Code—which by the mid-1930s had radically changed what was considered morally permissible in movies—was a response in large part to campaigns by religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency. Yet in the early days of film, as Lindvall documents in this lively study, the relationship was not necessarily adversarial. This is not a book about film as an artform or even about spirituality in film. Lindvall focuses on a particular segment of cinematic history and American sociology, limiting himself to movies with a Christian, specifically Protestant purpose: “evangelistic propaganda, historical instruction, and moral edification.” Thus he excludes both the “quasi-religious...spectacles of Cecil B. DeMille” and one of his “personal favorites,” Carl Dreyer’s magnificent study of sanctity, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). Given the author’s obvious admiration for Dreyer and D.W. Griffith, a Southern Methodist whose films had a strong moral backbone, culminating in the epic, multi-narrative *Intolerance* (1916), it seems a shame for him to close off this avenue of exploration. Still, there is plenty of meat here for those curious about the ever-shifting dynamic between doctrine and art. Into the perennial debate about art and commerce in film comes another player, didacticism.

Lindvall summarizes a good deal of historical material, including the iconoclastic strain of the Judeo-Christian tradition (the patron saint of motion pictures is St. John of Damascus, who defended the Church’s use of icons in the eighth century) and the theologically infused landscapes of the Hudson River School painters. Working against the idea of a Protestant visual culture was the categorizing of movies as frivolous entertainment; film had its origins in sideshow amusements. Puritan Oliver Cromwell had closed the theaters in London during his rule (1649–60), finding nothing but rowdy entertainment even in Shakespeare. No surprise, then, that some American towns extended the blue laws that closed saloons to the movies. Many American preachers, however, saw the proselytizing potential of the fledgling film industry. Lindvall unearths some intriguing examples of pop culture and religious cross-pollination: “tableau features” such as *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), a filmed



pageant of Gospel-narrative highlights indebted to the Oberammergau Passion Play performed in the Bavarian Alps; pious travelogues such as a set of twenty one-reelers entitled *Pilgrimage to Palestine* (1925), and lantern-slide shows intended to accompany sermons and hymns. Lindvall reproduces three images from a series illustrating the Calvinist hymn *Rock of Ages*, allegorical in the style of Thomas Cole's *Voyage of Life*, without the formal grandeur or artistic skill. Joseph Boggs Beale's 1879 slide show features a white-robed Victorian maiden, personifying Faith, clinging to a stone cross in stormy seas. Edison made a short film of the same subject in 1902, but Beale's vernacular melodrama has surprising force and sincere appeal. *Sanctuary Cinema* is, among other things, a history of marketing. Lindvall recounts the story of a distributor putting together a package of edifying films for a British pastor to show to his congregation in 1898. Faced with the disreputable *Skirt Dance by Mdlle. X*, he simply re-titled the film *Salome Dancing before Herod*. Lindvall comments: "Rhetorical reframings could sanctify almost any image."

As the movie industry grew more sophisticated, the author reports, "the church turned toward critiquing rather than creating film products." Popular evangelists, such as the Reverend Billy Sunday, who were turning to the radio as a pulpit, advised their audiences on which films were acceptable. The greatest successes were films that combined the heroism of early Christians and the perfidy of worldly Romans, a dichotomy that had become a popular trope through the immense success of two novels. Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) was made into an epic film in 1925 (at 141 minutes and with a huge production budget, it holds its own against the 1959 remake). Henryk Sienkiewicz's international best seller *Quo Vadis?* (1896) inspired Enrico Guazzoni's 1913 Italian film, which replicates famous paintings, notably Jean-Léon Gérôme's Colosseum scene *Pollice Verso* (1872). Both films were marketed to American audiences as "inspirational religious spectacles." (Those interested in pursuing the social history of these works should consult Maria Wyke's *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* and Jon Solomon's *The Ancient World in the Cinema*.)

This is a complex subject that raises a number of questions. Why have some of the most successful films on spirituality—like some of the greatest religious paintings—been produced by unorthodox or agnostic artists? What is the role of popular culture in the work of faith? Lindvall does not directly tackle these questions, but he offers fascinating insights into a particular episode in American history when faith and entertainment held an uneasy truce. Author Terry Lindvall is C.S. Lewis Chair of Communication and Christian Thought at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Virginia. His previous books include *The Mother of All Laughter: Sarah and the Genesis of Comedy* and *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent Film and Religion, 1908–1926*.