

# Christianity in Popular Culture

## A Introduction to World Religions Project

### Literature – Evans and Bolz-Weber

NOVEMBER 29, 2015 ~ VSUNNERGREN ~ LEAVE A COMMENT ~

Recently, there has been a trend in Christian literature towards being honest about the fallibility of Christians. Two recent works that highlight this trend are Rachel Held Evans's *Searching for Sunday* and Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Accidental Saints*.

Evans's work, *Searching for Sunday*, is the account of the author's difficult relationship with the church, told as a collection of stories surrounding specific sacraments. Evans is honest about which aspects of traditional church life are difficult for her and why, making her relatable to young adults who are statistically leaving churches in droves. One particular passage describes a routine moment in a church where a church is trying to make a traditional hymn faster and "hipper" by adding drum accompaniment, but the congregation obviously continues to sing at the same pace they have always done (Evans 47). This kind of humorous description of the ways that churches are trying and failing to connect with younger generations reaches out to those generations in a unique way. The author is trying to reach young adults and bring them to the Christian church through a self-deprecating sort of humor aimed at the church itself.

Bolz-Weber's book takes a similar, but slightly more nuanced approach. The book tells stories of people who are "unlikely saints" – people who are Christian or embody Christian ideas, even though they don't fulfil many of the stereotypical ideas of what a Christian should be. Throughout the book, Bolz-Weber "name drops" Christian theological terminology, which she defines in the footnotes. Through this method, the author manages to teach serious Christian theology in what appears to be only a light-hearted look at the many types of people who can be Christian.

Both books are attempting to bring young audiences back into the church through humor and the steadfast affirmation that anybody can be a Christian.

Books referenced:

Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints*. New York: Convergent Books, 2015.

## Art – Zac Kinkade

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Zac Thomas Kinkade is a painter who incorporated his family's faith and artistic legacy into his artwork. He is the nephew of Thomas Kinkade, a famous Christian painter known as the "Painter of Light." Using his uncle's company, Zac's work reaches large audiences through the company itself and through licensed products and reproductions.

Zac's most recent work is *Noah's Ark*, painted in 2015. The painting shows Noah standing in the foreground, in the center of the composition, holding a dove in an outstretched arm. Noah is surrounded by animals, under an arched rainbow, which also encompasses the Ark, which has run aground in the background. In his artist's statement about the work, Zac says that he includes the rainbow in the painting as "extending beyond what is possible and into what can be done by the hand of the Creator." He also says that he chose animals from every continent to show that the covenant with God that resulted from the flood in the biblical story of Noah's Ark was a worldwide event, not one affecting certain people. The image expresses Kinkade's Christian belief in a few ways. First, it obviously depicts a biblical scene, the story of Noah's Ark. It highlights the rainbow, which usually represents the covenant with God that was created following the flood, in the center of the piece. This shows Kinkade's belief in this covenant as a central tenant of his faith. His inclusion of animals from all the continents as a way of showing that the covenant is worldwide reinforces Kinkade's desire to spread his faith through his art.



### Works Cited:

"Noah's Ark." *Thomas Kinkade Company*. Web. Accessed 13 November 2015. <https://thomaskinkade.com/art/noahs-ark/>

# Music – Thrive by Casting Crowns

OCTOBER 30, 2015OCTOBER 30, 2015 ~ VSUNNERGREN ~ LEAVE A COMMENT ~





*Thrive* is the newest album by Christian band Casting Crowns. According to “Welcome to the Thrive Challenge,” the inspiration for *Thrive* comes from the idea that believers should thrive in their daily lives and focus on scripture, rather than worrying about the future. All of the members

of Casting Crowns are youth pastors, who feel that the rock band style of their music will draw youth to the Christian faith (“Casting Crowns: The ‘Lifesong’ of Mark Hall”).

The first song on the album is the title song, “Thrive.” It describes modern life as “this worn and weary land,” and praises God as the savior from that type of life. The song says “We were made for so much more than ordinary lives... we were made to thrive.” Knowing that this song was written by youth pastors as a way of calling teenagers and young people to the faith, this song has a very clear message. The song suggests that when this audience faces hardships, as is inevitable, God will be the force that brings them out of it. With its catchy chorus (“joy unspeakable, faith unsinkable, love unstoppable, anything is possible”), the song suggests praise of God as a solution to feelings of weariness and boredom in the everyday lives of young people.

The only song on the album that has been released as a music video so far is “Broken Together.” This song is intended to reach older members of Casting Crowns’s audience – those who have entered into marriages. The song, and the music video that accompanies it, suggests a couple who have married but are no longer happy in their marriage. The song’s refrain includes the line “maybe you and I were never meant to be complete, could we just be broken together.” The song firmly suggests that it is better for a marriage to continue during difficulties, rather than end in divorce, stemming from the band’s Christian faith. In a country with such a high divorce rate, this song encourages viewers to fight through difficult times in their marriage. This is an interesting message, coming from a contemporary and popular Christian group, as many Christians who have an opportunity to evangelize through popular culture tend to shy away from controversial ideas that may scare viewers away from the faith, such as the idea that Christians should remain in unhappy marriages rather than divorce. However, it softens this message by showing the couple in the music video as having grown old and happy together, in the final scene of the video.

Sources:

Casting Crowns. “Thrive.” *Thrive*. Provident Label Group LLC, 2014. Digital Album.

“Casting Crowns: The ‘Lifesong’ of Mark Hall.” *CBN*. CBN, n.d. Web. 30 October 2015.

## Television – lesodo

OCTOBER 16, 2015 ~ VSUNNERGREN ~ LEAVE A COMMENT ~



*Iesodo* is a children's television show that teaches New Testament stories through computer-animated bird characters. It is distributed through DVDs, each one containing two episodes having to do with a theme. One of these DVDs, *Believe*, is available through Netflix. This episode follows Barry, a Hopoe bird who is tasked with preventing Iesodo from gaining a following among the other birds. Iesodo is a white dove, the obvious Jesus figure in the show.

The symbolism of a white dove standing for Jesus is clear – white is the symbol of purity, such as in the common metaphor of Jesus as the white “lamb of God.” The dove is a symbol of hope in the Bible, such as that of the dove who finds the first sign of land for Noah after the great flood of the Old Testament. Some of the other symbolism in the show, however, is much less clear. “Maggie,” another bird character, fulfills the role of Mary of Magdalene in the New Testament stories of *Iesodo*. However, rather than clarify Mary of Magdalene's social position, as a prostitute or other outcast woman, the show explains that Maggie lost her family in a migration.

The show uses music to highlight its most important messages. These songs are catchy and utilized as a way to impart strong messages to children viewers. For example, the first song of the episode is sung by Barry's character, as he decides that he must do the right thing for Iesodo, rather than suppress him in the name of tradition.

This brings us to the intended message about Christianity that this show conveys. As an animated children's show available on Netflix, the show has the potential to reach a large audience of children. To this end, the show portrays Christianity as a radical idea of kindness and love. The Hopoe birds are shown to want to protect their traditions, at the expense of these ideas. Through the character of Barry, the show demonstrates a belief in Jesus despite how “radical” or “different” his ideas may be. This is an interesting position to take, when Christian ideas are now usually considered to be the traditional ideas. It is unclear whether the show wants to merely push back against accusations that the Christian church is too traditional, or whether it is also advocating for an acceptance of currently “radical” ideas, such as gay rights and feminism.

Work Referenced:

*Iesodo: Believe*. Television. Directed by Brian Ray, performed by Erin Bethea, Tyler Durden, and T.W. Gibis . 2013. Zaya Toonz, 2013. Netflix.

## Film – 90 Minutes in Heaven

OCTOBER 4, 2015OCTOBER 4, 2015 ~ VSUNNERGREN ~ 1 COMMENT ~



Film is perhaps the most recognizable form of popular culture in America. Going to the movies is a traditional pastime for Americans. Although it has declined in popularity in recent years, most Americans still know what is playing in theatres and attends an occasional movie, especially during the peak summer months.

*90 Minutes in Heaven* is a film that was released during the summer of 2015. The film is based on a popular book by the Union Baptist pastor Don Piper, which tells his revelations following a nearly fatal car accident. The general plot of the film begins with Don's car accident, during which he is pronounced dead for ninety minutes before "coming back to life." Following this, he faced extensive recovery, both in the hospital and at home. The film follows his struggle and that of his wife, as they both face his recovery. Don's character, the narrator of the film, explains that he was emotionally conflicted because he had seen heaven during his ninety minutes proclaimed dead,

and he did not understand why he had been forced to continue living in pain rather than been allowed to stay in his heaven. The film concludes with Don, through the help of a friend, realizing that he was left on earth so that he could pass his knowledge of heaven on to other people.

This film is part of Don's attempt to explain heaven to other people. The film shows heaven in a very traditional way – with large golden gates and an ephemeral quality. Don says that he was surrounded by people he knew who had died. He said there was nothing negative or worrisome. While the film does not expressly mention angels, light gathers during the shots of heaven in ways that form wings and haloes on the people that Don describes. Interestingly, the shots of heaven are shown full screen, while the rest of the movie is wide screen.

In terms of what Don and the filmmakers are attempting to convey about their Christian beliefs, there are several obvious points. The film features a traditional view of the physical appearance of heaven as true and accurate. The film also attempts to show that there is reason behind human suffering in the context of a loving god. The film more subtly advocates a traditional understanding of women's roles within the church – Don is a pastor and his wife supports him by cooking and caring for the home and children, as well as praying for him and organizing friends to pray for him. In one emotionally intense scene, Don's parents-in-law offer to take custody of Don's children during his recovery so that his wife could focus her attention on him, but he refuses. In this specific scene, he places his family values above the happiness of his wife, who was overworked and stressed, although he does allow it after some firm encouragement from his wife. Don's wife is shown as a source of strength for him, but she does defer to his wishes, even when he is incapacitated and she is running the household.

Overall, *90 Minutes in Heaven* is an attempt to use the popularity of summer films to show a traditional understanding of heaven, the purpose of suffering, and family gender roles. Tricks of filmography, such as lighting, as well as the narration and overall plot facilitate the expression of these ideas.

This post references the following material:

*90 Minutes in Heaven*. Directed by Michael Polish. Performed by Kate Bosworth, Hayden Christensen, Hudson Meek. Beverly Hills: Emmett/Furla Films, 2015. Film.

## An Introduction

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Works of artistic expression such as film, music, and art, can be analyzed to gain an understanding of the creator's intentions. In art historical theory, this is *structuralism* – the analysis of a creator's intention with his work of art, rather than focusing discussion on the work's reception or perception by viewers. In religious studies, a structuralist approach to artistic religious expressions can be a tool for a scholar to discover what the creator of a work of art wanted to express about their religion to the viewer.



In recent years, many works of American popular culture have been created by Christians as a means of expressing their religion to a general audience, many of whom are not practicing Christians. This blog will analyze a work from each of several genres – film, television, music, art, and literature – in order to understand what these creators are attempting to express about their religion to the general populace of America.

The author of this blog is an American student, studying religion at the undergraduate level. This blog is part of a project to meet the requirements for an Introduction to World Religions course.

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