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***Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949.*** By **Judith Weisenfeld.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xiv + 344 pp. \$60.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Judith Weisenfeld's richly documented book uncovers an aspect of cultural images of African American religion that has been missing up to now. Readers will find a treasure trove of fresh insights and new angles even on previously researched aspects of black religion. It is just the kind of work that I have been looking for in a course that I teach on cultural images and interpretations of African American religion.

Weisenfeld argues that religion "was central to American film's representations of African Americans in this period" and that the film industry's portrayal of black religion contributed powerfully to broader ideas about race and blacks' place in the nation (3). She notes that it is no surprise that African American religion would appear in film because of the importance of religion in many African American communities and the spiritual commitments of individual blacks. However, Weisenfeld contends that film representations of blacks were not simply a reflection of the significance of religion within black communities, but rather Hollywood studios' interest in describing and prescribing the boundaries of the category of religion. In other words, images of blacks as overly emotional and naturally religious were a way of shaping "the Negro" as an outsider in a white, "properly" Christian America.

The first two chapters of the book examine Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Hallelujah* (1929) and Warner Bros.' *The Green Pastures* (1936), Hollywood studio films that featured all-black casts and set their narratives in black Christian contexts. Weisenfeld does an excellent job of teasing out the cultural meanings of these two films in their emphasis on African American religion as childlike, hypersexual, and primitive. Her close attention to *Hallelujah* director King Vidor's assumption that he as a white Southerner had privileged access to what was fundamentally black opens up the film's central argument that blacks' character was "fixed and irredeemable despite their best efforts to act in ways contrary to that fundamental racialized nature" (33). Weisenfeld's astute reflections on the film's depiction of black religion as being incompatible with the Ten Commandments, which have occupied such a crucial place in various Protestant denominations, reminded me of longstanding critiques of black religion from Christian moralists (dating back to the 1870s) and social scientists who asserted dogmatically that religion and ethics were separate in black churches. By paying attention to film representations, Weisenfeld helps us not only to see a different dimension of blacks in the American cultural

imagination, but her work implicitly demonstrates the overlap of various discourses (in this case, film and the social sciences) in reinforcing and perpetuating certain images of African Americans.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze “race movies,” films produced for African American audiences. Here again Weisenfeld provides a deep examination of the uses of religion in broader discussions about the Great Migration, urbanization, and the relation between black churches and an increasingly urban commercial culture. Although some black churches condemned the new forms of entertainment in the new urban culture, including the movie theater, black churches had to wrestle with the implications of films with explicitly religious goals, and there was no uniform response. Some churches embraced various forms of entertainment such as religious subject-films, as Weisenfeld shows, and incorporated them into the churches. Others saw such entertainments as threatening to the unique status of the churches. In either case, religious films were seen as exciting new possibilities for the promotion of the oral and visual aspects of black culture to generate a new inclusive conception of blacks or as a potential threat to the role of the churches in providing amusements for its members and as a challenge to the moral life of churchgoers.

In chapters 5 and 6, Weisenfeld examines various attempts to transform representations of African American Christianity in the context of the Second World War and post-war discussions of civil rights. She looks at the films *The Negro Soldier* (1944), *We've Come a Long, Long Way* (1944), and *Lost Boundaries* (1949). Although Weisenfeld has a lot to say about the “moral meaning of race,” especially as it pertains to the latter film’s complicated exploration of racial passing as a subject matter, I felt that her usual attention to detail and nuance worked against a convincing claim that religion was crucial to these films (particularly *Lost Boundaries*) because we get lost in the details and one fails to see the connection between these and previous films. Even the most capacious understanding of the “religious” seems unable to identify these films as religious. To be sure, ministers appear and churches are present, but the way in which Weisenfeld describes these films (and here I rely on her analysis because I have not seen these latter three) perhaps inadvertently supports a secularization narrative of blacks in film. Civil rights, secular appeals for black citizenship, and racial passing and identity seem to me quite far removed from the kinds of explicitly religious material of *Hallelujah* and *The Green Pastures* (might urbanization have been highlighted even more strongly to indicate how it affected this process?). The comments and analyses of black critics take on a very different tone, and political and civil rights talk is much more prominent (again, I am relying primarily on Weisenfeld’s own research, though my reading of black newspapers has informed my judgments). In short, I am not

convinced that religion is as central as Weisenfeld claims it is when we reach the end of her analysis of films in the 1940s.

A particularly important aspect of Weisenfeld's book will be its usefulness to film critics, scholars of religion, and historians. The research is based on wide reading in mainstream and black newspapers, memoirs and autobiographies, and archival collections of writers, directors, producers, performers, and censors. The work is keenly attuned to contested meanings of films both between blacks and whites and within black communities. No simplistic analysis is offered. As Weisenfeld notes, on the one hand, through its representation, "black religion becomes a sign and symptom of the perpetual backwardness and outsider status of African Americans" (236). On the other hand, a very complex and nuanced process was involved in the production and reception of these films, and differences over time in response to changes and events in the broader culture are charted with careful attention. By taking seriously these various visual arts and moving beyond well-used textual and musical sources, Weisenfeld has deepened and expanded our understanding of the stuff of African American religious life and blacks' place in the American cultural imagination.

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*Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change.* By  
**Melissa J. Wilde.** Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.  
xvi + 196 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

*Vatican II* is an excellent analysis of the internal workings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962–1965)—from the key transforming events of the first session that redefined its purpose from a mere rubber-stamping of the previously written curial agenda to the nuts and bolts of the competing and collaborating interest groups that passed, or failed to pass, subsequent decisions on religious freedom, the role of Mary, and the permissibility of birth control. Dr. Wilde's research was based on archived transcripts of interviews with eighty of the most important bishops and theologians at the Council, plus photocopies of the original vote tallies on the above issues.

The book's main argument is a sociological one: that the Roman Catholic Church is an organization and, as in all organizations, its leaders' primary interest was in preserving the Church's *legitimacy* within its organizational