Elijah Siegler (ed.)


Though it may come as a surprise to casual viewers, a significant body of scholarly literature on the films of the Coen Brothers has emerged—some of it concerning film criticism, some philosophy, and some religion. The latter might seem most surprising of all, given the Coen Brothers’ reputation as cinematic masters of irony and violence. And yet, there are texts associating the Coens with Christianity, Judaism, and Zen Buddhism, so the notion that their films have something to say about religion (whether in doctrinal or praxical terms) is hardly uncommon. Far more controversial is determining how religion functions in their oeuvre: is it a subject treated with incisive understanding, or is it dismissed with the mordant humor characteristic of much of their work?

One could try to address these questions with a sweeping analysis of the Coen Brothers’ feature films, seeking to identify a number of religious-cum-theological themes that bind them together. An example of this approach is found in Cathleen Falsani’s The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers (2009), which goes so far as to gather a list of ethico-spiritual “Coenmandments” from their films. In contrast, one could focus on a specific film by the Coen Brothers, treating its religious ideas and implications in isolation from the rest of their corpus. Books such as The Dude De Ching (2010) and The Dude and the Zen Master (2013) have already taken this approach with regard to the Coen Brothers’ 1998 classic The Big Lebowski. At the same time, however, neither of these interpretive “models” is ideal: the former risks imposing unity on a textured, multivalent oeuvre, while the latter does little to contextualize or to extrapolate its particular object.

Into this situation arrives the recent anthology Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order, edited by Elijah Siegler. Divided into twelve chapters, as well as two supplementary sections dubbed “Intermissions” (not to mention an Epilogue), Siegler’s volume has the benefit of avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis mentioned above. On the one hand, it does not risk reducing the Coen Brothers’ corpus to an overarching “message” or to a handful of religious ideas. Rather, there are chapters that deal with morality, interfaith dialogue, race, and the sociology of religion, just to name a few. Thus the very form of Coen speaks to the diverse interests of the Coen Brothers, underlining, furthermore, how often such interests have religious connotations. On the other hand, the volume does not limit itself to only a film or two. Siegler and his collaborators examine each of the Coens’ feature films (with the exception of Hail, Caesar!, which presumably was released after the volume was completed), thereby challenging
the assumption that religion is merely a chance topic for the filmmakers. If anything, the book implies, it may be that religious questions and themes lie at the very heart of Coen Brothers’ art.

Taken on these merits alone, *Coen* is a valuable addition to the secondary literature on the Coen Brothers, and it might be seen as a companion to *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*—a 2009 volume (updated in 2012) that investigates a variety of philosophical issues across the Coens’ body of work. It does not hurt, either, that *Coen’s* contributions are generally of a high quality, well researched, and clearly presented. And yet, since the book’s chapters are disparate in their aims and concerns, it is impossible in this context to provide a summary of, much less exhaustively discuss, their significance. I will have to be content, then, to make a couple of observations.

First, Elijah Siegler’s introduction to the volume, “Are the Coen Brothers Religious Filmmakers? Or How Simple Is Blood Simple?”, is a helpful guide to the vexing question of “religion and film” in general. On what grounds can we say that a given film is “religious”? Is it enough for a film to raise religious questions (as in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Ordet* or Terrence Malick’s *Tree of Life*)? Or must the connection be even more straightforward, so that the film explicitly expresses or promotes certain religious teachings (as in Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* or even Harold Cronk’s *God’s Not Dead* franchise)? Siegler treats the Coen Brothers’ oeuvre as a kind of case study that, in turn, sheds light on the wider problem. After all, while a few of the Coens’ films patently concern religious issues and themes—*A Serious Man* (2009) immediately comes to mind, followed by *True Grit* (2010) and *Hail, Caesar!* (2016)—many of their films do not. But Siegler argues that this ostensible discrepancy is beside the point, since there are other ways that religion might impinge upon film, whether through implicit metaphysical assumptions, often conveyed by “subtle visual clues,” or through the audience’s reception of film as a bearer of religious meaning. With this expansive methodology in mind, Siegler paves the way for his contributors to investigate how religion crops up in each of the Coens’ films, albeit in different ways. As a result, he casts off the hermeneutical straitjacket of looking solely for overt and “sincere” ethico-religious content.

Still—and this is my second and final observation—such interpretive license does have a drawback. Perhaps it stems from due concern about Coen Brothers’ affinity for irony and opacity, or perhaps it is the all-but-inevitable result of scholarly writing about art, but *Coen* does not reflect either the ferocity or the levity typical of the Coens’ work. That is to say, while the final scene of *No Country for Old Men* (2007) leaves me speechless, and while the opening scene of *A Serious Man* is mysterious and sinister, *Coen* feels detached, procedural—a worthy academic exercise, yet somehow lacking the existential