

The Apostle: Robert Duvall's false objectivity

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In addition to starring in *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall wrote, directed and produced the film. Duvall worked on the project for 10 years, and put up his own money to finance the production when none was forthcoming from Hollywood. It must be said that Duvall the actor outshines Duvall the director in this film. He stars as Euliss “Sonny” Dewey, an aging, fiery Pentecostal preacher from Texas.

Sonny leads a congregation, and spends a lot of time on the road as an evangelist organizing revivals across the South. His wife Jessie (Farrah Fawcett) tires of his absences on these trips, as well as his philandering. She begins an affair with a young minister, Horace (Todd Allen), and demands a divorce and custody of the couple's young children. She also manages to exploit church bylaws to wrest control of their congregation.

After consuming a fair amount of alcohol, Sonny tries to make contact with his children at a Little League game. He provokes a fight with Horace and ends up bashing the latter in the head with a baseball bat, rendering him comatose. From this point forward, Sonny is on the run from the law. Eventually Horace dies as a result of the attack and the preacher is wanted for murder.

Sonny flees his Texas hometown, fakes his death by pushing his car into a lake, and anoints himself “The Apostle E.F.” We then follow E.F.'s efforts to reestablish himself as a preacher, a quest which finally lands him in Bayou Boutte, Louisiana. He enlists the support of a retired black minister, Reverend Blackwell (John Beasley), and builds up a following for his fledgling “One Way Road to Heaven” church in this poor, predominantly black Bayou town, until he is eventually tracked down and apprehended by the law.

Robert Duvall is a talented actor, and his portrayal of Sonny has its entertaining moments. This reviewer and many in the theater found his tub-thumping, Bible-quoting, gyrating performance highly amusing. But

after the laughter dies down, one is left asking: what is the point of this film?

In his appearances to promote *The Apostle*—including one on the Christian Broadcasting Network's The 700 Club—Duvall has stressed that he wanted to make a film about this genre of religion that emphasized “spirituality” without passing judgment; that he sought to honestly portray evangelism without pointing to the obvious corruption, without criticizing or ridiculing. But is this possible?

In a magazine interview Duvall expressed admiration for the gritty films of British director Ken Loach, although not the latter's left-wing politics. No doubt Duvall sincerely desires to produce work that is more authentic than the sort of fare turned out by the contemporary film industry. The actor-director seems to believe, however, that it is not necessary to have an overall conception in the creation of a realistic film, that it simply emerges as the sum-total of a series of honest moments. With this method one runs the danger of merely accumulating impressions, which leave the surface of events and emotions undisturbed.

A film with evangelism as its subject, one would think, ought to attempt to tell its audience something about the source of the attraction of this sort of religious activity for a section of the American population. Is it not the case that poor and oppressed people often turn to this brand of religion—with all its musical and theatrical trappings—in a desperate search for answers to life's problems, both material and spiritual? *The Apostle* tells us next to nothing about the basis of fundamentalism's appeal, nor does it even pose the question.

The treatment of the parishioners in the Duvall character's One Way Road to Heaven church is telling in this regard. While in one scene several churchgoers “give testimony” about their failed marriages, lost jobs, etc., we never see any of the conditions these people

face outside the church. The answer to their troubles is one word: “Jesus.” And the audience is apparently expected to consider this a legitimate solution. These characters, who could have been the vehicle for discussing all sorts of problems, are in general left undeveloped, bordering on caricatures.

As a matter of fact, the camera barely moves off of Duvall, and the characters played by Fawcett, June Carter Cash, Bill Bob Thornton and Miranda Richardson are left with little to do except stand back and watch him operate.

In the final analysis, *The Apostle* is a film about religious redemption, and an unbelievable redemption at that. Sonny is presented as a faithful man of the cloth—spreading the good word of the Lord—whose only flaw is a brutal murder. While on the lam, he is able to bring the word of God to a group of impoverished people in the Bayou. When a racist (Thornton) threatens to bulldoze his integrated church, Sonny manages to convince him to put his bulldozer in neutral and take Jesus as his personal savior. This religious conversion is broadcast live, blow-by-blow, on the local radio station.

It is precisely in these sorts of scenes that the film’s weaknesses are most apparent. It is simply not possible to be neutral about such events. Audience members are inevitably polarized. The irreverent and irreligious find them ludicrous; those disposed to holy-rollerism find them uplifting. The worst thing one can say about Duvall’s film is that spectators leave it with their ideological positions untouched.

In regard to racism, the film suggests that the integration of Sonny’s church—an integration on the basis of blind superstition and religious fantasy—offers a way forward for his congregation. But the social conditions that promote racism are not challenged, and are barely alluded to.

The message of *The Apostle* is presumably that Sonny must be forgiven for his violent acts because he is called by a higher power. The film does everything in its power, somewhat manipulatively, to encourage audience members to set aside Sonny’s brutal crime and focus on his religious calling. Even the police who come to arrest him in the final scene wait patiently for him to finish preaching, and we are urged to share the sadness of the parishioners as he is gingerly placed in the back seat of the police car. In this way the film

gives credence to a figure who is, frankly, somewhat mentally unbalanced.

Duvall’s goal of impartiality is unattainable. Fundamentalist religion in America is a complex and explosive question bound up with definite social interests. He may very well be unaware of the issues at stake, but Duvall passes on so many conceptions uncritically that his meticulous portrayal of Sonny becomes the vehicle for the legitimizing of evangelism and religion in general. What might have been an insightful look at a significant phenomenon becomes, in Duvall’s hands, an occasion for self-aggrandizement that leaves, more than anything else, a bad taste in one’s mouth.



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