

*The Adventists (film)*. By Martin Doblmeier. Journey Films, 2010. \$19.95.

Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church live as much as ten years longer than other Americans; it is a statistic startling enough to attract the attention of journalists and epidemiologists alike. Adventists, known best perhaps for marking the Sabbath on the seventh day (Saturday), look for the imminent return of Jesus Christ but also emphasize the wellbeing of our human bodies, maintaining that souls are inseparable from physical selves. Church practices that promote the healthy integration of mind, body, and spirit—including a vegetarian diet; abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and some caffeine; and regular exercise—seem to have some striking this-worldly effects.

*The Adventists*, an hour-long newsmagazine-style documentary film, purports to investigate what members of the SDA Church are doing right in terms of health. At the same time, it explores what it describes as a “paradox”: the involvement of a rather theologically conservative religious group in the development of cutting-edge health care.

Although the film’s broad title might suggest a comprehensive approach to a religious movement, filmmaker Martin Doblmeier’s focus is specifically on this relationship between Adventists and health. So, in the course of the film, we meet aged members (including a 95-year old practicing heart surgeon) who credit their longevity to diet and exercise. We visit several Adventist hospitals and learn about the considerable resources put into research in cardiology, proton treatments, or robotic surgery. We are introduced to patients benefiting from Adventist-funded health care: women in labor, infants waiting for donor hearts, cancer patients. And we hear from doctors who nod and confirm that the Adventist health code simply makes good medical sense.

For those seriously engaged in the study of religion and health/healing—or, for that matter, in the study of the Adventists as a movement—this film will probably not cover new ground. It is geared towards popular audiences and, while not without some nuance, assumes that its audiences know little or nothing about the subject matter. (In fact, there is a brief sequence of person-on-the-

street interviews demonstrating just how little most Americans know about the Adventist movement.)

But the film may still be useful in the classroom, with the following caveats for instructors of religion. First, the film's focus is, as noted above, quite limited. Although there is some fleeting attention to the history of the denomination—complete with awkward historical reenactments—the accent here is distinctly on contemporary Seventh-day Adventists. So, for example, the classroom teacher interested in making a point about women, religion, and health will find that founding visionary Ellen White is not especially prominent. We hear nothing about the church's sizable numbers outside of the United States; the Adventist movement appears, in this film, to be entirely American. Perhaps most regrettably for its use in courses on American religion, the film presents the Adventists as unique and even exceptional among American religious groups in their interest in practices related to health; we do not learn where they stand in relation to other health-preoccupied nineteenth and twentieth century religious groups. There is, for example, no mention of Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Scientists.

Second, in this sympathetic portrayal of the Adventists as promoters of good health, there is a curious lack of attention to the Adventists as a Christian denomination. The film's director, Martin Doblmeier, has made twenty-five documentaries that touch upon religiosity in some way. His previous film, *Bonhoeffer*, was a biography of the German theologian. But Doblmeier seems cautious about delving too far into Adventists' theology or ethics, perhaps because he wants to avoid explaining possibly controversial doctrines to a general audience. For example, although church representatives onscreen tell us that they see faith and science as complementary, we learn very little specifically about the Church's theological reasons for the emphasis on wellbeing, and nothing at all about how this relates to Adventist-funded scientific research that supports a literal interpretation of the creation story in Genesis.

Indeed, I was sometimes disappointed that attention to flashy medical treatments eclipsed religious questions raised by the subject matter. For example, one interviewee is an active man in his early forties who is undergoing robotic surgery on his prostate at an Adventist hospital. Over shots of him heartily engaging in athletic activities, he admits in an interview that he was surprised at the diagnosis of prostate cancer due to his age and activity level. But, he tells us, "cancer doesn't care who you are." From here the film veers off to talk about the promise of robotic surgery. Yet I was still struck by this man's common statement, which is actually somewhat in contradiction to the film's premise. The film implies that cancer, and other life-threatening illnesses, *do* discriminate—at least insofar as they seem to affect Adventists less often than others. This raises the question of what it might mean in Adventist communities when illness does strike. When healthy habits are given explicitly Christian meanings, one danger can be that illness itself can be viewed as a moral failing, a sign that one has fallen short of what is divinely required. How is sickness popularly defined in Adventist communities? This film does not explore this kind of question, nor does it show us any internal debate on matters of health within Adventist institutions. For the most

part, Adventist health care facilities appear in this film to be as serene and utopian as Celebration Health, the spa-like Adventist hospital that tourists visit in Disney's Celebration, Florida.

Finally, the film, perhaps unsurprisingly, does not offer a conclusive answer as to why Adventists have a corner on longevity. Interviewed experts indicate that it has to do with diet, exercise, and, somewhat more vaguely, a strong sense of community. A comparative approach would have been interesting here: Latter-day Saints are encouraged to eat meat sparingly and eschew alcohol and tobacco. They also, arguably, can have a well-defined sense of community. How do the LDS and Adventists compare in terms of longevity? More provocatively, do the theological underpinnings of these practices matter at all—or could one create a community that mimicked the practices but not the religious commitment? Some interviewed experts refer to an element of the unknown that is inherent to practicing medicine that seems to fit with religious worldviews, and we hear a chaplain reflect upon the significance of what happens in hospitals on human lives; but neither of these lines of inquiry are pushed any further. What precisely Adventists do right in terms of health—and what it has to do with their identity as a Christian community—remains an open question.

But despite these limitations—many of which could be reframed as excellent classroom questions—this film tells an often-fascinating, always-accessible story about the long reach of the SDA Church in American health care. There is plenty to engage an undergraduate or seminary class, from descriptions of the holistic approach in Adventist John Harvey Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium to the first "miraculous" transplant of a baboon heart in an Adventist hospital. Properly contextualized, the film could be an excellent jumping-off point for discussions about religion and health. In fact, because it so vividly depicts the effect of a religious denomination on health care in multiple spheres, it might work best of all as a film introducing students interested in the health sciences to possible impacts of religiosity on health and healing.

It is clear that the Adventists represent a religious movement with a distinctive and important relationship to health care. Despite some shortcomings, the film provides a potentially valuable pathway into a more complex scholarly conversation.

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