

How *Heaven Is for Real* shows trends in American religion

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The movie [Heaven Is for Real](#)—based on the [book](#) by the same name—tells the story of minister Todd Burpo and his four-year-old son Colton. The main plot revolves around Colton's near-death experience and his claims that while undergoing surgery he visited heaven and sat on Jesus' lap. Burpo struggles to define what happened to Colton for himself as well as for the community of faith to which he ministers.

Colton's experience and the apparent extrasensory information it supplies (like knowing about his mother's miscarriage of an older sister) pull various characters in different directions as they try to make sense of these events. The book made the *New York Times*' [best-seller list](#), and both it and the movie bill events described as a true story.

As a father, I was moved while viewing the fictionalized version of the Burpos' experience as I considered how I might have responded if it were my daughter in Colton's place. The fears and hopes, uncertainties and faith, love and loss, all resonated with what must have been an exceptional experience for this family.

As a scholar of American religion, however, I had a different view of the movie. Other reviewers have taken [a critical approach](#), or [described content for parents](#), or [looked at the differences](#) between the movie and the book, which is much more explicitly Christian. Instead, I want to explore how the film represents the continuity of several trends within American Protestantism. There is Burpo's struggle to understand Colton's experience which leads him to a secular university psychologist who offers a variety of scientific and cultural explanations for what Colton saw. Burpo ultimately rejects her explanations, but here we have the search for authenticity that led many Protestants in the 19th century to emphasize the importance of science in understanding religion. There is the presentation of Jesus in flashbacks of Colton's visions, as [a blue-green-eyed white man](#) with dark hair, fitting into the [long history of the whiteness of Jesus in the United States](#). There is also the turn to sentimentality in attempting to understand death and heaven. In the late 19th

century, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's best seller [The Gates Ajar](#) offered a sentimental, domestic vision of heaven after the mass death of the Civil War.

Two themes really stood out, however. First was the conflict between emotions and intellect in the practice of American Christianity, and second was the power of children's spirituality in authenticating religious truth. The emotionality of the Burpos' experience is contrasted with the experience of some of the congregants of Burpo's church. They don't want to accept that Colton actually visited heaven because it doesn't appear rational. Emotionality, however, wins out as Burpo emphasizes that the reality of heaven demonstrates the love of God. Such a tension has been a part of American Christianity since the middle of the 18th century as some Christians—particular those later called evangelicals—preferred an emotionally moving faith, while others believed that rationality was the way to approach religion.

The other theme that runs throughout the movie is the authority that Colton has as an innocent child, whose visions must be real. Prior to the 19th century most Christians looked at children as tainted with Adam's sin. Shaped by Romantic ideology, children turned into spiritual innocents and guides. They became little angels rather than small devils, although Christians have continued to hold these views in tension (consider the extensive Christian parenting literature on discipline and correction).

The movie, though, is awash in a sea of unclear theology that makes it hard to pinpoint the specific influence. What is more clear is that *Heaven Is for Real* doesn't present something new but instead repackages themes in American Christianity for a contemporary mainstream audience. Whatever happened to Colton, the film provides a pastiche of American religiosity that doesn't give us much information about heaven but does say a lot about what's going on here on earth.

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