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*A Serious Man* dir. by Joel and Ethan Coen (review)

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from danger. Instead, the film indicates, sexual violence knows no regional borders, as trauma may manifest in myriad ways and places.

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*A Serious Man*, dirs. Joel and Ethan Coen, 2009.

Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.<sup>1</sup>

Thus opens Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man* (2009), and a great deal does happen to title character Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg). Crises great and small plague Gopnik over the summer of 1967 in suburban Minnesota. His typically mischievous children Sarah and Danny (Jessica McManus and Aaron Wolff) are constantly at each other's throats; his live-in brother Arthur (Richard Kind) hogs the family's single bathroom; his overbearing wife Judith (Sari Lennik) and her pseudo-sympathetic lover Sy Ableman (Fred Melamed) ridicule Larry with the apparent normality of their affair. At work, student Clive Park (David Kang) haunts Gopnik after the physics professor fails Park on an exam, and the chair of Gopnik's tenure committee keeps making comments that push Larry to question his future as a scholar.

Much of *A Serious Man* feels like the darkly comical side of *The Wonder Years*. The Gopniks' Levittown-like suburban neighborhood would be a postcard image of 1960s middle class family life if not for class bully Mike Fagle (Jon Kaminski Jr.) chasing Danny Gopnik down the street every day, for grouchy neighbor Mr. Brandt (Peter Breitmayer), or for the nude sunbathing of Mrs. Samsky (Amy Landecker), which both delights and conflicts Larry. The various annoyances that sit at the center of almost every scene in the film—the "everything that happens to you"—avoid casting the era in too nostalgic a light.

Yet the past is recognizable here. Children Sarah and Danny grapple with timeless problems of youth. Sarah can never wash her hair before going out with friends because Uncle Arthur is constantly in the bathroom, while Danny forever is trying to watch *F Troop* over an always-fuzzy aerial (the attempted repair of which provides Larry with the opportunity to see Mrs. Samsky *au naturel* over the patio fence). A string of thefts brings fur-

ther woe to both children: money Sarah stole from Larry's wallet is, in turn, stolen by Danny to pay off a small debt to the class pot dealer. This subplot is one of the film's lighter elements, as is the false linguistic bravado on display throughout. Sarah prefers to call Danny "brat, fucker," and one of Danny's schoolmates refers to just about everyone and everything as some variation on "that fucker."

But how does the film portray the American Midwest? *A Serious Man* is set in a "typically" midwestern locale—in this case, suburban Minnesota—in three ways. First, the town's residential space is comprised almost entirely of identical, small ranch houses in a treeless neighborhood. Our limited exposure to other models of residence and leisure, such as the large house and the country club, conveys a certain sense of economic stratification, but not one so strong as to introduce explicit class antagonism into the narrative.

Second, while following Professor Gopnik during the course of his working day, the viewer is not treated to a campus overgrown with the collegiate Gothic buildings that typically convey intellectual prestige and social cachet. Instead, Larry works in a brick building so stereotypical of 1960s commercial architecture that one could imagine a dentist's office or an accounting firm down the hall from the physics department. The message is clear: Professor Gopnik is a smart guy, but he is only an average scholar, punching the proverbial time card in a bid for tenure-by-waiting. The film features a workmanlike approach to academia that suggests terms like "groundbreaking" or "esteemed" cannot really be applied to the scholarship here.

Third, *A Serious Man*'s community is overwhelmingly homogenous in terms of both race and religion. The vast majority of the community is white and Jewish. When an "outsider" does appear via the character of Korean student Clive Park, he becomes a source of continuous anxiety for Larry. The audience is in no doubt as to what Park means for the film's presentation of midwestern communities: everyone here is the same.

There is a bit of a twist to this homogeneity, though, and one that scholars of religion in the Midwest are only now beginning to recognize as truly significant. Because the Coen brothers immerse viewers so deeply in the world of *A Serious Man*, it is quite easy to miss: this is not the fabled Midwest populated solely by heartland Christians. The film is not set in Lake Wobegone, surrounded by Lutherans wielding casseroles. There is no casual conflation of Christianity, GOP politics, and public life as supposedly

happens in a place like Kansas.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the film's essential confinement to neighborhood, Hebrew school, and synagogue permits very little intrusion of civil life at all. Even though divorce is discussed numerous times throughout the film, its most important aspect here is the procurement of a *get*. No, this is a deeply Jewish community, where the rhythm of life revolves around bar mitzvah and the observance, even if only "cultural," of the Jewish holy days.

While some excellent work on Jews in the Midwest has been done, especially by Lila Corwin Berman, the scholarly assumption remains the same: the Midwest is not a Jewish place. Statistically speaking, this is true. The most recent compilation of data by the Glenmary Research Center in 2000 found that only 1.1% of the Midwest's population was Jewish.<sup>3</sup> *A Serious Man*, however, includes no overt images of Christianity at all. Moreover, this absence is not presented as remarkable; instead, the Midwest's unending acres of identical houses, the utter averageness of everything and everyone, and the pervasive social homogeneity are unassumingly Jewish as far as this film is concerned.

The film engages with Judaism in a way that adherents of any faith tradition will recognize as realistic. When Larry seeks the advice of the synagogue's senior rabbi, he is brushed off and has to settle for the much less experienced Rabbi Scott (Simon Helberg). The young rabbi has an obvious and deep love for Jewish spirituality but can convey it only in the most banal of senses, which leaves Gopnik wondering whether there is anything at all to the whole system. When Gopnik eventually meets with Rabbi Nachtner (George Wyner), he gets more serious and begs the rabbi to help figure out what it is Hashem wants for Larry Gopnik. Larry's pursuit of knowledge is sincere, but the rabbi's answer is unhelpful: who knows what Hashem wants for anyone? The Coen brothers' take on religion, then, is deeply serious even as it draws out the absurd obstacles faced by many adherents when they encounter crisis.

Scholars of the American Midwest would do well to spend some time considering how clearly *A Serious Man* reflects the communities and the people they study. Even those not interested in religion per se are likely to find much in the film that relates quite closely to their own fields, including ways in which the social expectations around homeownership and living space, the communal function of rituals not particularly connected with deep belief, and mundane family dynamics all are relevant to understanding what makes any given place "midwestern." By portraying as em-

inently relatable a community that is not, in numerical terms, anywhere near representative of the Midwest, *A Serious Man* goes a long way toward the ever-elusive answer that drives much of regional scholars' work: why care about the Midwest?

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NOTES

1. Attributed to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (or "Rashi"), an eleventh century Talmudic commentator.

2. Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

3. Dale E. Jones et al., *Religious Congregations & Membership 2000: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported for 149 Religious Bodies* (Nashville: Glenmary Research Center, 2002). My figure is a combination of the Jewish population estimates for what Glenmary calls the "East North Central" and "West North Central" regions, which together represent the twelve states often referred to as "the Midwest": the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio.