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Sinitiere's "Salvation with a smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity" (Book Review)

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forms in the rapidly changing context of the early 21st-century accrediting landscape than a choice between either option would have done alone. Highly recommended for academic libraries hoping to understand and foster the culture of evaluation.

Reviewer
Donald E. Day, B.H. Carroll Theological Institute


The past dozen years have seen a commensurate amount of bestselling books released by neo-pentecostal preacher Joel Osteen, evoking corresponding negative reactions from evangelical thought leaders. What has been missing, until now, is a full-length scholarly treatment of the Osteen phenomenon. Sinitiere, author or editor of several books and Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Sam Houston State University, has filled this lacuna in the literature with the release of Salvation with a Smile. Positing the thesis that Osteen’s popularity is reflective of American Christianity as a whole, the book traces the origin and ascent of Lakewood Church under Joel Osteen’s father John Osteen, uncovers the theological and psychological underpinnings of Lakewood’s prosperity teachings, and sets Lakewood in context of its relationship with evangelicalism and American Christianity as a whole.

Sinitiere’s scholarly bona fides and personal experience as a sympathetic outsider who has attended Lakewood Church services lend credibility to his account of Lakewood’s past and present. He is thorough, sometimes repetitively so, but his research efforts cannot be faulted. While some readers might wish his theological analysis of Osteen were more exacting, it should be noted that this book is a university press publication and that Sinitiere’s scholarly discipline is history, not theology. Even so, Sinitiere could be accused of relying too much on narrative psychologist Dan P. McAdam’s concept of “the redemptive self” in American identity. Given that reliance, I do appreciate the corrective provided by Shelly Rambo’s Spirit and Trauma: a Theology of Remaining (Westminster John Knox, 2010), which implicitly questions whether self (i.e., McAdam) or prosperity (i.e., Osteen) can actually bear the weight of redemption biblically conceived. By all means, carry Sinitiere’s book – and McAdam’s and Rambo’s too.

Reviewer
Mark Tubbs, Pacific Life Bible College