

Jason Byassee's theological film favorites

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue



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The Coen brothers' sense of humor is not for everyone, but anyone with any sympathy for slackerdom can find a place in his heart for *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998). I consider it a near-perfect illustration of the ancient Christian virtue of apatheia. The Dude (Jeff Bridges) wants only one thing: to get his rug replaced ("it really held the room together"). Otherwise he doesn't want a lot. Christians are not supposed to want a lot either. This is a Christian parable about *mutatis mutandis*.

*The Way* (Emilio Estevez, 2010) is a glorious depiction of the 800-kilometer, thousand-year-old trail from the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela. It's also a tender depiction of a difficult relationship between a father and his son. Tom Avery (Martin Sheen) is a father lamenting a son who died on the trail. Estevez, Sheen's real-life son, directs the film and appears at key moments. The concluding scene of worship at the cathedral is as perfect a depiction of liturgy as I've seen on film.

Sin has to be depicted as genuinely enticing for sainthood to be shown as far more intoxicating. Despite the marvels of cinematic special effects, it's nearly impossible to make a miracle believable. *The End of the Affair* (Neil Jordan, 1999) does it—by not showing it. It also succeeds in making God real enough to be worth rejecting.

*Of Gods and Men* (Xavier Beauvois, 2010) examines a small community of Trappist monks in colonial-era Algeria who are squeezed between resurgent violent fundamentalist Muslims and the village of neighbors they have come to love. This film includes some of the best depictions of leadership I have ever seen. The abbot

helps a frightened community prepare to face martyrdom—confident, if not unafraid.