

God and global cinema

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue



A still from the film *Hadewijch*.

For a century, cinema has been a critical medium for presenting religious themes in mainstream culture. Though such efforts are in danger of being swamped by Hollywood megaproductions like this year's *Noah*, which set stunning commercial records around the world—including in Russia, South Korea, Mexico, and Brazil—there are filmmakers who find a distinctive religious voice.

By far the most significant religious film of recent years is Xavier Beauvois's *Of Gods and Men*, a 2010 French production which portrays the Trappist monks who stubbornly maintained their presence in Algeria until jihadi guerrillas murdered seven of them in 1996. The film never lapses into hatred for the perpetrators. It is simply one of the greatest and most convincing depictions of sanctity in cinema.

Another portrait of faith in the heroic mode is the 2012 Mexican action epic *Cristiada (For Greater Glory)*, which depicts the Catholic Cristero revolt against the country's aggressively antireligious tyranny in the 1920s. The centerpiece of this reverential work is the story of a true-life martyr, the teenaged rebel José Luis Sánchez.

Those two films stand out in their presentations of staunch Christian heroism in the face of tyranny and terror. Far more common, though, are visions of faith as a source of conflict. Lebanon offered a wry example in the 2011 *Where Do We Go Now?*—a production that looks all the more relevant in light of later sectarian confrontations. The setting is a village bitterly divided between Maronite Christians and Shi'ite Muslims, where the slightest mishap threatens to provoke all-out

interfaith warfare. Maintaining a tenuous peace depends on two good friends, the Christian priest and the Shi'ite imam, who rely far more on wily cunning than heroism. Perhaps satirical humor is the only way of addressing such grim matters.

Many recent European films depict Christianity very negatively, associating it both with the darkest stereotypes of medieval fanaticism and modern-day radical Islamism. The 2009 French production *Hadewijch* portrays Céline, a young novice who practices extreme asceticism, modeling herself on a 13th-century female visionary named Hadewijch. Céline's acts of self-denial reach the point where the authorities expel her from the convent, forcing her to seek faith in unlikely settings. At one point, she seems destined to become a Muslim suicide bomber. It seems that for many secular Europeans, only an arbitrary line separates sincere Christian devotion from Islamist violence.

An ultraconservative Catholic prayer group is the subject of the Austrian film *Paradise: Faith* (2012), directed by Ulrich Seidl. Its middle-aged heroine flagellates herself before a crucifix, and on her door-to-door visitations she carries a substantial statue of the Virgin Mary. She is at best flaky, and at worst an intrusive fanatic. Her estranged former husband is, incidentally, Muslim.

Seidl also made the intriguing documentary *Jesus, You Know* (2003), which observes a group of pious believers praying as they face the camera. The film's general tone is far less harsh than *Paradise: Faith*, and the depictions of the believers' troubled lives are often moving. But as in the later film, the audience is presumed to be watching these alien believers with about as much sympathy and understanding as they might have for shamanic rites in the Subarctic.

As in the United States, debates over sexual identity cast religious groups firmly on the side of shortsighted repression. In 2012, Romania produced the widely praised *Beyond the Hills*, which was based loosely on an actual case in which a woman died during an exorcism. The film describes the sexual relationship between two young women, one of whom has been forced to become a nun in a stern Orthodox convent under a fanatical authoritarian priest. Her former lover represents insidious forces of Western liberalism and feminism, which the church can only understand as demonic.

I do not wish to paint the picture entirely in bleak colors. In the past decade, Europe has produced some of the finest religious films ever made—not only *Of Gods and Men*, but also the 2006 Russian film *Ostrov (The Island)*—both, incidentally, with monastic settings. I would also note such impressive contributions as the British

movie *The Gospel of Us*. But the portrayals of everyday church life, and of Christian religious behavior generally, are consistently tendentious—and depressing.