

# Between Heaven and Earth

Of Gods and Men | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Xavier Beauvois | Drama, History | R | 2h 2m

By A.O. Scott

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In the 1990s, Algeria was gripped by a gruesome, protracted civil war between the government — which declared martial law after annulling elections it appeared to have lost — and a ruthless Islamist insurgency.

The country foundered in a state of terror, with beheadings, throat-slashings and large-scale massacres an almost daily feature of life. These grim circumstances provide the setting for “Of Gods and Men,” a beautiful, somber and rigorously intelligent new film by the French director Xavier Beauvois.

Though it takes place in the recent past, “Of Gods and Men” has an unmistakably timely resonance, evoking as it does both the messy wars on terror and the rebellions currently convulsing North Africa and the Middle East. And yet while it takes pains to be historically authentic, the film, closely based on the true story of a group of French Cistercian Trappist monks caught up (and ultimately killed) in the violence, also keeps an eye on less worldly, temporal concerns.

Courses on religion in cinema are a staple of the film studies curriculum, but movies that try to illuminate religious experience from within constitute a tiny and exalted tradition, in which Mr. Beauvois’s story of faith under duress clearly belongs. Its more-or-less recent peers include movies as diverse as Carlos Reygadas’s “Silent Light,” from Mexico, Philip Gröning’s sublime documentary “Into Great Silence,” Bruno Dumont’s “Hadewijch” and “The Apostle,” Robert Duvall’s acute and sympathetic study of the glorious contradictions of American Evangelical Christianity.

The eight monks in “Of Gods and Men” belong to a quieter tradition than Mr. Duvall’s spirit-stung preacher, devoting themselves to contemplation, service and humility. Their conversation is quiet, minimal and gentle, making the occasional spark of anger or glimmer of humor all the more notable. Ranging from sturdy middle age to elfin decrepitude, the monks spend their days tending bees, growing food and praying.

But they are nonetheless very much a part of everyday life in the village in the Atlas Mountains where their abbey has stood since the mid-19th century. They sell their honey in the local market and participate in rituals and celebrations with their Muslim neighbors.

One of them, Brother Luc (Michael Lonsdale), almost single-handedly runs a medical clinic, dispensing advice and hand-me-down shoes along with prescriptions.

Simplicity and charity may be central aspects of their mission, but the monks’ presence, as European Christians in a land of Arab Muslims, is part of a complicated political legacy, fraught with resentment and bad memories. France’s colonization of Algeria and the brutal war of independence that ended it cast their shadow over the monastery, and while the monks are not overtly trying to expiate the sins of colonialism, they are surely committed to healing its wounds.

The prior, Christian (Lambert Wilson), spends nearly as much time with the Koran as with the Bible, and he regards himself as neither an interloper nor a native but rather as a sincere and dedicated friend of Algeria. Though it is not mentioned in the film, the actual Brother Christian, who came from a distinguished military family, served in the French Army during the Algerian War. His decision to stay in that country after taking his monastic vows represented a stubborn and passionate belief in the possibility of reconciliation. (A richly detailed and moving account of his life and the fate of his abbey can be found in “The Monks of Tibhirine,” a 2002 book by John Kiser.) Mr. Wilson’s Christian, with a hint of steeliness beneath his calm demeanor, holds onto that belief as circumstances become more and more dangerous.

A group of Croatian highway workers are slaughtered in broad daylight, in keeping with the militants’ drive to rid Algeria of foreigners and other infidels. News reaches the abbey of other killings, and the local civil and military authorities try to persuade Christian to abandon the abbey. Several of the other monks are tempted to leave, and some of the most dramatic scenes in the movie show them debating the merits of various courses of action. Christian is scolded for asserting his authority without honoring the order’s communitarian ethic, and what seems like a beside-the-point procedural debate touches on the film’s deepest spiritual and ethical concerns.

The monks are clearly risking their lives — as nocturnal visits from armed militants make clear — but martyrdom is not part of the Cistercian creed. What motivates Christian and the others is rather an almost fanatical humanism, strict adherence to an idea of compassion that leads Luc to treat a wounded jihadist and Christian to pray for the soul of a murderer and to pre-emptively forgive his own

likely assassins.

Mr. Beauvois, an actor who has directed and written a handful of features, is clearly fascinated by the radicalism of the monks, an expression of religious zeal whose extremism lies in its insistence on preserving peace and dignity in all circumstances. But though his sympathy for the Trappists is evident, the film does not treat them as saints, or as mouthpieces for any particular theology. Rather, “Of Gods and Men” works to balance the two terms of its title and treats the relationship between them as a grave and complex mystery.

The theme may be piety, but Mr. Beauvois and his cast do not address it piously. “Of Gods and Men” is supple and suspenseful, appropriately austere without being overly harsh, and without forgoing the customary pleasures of cinema. The performances are strong, the narrative gathers momentum as it progresses, and the camera is alive to the beauty of the Algerian countryside. (The film, a big hit in France last year, was that country’s submission for the foreign-language Academy Award, though it was not among the five nominees.)

In place of a traditional soundtrack, most of the film’s music comes from the monks’ chanted prayers and the cries of the muezzins at nearby mosques. The notable exception — the only time recorded, secular music is heard — comes during a meal, when the residents of the abbey sit and listen to a famous passage from Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake” and lose themselves as completely in aesthetic reverie as they otherwise do in religious devotion.

The identical music figures, coincidentally enough, in “Black Swan,” a movie so utterly different from “Of Gods and Men” that they barely seem to belong to the same medium. In “Black Swan,” Tchaikovsky delivers the extravagant melodrama that is the film’s entire reason for being, whereas here his lush, emotive orchestration emphasizes the utter absence of such wanton emotionalism. And yet it also serves as a reminder that even in wartime, and even in lives governed by restraint and self-denial, there is an essential need for beauty, feeling and art.

*“Of Gods and Men” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has some bloody, violent scenes.*

## **OF GODS AND MEN**

*Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.*

Directed by Xavier Beauvois; written by Étienne Comar and Mr. Beauvois; director of photography, Caroline Champetier; edited by Marie-Julie Bonnier; production design by Michel Barthelemy; costumes by Marielle Robaut; produced by Frantz Richard; released by Sony Pictures Classics. In French and Arabic, with English subtitles. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Lambert Wilson (Christian), Michael Lonsdale (Luc), Olivier Rabourdin (Christophe), Philippe Laudenbach (Célestin), Jacques Herlin (Amédée) and Loïc Pichon (Jean-Pierre).