

REVIEW

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Of Gods and Men Resurrects Martyrdom

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

*Spoiler alert: If you haven't seen *Of Gods and Men* be aware that although the details of the story revealed herein are widely known, some readers may be unfamiliar and wish to keep them a surprise—ed.*

The idea of martyrdom hasn't been in very good shape lately. One common usage of it—"I'll not be made a martyr!"—refers to the prospect of somewhat tragic but mostly useless suffering, perhaps in the service of a delusional cause, religious or otherwise. Another appears regularly in the news with reference to Islamist terrorists, especially suicide bombers. Still, despite these entrenched negative associations, the idea may be on the mend.

One obvious reason for this is the dramatic reversal, happening now around the Arab world, in how political resistance is done. When plainclothes *agents provocateurs* instigated by a corrupt government kill an unarmed protester, and the word "martyr" is used, it takes on a wholly different meaning than it would in reference to somebody blowing him or herself up on a bus. It even starts getting closer to the word's original meaning in Greek: "witness."

Another thing that bodes well is the US release of *Of Gods and Men*, an award-winning French film which might be, despite a so-so title, good enough to make you change your vocabulary.

The based-on-a-true-story account of the seven French monks who were abducted from the Our Lady of Atlas monastery in Algeria and murdered 56 days later, on May 21, 1996, occurred during a civil war between the government and Islamist groups that had, by then, already killed tens of thousands of civilians. The rebels singled out foreigners as targets, so the monks were well aware of the probable outcome.

The government ordered them to leave and tried to provide armed protection, neither of which were accepted. As their prior Father Christian (Lambert Wilson, of *The Matrix* fame) says, "Our mission here is to be brothers to all," which precluded taking certain luxuries for safety while leaving the villagers who lived among them, and who depended on them, vulnerable.

Much of the film follows Christian and the other monks as they make, and come to terms with, the choice to stay. The word "martyr" is mentioned a few times, with both positive and negative connotations, and there are a number of extremely well-acted scenes of agony and anxiety. They meet

together at a table under a Gall-Peters world map, a staple of humanitarians that shows the true vastness of the global south. The burden on these men feels just as vast.

Mercifully, though, their way of life doesn't allow for a whole lot of time for agonizing. As Trappist monks—the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, officially—they gather in the church several times a day to chant prayers, from before dawn until after dusk. In between, they're busy with “spiritual reading” and ordinary manual labor like farming, wall-building, and honey-producing. Brother Luc (Michael Lonsdale) also serves as the region's doctor—overwhelmed with patients, but still finding time to dispense sagely advice.

It's impressive, actually, how many rudiments of Trappist life director Xavier Beauvois is able to show. The whole film proceeds at a monk's pace, with long silent portions between spoken French and Arabic. It's to Beauvois' credit that you'll never wish you could fast-forward; as for a monk, there is no reason to hurry.

Such ordinariness is also a feature of the martyrdom he portrays. It stems from neither overzealousness nor a death wish. (May some early Christian martyrs forgive me for saying they could've learned from this.) The monks aren't living in harm's way simply because of any otherworldly, or delusional, or unfathomable faith, as one might expect of martyrs. They're living there for people, with faith.

What's surprising is just how fathomable Beauvois makes their choice. The martyrs come out as heroes, but not especially superhuman ones. The Christian love they're striving for takes very specific form in the people that they serve. Nobody wants to die. They're not even trying to change the world, really, but only bear witness to it normally, day by day. This, too, is typically Trappist; a vow all monks take is to bind themselves to a place. It's also, in the etymological sense, martyrdom.

The presence of French monks in Algeria in the first place isn't unproblematic. Cistercians first arrived in 1843, and they were very much a part of the colonial system. Father Christian may have had this partly in mind when he wrote, in a “testament” left behind after his death, that “I am complicit with the evil that, alas, prevails over the world.” He served as a soldier there in his early twenties, and it was then that an Algerian friend saved his life at the cost of his own.

Christian went on to become a student of Arabic and the Qur'an—a fact which once gets the monks out of a tight spot—and he treated the problem of Muslim-Christian relations as an opportunity to learn as much as to teach. Again, the monks' response to this and other complex problems is to start with simple actions. Like Qur'an-reading. And doctoring. Being there. I don't think it's spoiling anything to say that they hatch no elaborate plan to surprise us at the end. They just stay.

Basically, *Of Gods and Men* is a masterpiece.

I should admit, though, now that I'm nearing the end of this, that I'm biased. As I write, I'm completing a two-week stay at Holy Cross Abbey, a Trappist monastery along the Shenandoah River

in Virginia. We're told that the film did well at Cannes and in European box offices, and that it's now even drawing crowds in US cities. The excitement is palpable, if subtle.

A burned DVD copy is discreetly circulating and being watched on little screens with headphones, and reviews cut out from newspapers appear on the bulletin board, surrounded by exclamation points. Some of the monks here met Father Christian. One has a picture of him on his desk. Most of them remember praying for him and the others after their disappearance. I leafed through an overflowing file of news clippings and communiques between the order's abbots from that time, full of updates, helplessness, reverence. There's sorrow in martyrdom, but there's also, actually, redemption.

The circumstances here are entirely different, of course, but what strikes me are the similarities between monks in embattled Algeria and those on quiet rolling hills an hour and a half from Washington DC. Simplicity, combined with the discipline of tradition, looks much the same wherever you go. I expected that it would've been jarring to watch a movie while in the cloister, but not this one.

While there isn't much danger of armed marauders here, there is witnessing. These monks, while making fruitcakes and other things, bear witness to the land. In an area increasingly beset by suburban sprawl, they live on a working farm. As the global ecological crisis worsens and inaction still reigns, they're learning how to implement an ambitious environmental sustainability plan. It will make them better caretakers of the land that they've committed themselves to live—and die—on.

Maybe it's best to save the word "martyr" for other, more violent witnessing happening now in the Middle East and elsewhere around the world. But after seeing *Of Gods and Men* here, I'm not sure that it doesn't apply, and in the best of senses.

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