



# Of Gods and men

**Director: Xavier Beauvois**

**Country: France**

**Date: 2010**

*Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, December 2010:*

"Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction." The speaker is Luc, an elderly Catholic monk played by 79-year-old Michael Lonsdale, quoting a pensée of Pascal. He does it at a moment of crisis and ambiguity: does this thought apply to the Islamist mujahideen who are threatening to kill him and his brothers? Or should it rather apply to these future victims, secretly infatuated with the idea of a martyrdom that will fan the flames of violence for generations to come?

That reference is the sole, perhaps pre-emptive, concession to secularism in this stunningly passionate and deeply moving film by the French director Xavier Beauvois, based on the kidnapping and murder of monks in Algeria by fundamentalists in 1996. The movie is in fact saturated with faith and belief, and part of its power is the absolute conviction of its cinematic language, an idiom of severity, austerity and high seriousness, imitating the spacious silences to which the monks have devoted themselves, and boldly supporting the validity and meaning of their dilemma. *Of Gods and Men* is a modern tragedy that doesn't require the audience to share its belief any more than something by Aeschylus. It climaxes in a quite incredible "Last Supper" sequence, in which the monks share red wine to the accompaniment of Tchaikovsky's Grand Theme from *Swan Lake*, playing on an old tape machine in the corner.

Beauvois's camera does nothing but pan slowly around the table while this happens, minutely watching these men's careworn faces as they absorb the mystery of their own deaths. It is an overwhelming fusion of portraiture and drama, and perhaps one of the most sensational things I have seen on the big screen. Many who have watched this scene find it overwrought, overdone, and the Tchaikovsky unsubtle. Well, maybe. But each time I have watched it, frankly, I have become overwhelmed with an emotion I can't possibly describe. A friend told me that my face looked like Henry Thomas's when he sees *ET* come back to life. I am almost tempted to say that cinema audiences should be required to stand during this sequence, like concertgoers during the Hallelujah chorus in Handel's *Messiah*.

Lambert Wilson plays Christian, the head of a Cistercian monastery in Algeria: a spartan order devoted to contemplation and prayer. Their community has developed a happy relationship with the local Muslim villagers, based partly on the free outpatient clinic they provide. They have a quiet, supportive respect for each other's traditions. But dark forces are gathering: intolerant jihadist forces have already murdered Croatian construction workers, and are rumoured to have the Catholic monks in their sights as the ultimate prize. There is a regressive, brutal worldview – and a cynical police chief, irritably preparing to wash his hands of the imminent bloodbath, tells Christian: "I blame French colonisation for not letting Algeria grow up." The monks must now decide: should they stay or should they go? Is going cowardice? Is staying arrogance? Is martyrdom their destiny?

The monks themselves are permitted little or no backstory. Their lives in France are hardly touched on. Some are very old, especially Amédée, heartbreakingly played by 83-year-old Jacques Herlin, whose face is set in an unreadable expression, perhaps a gentle smile of acceptance and grandfatherly tolerance, or a rictus of suppressed pain. Perhaps he has been here all his life, perhaps not. When Luc is asked by a local young woman – for whom he is a confidant – what love is like, he replies that it is an attraction, a desire, a quickening of the spirits, an intensification of life itself. Beauvois allows us to believe that this chaste monk must, poignantly, be speaking about his love for God, and that his advice is at once truthful and naive. But no. He confesses that he had been in love a number of times before he found his truest love,

and so we are shown that Luc had known and lived in the secular world – presumably as a doctor, for he runs the clinic – before he joined the order.

*Of Gods and Men* strives for simplicity; cinema is usually about dynamism, attraction, ego, but this movie concerns the renunciation of these things, in art and life. But it is also about the question of how to act when this life is violently challenged. The one visual flourish Beauvois permits himself is a shot of a dead jihadist, murdered by his comrades; the foreshortened image is held on screen just long enough for the audience to register its resemblance to Mantegna's Christ. Of course, this is a fictional account of a real life event; audiences are entitled to wonder if Beauvois is too respectful of the Monks and their lives, and further wonder if this account is tendentious or even propagandist. I can only say I found it thrillingly audacious, moving and real. See it for yourself; see if you can withstand the Swan Lake sequence. I couldn't.

***An interview by Emanuel Levy with Lambert Wilson, who plays the lead role in the film:***

Music occupies an absolutely primordial place in my life. I think that I could have been a singer. In fact, if I had done a little work on myself before diving into theatrical studies, I think I would have most certainly extracted from myself this passion, which suits me better. I listen to vocal music very often, as well as to a lot of religious and liturgical music– a lot of singing especially.

Historically, since the time of the Greeks, singing – lyrical art – was always linked to the dramatic arts; unfortunately modern actors are no longer connected to singing. Today however, in theatre directing in particular, one speaks of rhythm, intonation, dynamics -- we are in fact using a lyrical vocabulary. I think music must be constantly integrated into an actor's work. It is useful to me in my work, in order to prepare myself emotionally for certain scenes. Singing is organic, it is not intellectual– it's a feeling, an emotion, a physical action. It was singing that prepared us the most to perform these particular roles.

During the shoot of another film, I began studying the scores we would be singing in *Of Gods and men*. It was really during the classes with François Polgar that we began the real work, that the actors fused into a team and the community spirit began.

The first interactions were a bit embarrassing because none of us were great singers, but it helped break the ice between us. As actors, it is because we had to work together on singing that it helped us become this community of monks. We had to fuse in some sort of higher level and reveal our own identities at the same time. For me, singing, besides the biographical work each of us did on our respective characters, is what constituted the essential foundation of our preparation. At the Tamié Abbey, where we went on a retreat, monks spend four hours a day singing during the seven religious offices. We all loved doing this work with multiple voices–it's the principle of fusion in the choir. It was a very exhilarating journey.

In fact, it reminded me of the very simple emotions I loved when I was little. I did a little choir singing in kindergarten, and I totally loved it. In fact, that is why I say I am a frustrated singer: I think there is no more beautiful activity than singing.

What is surprising with the actors is that they gave themselves to this singular exercise with a lot of candour. On the set, when we were waiting for the lights to be adjusted, for example, instead of idling time away, we sang together. Suddenly, we would start singing a "Salve Regina" or another tune because we took real pleasure in it. We felt a real sense of sharing among us– it's a very simple joy, almost playful, to start off from the same bar and to manage to reach the last one together".