



MOVIES

# 'Two Popes,' 'Dark Waters,' 'Hidden Life' — filmmakers are finding religion



This awards season, there are a slew of films that directly or indirectly touch on the purpose of religion in characters' lives. (Edmon de Haro/For The Times )

By RANDEE DAWN

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After a screening of “The Two Popes” in New York recently, screenwriter Anthony McCarten recalls being approached by an audience member with a surprising take on the film.

“He said, ‘You do know this is a Jewish movie, right?’” recalls McCarten. The man went on to say, “It’s a foundational aspect of Judaism to debate scripture in such a way that you present an argument hoping to produce a better counterargument.’ That delighted me — because it was not meant to be a movie about Catholicism.”

This awards season, there are a slew of films that directly or indirectly touch on the purpose of religion in characters' lives — specifically, Catholicism: “Popes,” Poland’s Academy Award entry “Corpus Christi,” Terrence Malick’s “A Hidden Life” and Todd Haynes’ “Dark Waters.” Yet though they may have popes, priests or martyrs as protagonists, these films tend to be less about institutions and doctrine than they are about faith, community and sacrifice.

It’s an interesting left turn, considering how past films such as “Doubt,” “Philomena,” “Spotlight” and “The Magdalene Sisters” have over the last 20 years focused largely on reflecting headlines and revealing the many skeletons in the church’s deep historical closet.



Valerie Pachner and August Diehl in the movie “A Hidden Life.” (Fox Searchlight Pictures)

“It’s been in the media for various reasons over the last few years,” notes “Hidden Life” producer Grant Hill, whose film examines an Austrian farmer-turned-WWII war resister martyred for refusing to fight. “It’s a religion that has very much been under scrutiny — for its history and current position.”

But headlines aside — though “Popes” does refer to the scandals that generated them — these films use the nature of faith to illuminate bigger issues. That’s something that will come as a relief to the faithful, says Corby Pons, owner of Wit PR, a specialty publicity and marketing company that emphasizes religion and faith.

“The apprehension for Catholics is that any time the entertainment industry makes films that reflect on Catholicism, it can reflect badly,” says Pons, who consulted with Netflix and Fox Searchlight for “Popes” and “Life.”

“I sat with two nuns who greatly enjoyed the movie, and one key emotion was relief,” says McCarten. “Catholicism had become a horror show every time they opened the newspaper — and that’s not the institution they’d devoted their lives to. They knew humanitarians were trying their best every day to do something good for the world, and they felt frustrated.”

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CORBY PONS

Exactly why so many films are looking at Catholicism now is unclear, but those approached for this article suggest it’s a reflection of world politics. “We have the rise of autocrats around the globe, and a lot of people are asking, ‘Who should we emulate ourselves after?’” says Pons. “‘Life’ shows a commoner that history would not have remembered otherwise. We can look to people inside our communities. We do not have to be the pope or a president to lead morally.”

Thirst for real moral leadership is so strong in Poland that there’s been a trend of instances where the unordained have declared themselves priests and begun preaching, which is the subject of “Christi.”

“Communities are becoming detached from the Vatican and craving local, spiritual leaders,” says director Jan Komasa. “So whenever there’s someone with enough charisma and passion, he gets to be the new Kanye West. [‘Christi’ protagonist] Daniel wants to connect with other people, and those connections are significant parts of religion. That spiritual feeling is very underestimated — not just by filmmakers, but in art.”



Mark Ruffalo stars as Robert Bilott in director Todd Haynes' "Dark Waters," a Focus Features release. (Mary Cybulsk / Focus Features)

“Dark Waters,” which looks at one lawyer’s real-life two-decade battle against DuPont on behalf of farmers, employees and other residents in West Virginia, uses religions (Catholic and Baptist) primarily as ways to define its characters, but director Haynes says he had another motivation.

“Religion felt so elemental to the cultures we’re describing,” says Haynes. “I wanted to be honest about the worlds we were describing, and religion maintains an aspect of community life that really does bind people together. It’s a through-line that was essential to the story we’re telling.”

Meanwhile, McCarten was hoping with “Popes” to sketch out a way for individuals with opposite worldviews to come to a common understanding, suggesting a blueprint for audience members who also may be at odds.

“These two old men in frocks ... are combatants,” he says. “They punch each other to a standstill and say, ‘Let’s sit in silence and listen to each other.’ There’s something about that moment — where people have a real craving for silence, for relief from each other.”



Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce star in “The Two Popes.” (Netflix)

And by examining faith in this way, these filmmakers are hoping to resurrect some of the more important elements of all religions, elements that may have been obscured among all the rhetoric and shouting.

“I feel like we’ve lost some link to the traditions within Catholicism of social justice,” says Haynes. “Not just Catholicism, but other faiths. We shouldn’t forget that what we’re really talking about is reaching out and providing help to the most fragile in our society.”

In the end, each film is full of decisions by an individual who re-examines his own soul to make life-altering changes, even when the consequences of those decisions are dire.

“Someone once said, ‘We can become so heavenly-focused that we are no earthly good,’” Pons notes. “I think what [these films show] us is how to exercise our heavenly faith in a way that allows us to be earthly good in the face of incredible adversity and despite our own flaws.”

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