



# OF GODS AND MEN (DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX)

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## Review by Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*

\*\*\*\*\* Severe, austere and deeply moving, Xavier Beauvois's film about monks threatened by fundamentalists is one of the year's highlights.

"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.