

Of Gods and Men

Cert 15 France 2010 122 mins

Crew

Director	Xavier Beauvois
Screenplay	Etienne Cornar
Adaptation/Dialogue	Xavier Beauvois Etienne Cornar
Cinematography	Caroline Champetier
Editor	Marie-Julie Maille
Art Director	Michel Barthélémy

Cast

Lambert Wilson	Christian
Michael Lonsdale	Luc
Olivier Rabourdin	Christophe
Philippe Laudenbach	Célestin
Jacques Herlin	Amédée
Loïc Pichon	Jeanne-Pierre
Xavier Maly	Michel
Jean-Marie Frin	Paul
Olivier Perrier	Bruno
Sabrina Ouazani	Rabbia
Farid Larbi	Ali Fayattia

Synopsis

Algeria 1995.

In a remote village, a group of French Cistercian monks live in an atmosphere of peace and mutual respect with their Arab neighbours despite the fact that elsewhere the country is being terrorised by Islamic fundamentalists. When Croatian Christian construction workers are slaughtered by a terrorist group, the government offer the monks military protection but Brother Christian, the monk's leader, rejects it. His failure to consult the other monks leads some of them to fear he may have condemned to death.

Shortly afterwards, local terrorists. Led by Ali Fayattia, storm the monastery demanding that Brother Luc, a medic, accompany them

Abridged from Sight & Sound, Jan 2011.



Reviews

Xavier Beauvois' film, already a hit in Cannes and now the French entry for the Best Foreign Film at the Oscars, completely justifies the advance heat.

It is based upon the true story of a hillside monastery in Algeria where eight Cistercian monks live in harmonious union with their Muslim neighbours, mostly poor farming folk for whom they provide medical assistance. The film's meditative pace is dictated by the monks' daily routine – prayer, reflection, farming – which is now under threat from terrorist insurgents in the area. Lambert Wilson plays the order's head, resisting the authorities' urge to leave yet painfully alive to the peril in which he and his brothers exist. The atmosphere of dread gathers and the debate becomes ever more anguished – "Does dying here serve a purpose?" – yet Beauvois' serene direction and the individual performances raise this moral drama towards something quite numinous. It is a celebration of spiritual humility in the face of earthly contingency, and its expressive humanity can hardly fail to move.

Anthony Quinn, *The Independent* Dec'10

Xavier Beauvois's soulful monk weepie *Of Gods and Men* arrives festooned with praise: it won the Grand Prix at Cannes this year, went on to top the box office in France, and has now been officially submitted for the Best Foreign Film Oscar. It could easily win: it's about progressive faith and martyrdom in the face of religious persecution. It's spare and meditative in that way that one viewer responds to as profound artistry, while his neighbour (that would be me) feels shushed into submission, and almost guilty for questioning its tactics.

Beauvois recreates the final days of a seven-strong Cistercian brotherhood at the monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria, where these humble men dispense pastoral advice, honey and even dating tips to the locals. The 1996 jihadist uprising claimed their lives, because they refused to abandon their post, a sort of spiritual Alamo against fundamentalist violence.

So as not to make the film about a clash of theologies, their kinship with the beliefs of benevolent Islam is stressed repeatedly, not least when Brother Christian (Lambert Wilson) uses an apt quotation from the Koran to defuse a prickly encounter with militants demanding medical help.

It's a grave and thoughtful film, and certainly not a bad one, for all my twinges of scepticism about how deep its insights really go. Beauvois deserves particular credit for getting a moving and dignified performance out of Wilson, a pillar of smugness in most other movies, and Michel Lonsdale remains perhaps the world's premier go-to actor for jowly, pensive gravitas.

Tim Robey, *Daily Telegraph* Dec'10