



'Of Gods and Men' affirms Catholics and Muslims in search for common ground



By [Nancy Haught, The Oregonian](#)

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Correction appended.

The monk swallows his own fear and questions the rebel whose men have shattered the Christmas peace inside the monastery.

"Do you know the Quran," the Catholic asks and begins to recite from the holy book of Islam, a passage about monks and priests. The Muslim insurgent finishes the line, and the two men stand in silent, wary respect for each other's faith.

It is a fleeting but memorable moment in "[Of Gods and Men](#)," the French film inspired by Trappist monks who lived -- and died -- alongside Muslims in Algeria in the 1990s. Directed by [Xavier Beauvois](#), the film has been critically acclaimed for its thoughtful script, understated performances and the questions it raises about faith, friendship and fundamentalism. It opens in Portland Friday at [Cinema 21](#).

Based loosely [on actual events](#), "Of Gods and Men" tells the story of eight French monks living in a small Cistercian, or Trappist, monastery in the mountain village of Tibhirine. They live simply, growing their own food, providing minimal medical care to scores of villagers every day, rising early and stopping often to chant their prayers.

When the remnants of colonialism converge with a corrupt government and angry tribesmen, violence erupts. The monks, caught in a political conflict, struggle with the demands of their own faith, their commitment to each other and to the Muslims they serve.

The Oregonian invited two Catholics and two Muslims to an advance screening of the film. Three are active in Portland's Muslim-Christian dialogue: Fatima AlBar, 34, a native of Saudi Arabia, is a doctoral student in engineering and technology management at [Portland State University](#), teaches high school Islamic studies and is co-chair of the [Muslim Educational Trust](#)'s outreach committee; Mike Abudharr Branch, 69, converted to Islam in 1992 and is active in the Muslim Educational Trust and the [Institute for Christian-Muslim Understanding](#); and Sister Mollie Reavis, 69, a Catholic [Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary](#), is co-chair of Portland's [Institute for Christian-Muslim Understanding](#). The fourth person, the Rev. Casey Bailey, 59, is an ordained monk who has lived for 21 years at [Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey](#) in Lafayette.

After the screening, they shared some reactions to the movie. Their comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

What did you make of the confrontation between Father Christian and the rebel leader outside the monastery?

Reavis: To me, that scene highlighted the value of communication, the kind of respect that can exist between two religious people.

AlBar: This was one of the most honest moments in the film. These two men respected each other. This was a place of peace. It was an honest moment -- without politics.

Branch: I had a different take on it. I saw it not as an interaction between a Muslim and a Christian but an inner action, about innocents swept up by war, two people caught in an ideological battle that was thrust on them: the remnants of French colonial forces (the monks were perceived as part of that) and mountain people, who were being exploited by their national government, which was supported and propped up by the French. What they believed would be tested.

From your perspectives, how accurate did the film seem?

Bailey: There's a line in the Trappist constitutions, that our lives are "ordinary, laborious and obscure." I thought the film captured that quality of Cistercian life, particularly in a rural setting.

AlBar: I did not like the way they cut the story. I am not with violence in any shape, but the world needs to know the whole story; what French Colonialism did in Algeria, how Algerian people and tribes lived under French Colonialism and, after that, how some of the tribes did not get their rights in their own country. Nobody listened to them.

Bailey: It's true that the film represents just a little piece of the greater reality. It was such a complex situation. The monks did not want to take sides, either with a corrupt government or those fighting against it. Trappists make a vow of stability to God, a vow to stay in a community in a place -- Trappists being lovers of the place, as Saint Stephen Harding put it. Some of the discussion within the community was fraught, whether to leave or stay. These men wanted to be disciples of Jesus in the Trappist mode: They wanted to be brothers to everyone in Algeria.

Reavis: The beginning of the film, in particular, seemed quite accurate to me. The monks and villagers shared many aspects of daily life -- for example, in the market and celebration scenes. As the film progressed we realized the situation was much more complex. The monks saw themselves as having a lot in common with the villagers, but the rebels and government officials viewed the monks from very different perspectives. Even then, this was only a piece of a larger picture.

One scene in the film has been controversial. The monks share a bottle of wine with a guest and listen to a recording of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake." Some critics say the scene is emotionally manipulative and seems artificial. Others see it as truly moving. What did you think?

Reavis: As the camera was going around, I saw smiles. They seemed to be enjoying their time together. But as the camera kept moving, I saw tears in their eyes. Those were the emotions they were feeling -- happiness and sadness -- at the thought that they might be killed.

Branch: Did you see sadness or acceptance?

Reavis: (pausing to think) I don't know.

Bailey: I thought the camera was used very effectively, but there may have been a little artistic license taken there. It was Lent. They were kidnapped on March 27, 1996, killed on May 21. Christian's testament was read on Pentecost Sunday. But even in Lent there are some feasts -- the feast of St. Joseph and the Annunciation -- and the monks were French. Maybe they did have a little wine.

AlBar: You could see the happiness on their faces -- but also the recognition that "this will not stay, this will end soon."

Do you think this film will foster or frustrate relationships between Muslims and Christians?

Reavis: When the Muslims were chanting their prayers ... the words weren't all that different from some of the prayers the monks chanted. And, I also noticed that the prior had several books on his desk -- including a Quran. ... Knowledge about others' beliefs is very important. These people learned to value each other. I hope the film will foster relationships. The Muslim villagers and monks lived together peacefully -- the villagers were also terrorized by the rebels.

AlBar: It is a small thing, but when in the movie you hear the (Muslim) call to prayer, it is not nicely done. When the Quran is recited, it is not nicely done (in the movie). If you are going to have the monks' chants sound so beautiful, the Quran should sound beautiful, too.

I asked myself over and over, "What is the purpose of this movie, these parts of the story without the whole picture?" I think the movie will create hate and suspicion of religious people. There will be more fear, more untrusted relations. But Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in peace for hundreds of years. We have so many different stories that will lift us up, help us feel positive toward each other, that won't spread hate or suspicion. Why do we not focus on spreading the voice of love instead?

Bailey: I know the film doesn't preserve the whole conflict, but if it reinforces stereotypes, if it creates more hatred, that is not what Christian would have wanted. These men opt for Jesus, for his Sermon on the Mount (or on the Plain, depending on the Gospel): If your enemy makes you walk one mile, walk two. If he asks for

your shirt, give him your coat. If he slaps you, turn the other cheek. I think Christians need to hear this, to see this.

Branch: I don't see any conflict between Christianity and Islam, anywhere. The conflict is between Christians/secular forces and Muslims. If we were all true Christians, true Muslims, we wouldn't need Christianity or Islam. The way you become a chosen people is to mess up. Then God sends the prophet and the book.

The movie shows people being swept up by war. People need to have a better understanding of war and what it does to people.

Bailey: Everybody loses.

-- [Nancy Haught](#)

This article reflects a correction published on March 22, 2011:

Mike Branch is a board member of the Institute for Christian-Muslim Understanding and a former member of the Islamic Society of Greater Portland. His background was incorrectly reported in a Monday How We Live article about the film "Of Gods and Men."

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