

## Mainliners in film

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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This year's Sundance festival featured several films offering unflattering portrayals of evangelical Christianity. Alison Willmore [raises a good question](#) about independent cinema:

If faith is still such an important part of American life, why is it met with such a lack of empathy in so many indies that theoretically go in search of a more sincere, less "Hollywood" version of characters and stories?

Part of the problem is that, like Chekhov's gun, a character's faith isn't generally introduced in a film unless it's going to have something to do with the eventual outcome. If religion is just a normalized aspect of someone's life that he or she is not going to have challenged, including it on screen could be seen as a loose end. But that means that when you see films with themes of contemporary religion, they're either there to fill in preexisting and frequently negative assumptions, or religion is what the film is explicitly about.

If Willmore were talking about the small screen along with the big screen, this would be an opportunity to point out how well the show [Friday Night Lights](#) handled stories about a part of the U.S. in which Christianity is a normalized aspect of life. (We *FNL* evangelists never miss an opening.) That aside, Willmore's examples are films that portray evangelical contexts, some mainstream and some fringier. What about films that present a more progressive Christian faith as a simple and dignified fact of a character's life, not a primary subject to be propped up, torn down or otherwise explored?

I can't think of many; one that comes to mind is Kenneth Lonergan's excellent *You Can Count On Me*, but that came out more than a decade ago. Any recent nominees?