

Hollywood probes spiritual subjects without getting preachy

by [Stephen Whitty](#)

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(RNS) The New Testament warns about trying to serve two masters. But lately Hollywood's ordered up a rewrite.

Moviemakers would prefer to have it both ways. And so multiplexes have been crowded with films that wrestle with spiritual questions even while battling for box-office attention.

These aren't tiny indies, like the evangelical films that sprang up after "The Passion of the Christ" in 2004. Nor are these holy terrors like "The Last Exorcism" and "Paranormal Activity 2," a subgenre that's replaced Freddy and Jason with demons from hell.

These are the mainstream pictures -- Woody Allen character studies like "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger," audience-friendly dramas like "Secretariat," and big star-driven pictures like "Stone" and "Hereafter," that explore subjects like spiritual awakenings and the possibility of an afterlife.

Faith-based film fans used to be seen as a niche audience. Now, in Hollywood, they're just seen as the audience.

"I think audiences are often smarter than they're given credit for," said actor Edward Norton, who co-stars in "Stone." "And I think they're

often drawn to films that raise genuine questions about our lives that demand a real ponder."

That hunger continues to inspire independent films, made by and for believers who, says Steven Greydanus of decentfilms.com, "often feel that Hollywood is against their values." But, the New Jersey-based writer continued, "too often Christian filmmakers pay more attention to the message than the moviemaking. They haven't learned to put stories and characters first."

And that's where the new Hollywood movies have come in, with slicker, more sophisticated entertainment.

"These are not the 'Left Behind' films, preaching to the choir," Hollywood.com box-office analyst Paul Dergarabedian said of the new crop. "They're not beating people over the head. If people come out of them saying, 'That was a terrific film about faith,' fine. But mostly they want people coming out saying, 'That was a terrific film.' "

The title of Woody Allen's new "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger" refers to a fortuneteller's cheap prediction, but also in a way to Death, that most persistent of suitors. Indeed, the film's desperate characters do anything to avoid thinking about mortality.

Helena, an older woman abandoned by her husband, turns to fortunetellers and New Age teachings. An immediate true believer, she's met with the disdain that it's superstitious nonsense, that she's wasting her money on charlatans.

Yet while you'd expect Allen to make her a figure of fun, surprisingly faith conquers all, and Helena -- the only character who

looks beyond worldly pleasures for satisfaction -- is the only one who ends the film at peace. It's as if the film is saying it almost doesn't matter what you believe -- belief itself can heal.

While "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger" seems to show a filmmaker talking about these issues in spite of himself, "Secretariat" reveals one failing despite his best efforts. Director Randall Wallace has spoken of his own beliefs; screenwriter Mike Rich did "The Nativity Story."

Yet the sermonizing "Secretariat" limps along like a horse with a lame leg. Passages from the Book of Job serve as awkward bookends; in the middle, everything stops for a gospel song. It's obvious, but unconvincing; if there is a genuine prayer here, it's only the studio's hope that they somehow replicate the sports-and-spirituality success of last year's "The Blind Side."

Although "Secretariat" has drawn some raves -- particularly from the conservative Christian Movieguide.org -- it's taken some knocks, too (including one hyperbolic Salon.com critic who compared it to Nazi propaganda).

"It's very tricky, appealing to people on both sides of the pew," said Dergarabedian. "You can't just shift gears in the middle, and start delivering a sermon. The secular audience starts getting uncomfortable and the faith-based audience knows it's being pandered to."

Death -- and what comes next -- is the entire point of "Hereafter," Clint Eastwood's latest drama. While Eastwood's films have sent dozens of characters to their graves, here he stops to ask where they actually went.

The acting and directing legend remains typically taciturn about his own views.

"I've talked to people who claim to have had near-death experiences and they paint a similar picture, but I don't know," Eastwood said at a recent film-festival press conference. "I mean, I just haven't been there. And I don't intend to go there before my time. ... Does it exist? I don't know."

Eastwood's film clearly shows a life after death (even if it looks, disappointingly, like a typical Hollywood dream sequence). The belief that part of us lives on is something the film endorses -- and that the aged director, like Allen, surely finds comforting.

Other movies are even more single-minded -- and more daring. Directed by John Curran, "Stone" is about nothing less than a road-to-Damascus moment, in which a meth-head arsonist suddenly hears the small, still voice of the divine.

While "Stone" is the year's most provocative meditation on belief, it's also its most profane, tinged with sex and violence. Will it prove to be too worldly for a faith-based audience? Too metaphysical for fans expecting a hard-boiled prison picture?

"We've shown this to communities of faith, and had a really enthused response," said Norton. "I expected the opposite, frankly, and I was pleasantly surprised. Still, a lot of them thought they weren't going to be able to recommend it because of the sexual component. I thought that was a shame, but it was a real concern they had."

Apparently, a redemption fable is one thing; showing the nasty

details of the road to redemption is something else.