

Faith gets star treatment at Sundance

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) Celebrity sightings and up-and-coming indie flicks are a given at the annual Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, but this year something else is drawing attraction on the red carpet: faith on film.

A small but noticeable number of films at Sundance -- where crossover movies like "Reservoir Dogs" and "Little Miss Sunshine" broke into the mainstream -- tackle issues of religion, spirituality and faith.

Out of 120 Sundance features scheduled to show at the Jan. 20-30 festival, 12 are overt stories about religion, or chronicle protagonists largely defined by faith, says John Nein, senior programmer for the festival.

"There are definitely more films (exploring spirituality) that ended up in the program this year than in years past," he said, noting an uptick in the number of submissions that touch on religious themes.

Christianity is a central theme in most of the films, from the star-studded satire "Salvation Boulevard," featuring Pierce Brosnan as a popular preacher who frames a born-again Christian follower for a crime, to the riveting documentary "The Redemption of General Butt Naked," about a Liberian warlord-turned-preacher facing the loved ones of people he killed.

The Italian film "Lost Kisses" centers around a Sicilian community's reaction to a 13-year-old girl who may perform miracles. Two films explore Christianity and Islam, with "Kinyarwanda" set during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and the documentary "Position Among The Stars" tracing the lives of an impoverished family in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Japanese "Abraxas" focuses on a depressed Zen monk who reconnects with punk rock, while the bizarre American comedy "The Catechism Cataclysm" centers on a priest who loves heavy metal music.

Three American narrative features -- "Martha Marcy May Marlene," Kevin Smith's horror film "Red State" and Vera Farmiga's directorial debut "Higher Ground" -- are concerned with cults and religious sects on the fringe.

Religion, of course, isn't totally new territory for Sundance -- previous fest fare included "Saved!," "Jesus Camp" and "Shape of the Moon," a precursor to this year's "Position Among The Stars."

Most Sundance religious fare tended to be satirical or derisive -- with "Saved!" a prime example -- said Dick Staub, author of "The Culturally Savvy Christian" and a columnist for Religion News Service, who has participated in the Windrider Film Forums around Sundance that bring together directors and audiences to talk about faith on film.

William L. Blizek, founding editor of the Journal of Religion and Film and professor of philosophy and religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said religion may have a higher profile at Sundance this year because "religion has become a much more visible part of our culture."

"Now that you've got a culture that is more open to the discussion of religion, you get more movies (exploring religion)," he says, citing Mitt Romney, President Obama and others who are defined in the public's eye by their faith.

With more openness toward religion, there is more freedom to make movies about it, some Sundance filmmakers say.

"Position" director Leonard Retel Helmrich says he tried pitching documentaries dealing with religious themes in the '80s and '90s in his native Netherlands but could not get financing until recently. Flash forward to 2010 and "Catechism" director Todd Rohal said there were no concerns from funders that his film had a priest for a protagonist or a "ridiculous" Catholic-infused title.

Sundance's Neill said this year's selections "indicate a wide array of approaches" toward religion, including politics and current events, blatant inspiration ("Salvation" and "Red State") and more personal stories of redemption and soul-searching ("Tyrannosaur," about a Christian charity worker, and "The Ledge," a thriller where a woman wrestles with her personal faith).

Some films highlight the connection between religion and society while still telling personal stories.

Helmrich, whose family has ties to Indonesia and both Islam and Christianity, was drawn to making a documentary about the lives of a Muslim family with a Christian matriarch in the nation's most populous Islamic country.

"Butt Naked" is a personal story of a man seeking redemption after a

14-year civil war had killed 250,000 Liberians. Several scenes show the allegedly reformed warlord face-to-face with relatives of his victims, but why and how they forgive is left to the viewer to speculate, along with the question of whether such a sinner can truly be redeemed.

"We were interested in knowing if somebody made a transformation this extreme, what would it look like?" said co-director Daniele Anastasion."

... How much do you have to do to balance the scales? Is it even possible to balance the scales?"