Culture
Blog
Arts and Media



Mia Threapleton in Wes Anderson’s "The Phoenician Scheme." When her father lures Liesl out of the convent to prepare her to take over the family business, father and daughter must reckon with their wildly opposing views of life, relationships and morality. (Universal Pictures)



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I was 7 when I first watched "The Sound of Music," and it left me with the impression that a nun's vocation involved sabotaging Nazi vehicles and belting out show tunes. For a few months afterward, I told anyone who asked that I planned to be a nun when I grew up — even though my family was not yet Catholic.

Well, I didn't become a nun, but I have gotten to know a number of women religious in real life. And though I saw many film depictions of nuns over the years, none managed to reignite my childhood yearning for the convent.

Cinema tends to reduce women characters to stereotypes, and nuns are not exempt from this. The wise mother superior in the 1965 movie "The Sound of Music" is one such type. Others include the naive, sheltered nun (Sister Mary Robert of 1992's "Sister Act") and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the sadistically abusive nun (Sister Mary Bridget of 2002's "The Magdalene Sisters").

Sexy, demon-afflicted nuns are a staple of the horror genre, as well as the "nunsploitation" thrillers that often depict nuns driven to unhinged depravity by the confines of their vocation. Memorable nunspoitation films include 1971's "The Devils," with Oliver Reed and Vanessa Redgrave and, more recently, 2023's psychological thriller "Sister Death."

Yet not all cinematic nuns are reduced to type, and several recent films push back against some of the film tropes about religious sisters.



Isabella Rossellini in "Conclave" (Focus Features)

The 2024 film "Conclave" highlighted the vital but often thankless work of religious sisters. Ironically, the male characters in "Conclave" are gossipy, emotive and melodramatic, adorned in lace and finery. Meanwhile the character Sister Agnes, portrayed by Isabella Rossellini, is resolute and self-disciplined. Sister Agnes is hard to pigeonhole, neither old nor young, neither a font of divine wisdom nor a sheltered ingenue. Like the archetypal mother superior, she is intelligent and decisive, but her wisdom seems to derive, not from some supernatural line to God, but from her own experience and judgment.

Like the nuns in the 1992 comedy "Sister Act," who shelter a witness to a crime, Sister Agnes is a protector. When a cardinal cruelly manipulates a younger nun, using her as a pawn in his play for the papacy, Sister Agnes intervenes. The power she shields the younger woman from is no outside force, but the church itself — or, at least, its princes.

The nuns in the 2025 horror movie "The Ritual" also do thankless work largely behind the scenes. "The Ritual" was a critical flop despite a reputable cast, including Dan Stevens and Al Pacino. Patricia Heaton's portrayal of the mother superior at the convent where the exorcism takes place is one of its few bright spots. Brusque, businesslike and exasperated, Heaton's character makes the best of a situation over which she has no control. And she seems less concerned about demonic activity than about the physical well-being of the woman being exorcised and the safety of the other nuns under her protection.

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Heaton's mother superior has no illusions about priestly superiority. At one point she tells Stevens' character: "All my life I have been taking direction from men who are not as smart as me, not as disciplined, and whose piety pales in comparison to the women of this convent." Probably the only realistic detail in the film is the way she steps in to help the men who made a mess of things.

Both horror and the nunsploitation genre tend to fetishize the robed and consecrated female body. These stories sometimes involve nuns who struggle against the confines of their vocation, overstepping their vows into illicit sensuality.

A fascinating variation on the trope of the nun who dabbles in sexual experimentation occurs in "And Just Like That ...", the television sequel to "Sex and the City." The character Miranda hooks up with a woman named Mary, played by Rosie O'Donnell, who turns out to be a religious sister. "I had sex with a nun," she tells her friend Carrie the next day.

While Miranda worries that Mary is in love with her, Mary assures her she has no intention of leaving God — she's just grateful for this experience, and knows herself better because of it.

This plotline, with mature women in control of their destinies, is a contrast to stories about nuns being exploited sexually, or in which lesbian encounters are showcased for the male gaze. It also subverts the idea that nuns only stay in their vocation because they haven't sampled the world's pleasures.



Clockwise from upper left, women religious characters in scenes from: "The Sound of Music" (CNS/Twentieth Century Fox); "The Magdalene Sisters" (CNS/Miramax Films); "And Just Like That ..." (Max/Craig Blankenhorn); "Sister Death" (Netflix)

Perhaps the most memorable nun in recent film offerings is the deadpan novice Liesl, portrayed by Mia Threapleton in Wes Anderson's "The Phoenician Scheme." When her father, wealthy arms dealer Zsa-zsa Korda (Benicio del Toro) lures Liesl out of the convent to prepare her to take over the family business, father and daughter must reckon with their wildly opposing views of life, relationships and morality.

Throughout the story, it's the decadent Zsa-zsa who has religious experiences, while his austere daughter admits that God never answers her prayers. Her approach to religion, though rigid, is personal and idiosyncratic, and she repeatedly offers blessings to people, even absolving them in the manner of a priest. Liesl does end up leaving the convent and marrying a man, but her connection with her father, and the middle ground they find together, is the compelling relationship in her life.

Yet despite these films' upending of the usual nun stereotypes, there are nun stories we aren't telling. This might be because the work of women religious goes unthanked and unnoticed, but it could also be due to confusion about what a nun's vocation entails. Not just the secular culture, but much of Catholic culture holds onto the idea of a nun as a veiled, mysterious figure, hemmed in by church walls — unless, of course, she chooses to scale those walls and cut loose.

One movie that disrupts these assumptions was made 30 years ago: "Dead Man Walking," about real-life anti-death-penalty activist Sr. Helen Prejean. A Sister of St. Joseph, Prejean has been the spiritual adviser of several death row inmates, and written extensively about the spiritual and psychological effects of the death penalty. She's no ivory tower mother superior dispensing wisdom in a song, nor a sheltered innocent enclosed by convent walls.

A scene from the 1995 movie "Dead Man Walking," based on a book by St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean

Prejean's life is a reminder that being a nun or religious sister (they aren't the same thing, incidentally) doesn't mean being cut off from the world. And while few real-life women religious end up portrayed by Susan Sarandon in award-winning films, many do the same kind of healing work in a world Pope Francis famously called a "field hospital." Even contemplative nuns engage with the world through prayer.

Some viewers enjoy the romanticized image of the woman enclosed by convent walls. Others — myself included — may be more invested in the drama of women who transgress those boundaries. But there are many other tales to be told about women religious, and I hope filmmakers start telling them.

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