Culture

Oscar statues are seen March 1, 2025, ahead of the 97th Academy Awards in Los Angeles. Th

Oscar statues are seen March 1, 2025, ahead of the 97th Academy Awards in Los Angeles. The 98th Academy Awards show will be broadcast live on ABC and Hulu, starting at 7 p.m. ET Sunday, March 15. (OSV News/Reuters/Jeenah Moon)

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Faith never seems far from the Oscars. Each year, many of the Best Picture nominees deal in some way with religion. How they portray it gives a good snapshot into how Hollywood is wrestling with spirituality at the time.

In 2022, the Academy portrayed faith as a positive force for comfort and inspiring social change, as well as a motivating force for oppression and harm. 2024's Oscar nominees largely imagined life without religion.

Now, in 2026, Hollywood is finally developing a synthesis: Faith is bad when it is an organized (particularly Christian) religion, but is positive when it is an expression of individual spirituality.

You see this most clearly in the movies "Sinners" and "Hamnet." "Sinners" follows Sammie Moore (Miles Caton), a talented blues musician who disobeys his preacher father to join his twin cousins Stack and Smoke (both played by Michael B. Jordan), who open a juke joint for the Black community in their Mississippi hometown.

When vampires attack, they need the help of Smoke's Hoodoo-practicing wife Annie (Wunmi Mosaku) to have any hope of survival. "Hamnet" follows Shakespeare (Paul Mescal) and his wife, Agnes (Jessie Buckley), as they build a life together and then grieve the death of their son, which inspires Shakespeare's play "Hamlet."

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Likewise, in "Train Dreams," the Christian religion — such as going to church, or quoting the Bible — is portrayed as something people do, but with little truth represented in it.

"All those flood stories, all those different religions all over the world," a woman says to the protagonist Robert (Joel Edgerton), "same story, different lens."

Mostly, what the characters come to recognize as true is that there is a vague spiritual reality: We are all "stitched together," and as individuals, we can become "connected to it all."

"Frankenstein" is one of the closest to affirming traditional Christian belief. Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) seeks to conquer death and, following the inspiration of a dark angel that came to him in a dream, "correct God's mistakes." The most morally pure characters have some attachment to God. Elizabeth (Mia Goth) sees God's design in the "symmetry and shapes" of insects. She wears a cross and goes to confession.

Likewise, a kindly blind grandfather educates The Creature by having him first read The Bible. But the faith of the grandfather is a mix of Christianity and folk spirituality, describing The Creature as "the spirit of the forest."

Michael B. Jordan plays dual roles in a scene from the movie "Sinners." The film received 16 O

Michael B. Jordan plays dual roles in a scene from the movie "Sinners." The film received 16 Oscar nominations, including a Best Actor nomination for Jordan. (OSV News/Warner Bros.)

"One Battle After Another" largely follows previous Oscar precedent by dividing its "good versus bad faith" along political lines. The bad guys are part of a white supremacist illuminati called the "Christmas Adventurers," who try to crack down on left-wing activists, terrorist groups and illegal immigrants. Those left-wing groups

smuggle immigrants and offer sanctuary to them in churches and in their homes filled with crosses, flipping the normal portrayal of the more traditional Christian groups being the bad guys. But in the film, political leaning is the binding principle of virtue rather than religious fidelity.

Taken together, this year's Oscar nominees strongly suggest that both pure materialism and organized religion are either harmful or insufficient for addressing the problems of life. The answer is for individuals to form a personal faith — utilizing the parts of faith traditions that work for them — to heal themselves, their relationships, and conquer evil by accessing the divine. After many years of the Academy wrestling with when faith is good vs. evil, this comes the closest to a coherent framework.

It's also noteworthy how it decenters gender compared to general Hollywood trends. I've noted elsewhere that Hollywood has started leaning hard into portraying women with feminine spirituality as good and men driving masculine, organized (particularly Christian) religion as evil. But the Oscar nominees show nearly equal examples of positive personal spirituality exhibited by men and women.

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This framework makes sense culturally. Western societies — and perhaps societies more globally — are moving toward hyper-individualized customization of our lives. We customize our entertainment through streaming and social media algorithms. We customize our communities by moving neighborhoods and through social media. As sociologist Jean Twenge notes in her book Generations, this is one of the primary reasons millennials have left religion in record numbers: "because it is not compatible with individualism — and individualism is Millennials' core value above all else." It's one reason that those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" are on the rise.

But the well-documented downsides of these trends, including rising rates of loneliness and depression, suicide, and growing political polarization, should make us skeptical of a spirituality that mirrors them.

By contrast, organized religion is doing the best job of resisting every single one of these trends. This is because people need to be in shared spaces around a shared subject or object of worship to have emotional and tangible unity. Individualized spirituality, by contrast, pulls us apart.

The 2026 Oscar nominees' bias toward personal faith over organized religion reflects the move our own society is making in that direction. It remains to be seen whether that spirituality will evolve to meet the challenges of hyper-individualism, or if organized religion will simply outlast it.

This story was originally published at Religion Unplugged.

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