

Religious Vision : *Les Misérables* and *Anna Karenina*

Have today's movies lost religion? Not necessarily — but sometimes it helps to know where to look. For instance, mainstream films are more likely to include **sympathetic depictions of religious faith in period pieces** than in stories set in the present day.

Take a pair of remarkable films that opened in theaters in 2013, which have more than a little in common : *Les Misérables* and *Anna Karenina*.

Both films are **ambitious Oscar-nominated British costume dramas** based on sweeping 19th century European social novels. Both come to the screen in some way via the stage. This *Les Misérables* is the first big-screen adaptation of Victor Hugo's tale by way of the hugely popular musical version, while *Anna Karenina* has been brilliantly reworked as a semi stage-bound theatrical production.

Both films freely use **traditional Christian vocabulary and themes** : God and the soul ; sin and damnation ; **grace, redemption, forgiveness**. Christian imagery populates both films : crucifixes, icons, the Bible.

1 – *Les Misérables*

The first act of *Les Misérables* includes the famous pivotal episode in which Valjean (**Hugh Jackman**), driven by desperation to steal silverware from a hospitable bishop, is briefly detained by police — until, to Valjean's surprise, the bishop not only supports his story that the stolen items were gifts but enhances the gift with more silver. Privately exhorting Valjean to see a '*higher plan*' here, the bishop concludes :

'By the witness of the martyrs / By the Passion and the Blood / God has raised you out of darkness / I have saved your soul for God.'

This stunning grace transforms Valjean into an **honest, conscientious man** — and ultimately a **self-sacrificial hero** who is finally acclaimed '*a saint*' by his son-in-law Marius, whose life he saved in giving his own.

The bishop isn't the only religious figure who aids Valjean. At the end of the first act, he and young Cosette find sanctuary in a convent. At the climax, following the novel, Valjean returns to the convent to die, and his soul is welcomed to Paradise — represented by a door opened to a Church irradiated with light, not only by the sainted bishop opening his arms for a loving embrace, but also by Cosette's mother Fantine (**Anne Hathaway**). During this soteriological finale, the chorus affirms, in one of the musical's best-known lines :

'To love another person is to see the face of God.'

2 – Anna Karenina

There are no prominent clergy or religious in *Anna Karenina*, a morally complex tale contrasting the disastrous affair and ruined marriage of the titular heroine (**Keira Knightley**) with a more hopeful marriage, that of Levin and Kitty.

Still, the film is pervaded by a religious vision, particularly in connection with Anna's cuckolded husband Karenin (**Jude Law**), who is portrayed with **surprising sympathy and decency**. For Karenin, marriage is *'bound together by God'*, and while he assures Anna that *'sin has a price'*, he is able to **forgive both her and her lover** Vronsky.

Vronsky speaks for the modern glorification of passion when he tells Anna :

'You can't ask why about love !'

Offering a **strikingly different moral vision**, one evocative of the Catholic theology of the body, Levin says :

'Impure love is not love... Sensual desire indulged for its own sake is greed, a kind of gluttony, and a misuse of something sacred which is given to us so that we may choose the one person with whom to fulfil our humanness.'

Echoing this counter-cultural wisdom, another character says :

'Live rightly, for your soul, not your belly.'