

Article

Believing Women: Faith, Agency, and Peacebuilding in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

Contemporary cinema increasingly portrays believing women as active moral agents rather than passive figures confined by patriarchal or religious stereotypes. However, scholarship on religion and film has predominantly focused on male religious figures, leaving the representation of believing women comparatively underexplored, especially in films directed by women in the twenty-first century. This paper addresses this gap by examining how female agency, religious identity, and peacebuilding are represented in three contemporary films directed by women: *Wadjda* (2012, Saudi Arabia), *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya* (2019, North Macedonia), and *Women Talking* (2022, USA). These films were selected because, despite originating from distinct religious and cultural contexts—Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestant Mennonite tradition—they share female protagonists who negotiate patriarchal religious structures through nonviolent, relational strategies of action. Drawing on feminist film theory and the distinction between negative and positive peace, the analysis demonstrates that these protagonists move beyond stereotypical portrayals of religious women as passive or marginalized, instead enacting agency through persistence, dialogue, solidarity, and nonviolent resistance. The paper argues that contemporary women-directed cinema can function as a space for reimagining women's religious identities and for articulating more inclusive, peace-oriented models of social transformation.

Keywords: religion and film; feminist film theory; gender representation; peacebuilding; female agency; women directors

1. Introduction

This paper explores the representation of believing women in contemporary cinema and examines how female protagonists negotiate questions of faith, gender, conflict, and peacebuilding within religious communities. The term “believing women” refers to female characters whose religious identity is expressed not merely through institutional affiliation, but through personal faith, ethical action, and engagement with their religious and social communities. In other words, these are characters whose relationship to faith is active and reflective, and who integrate religiosity into their everyday decisions, relationships, and social engagement, even if they do not explicitly define themselves as religious. Rather than portraying women as passive or marginal figures, contemporary cinema increasingly presents them as active moral agents capable of challenging patriarchal structures and contributing to social transformation. By bringing together feminist film theory, religion and film studies, and peacebuilding perspectives, this paper seeks to understand how contemporary films directed by women reimagine women's religious identities and agency.



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To contextualize these representations, the introduction first traces the historical development of the relationship between religion and film before turning to feminist approaches to gender, religion, and peacebuilding in contemporary cinema.

Religion and film have been closely linked since the very beginning of cinema history, with depictions of the life of Jesus appearing on screen as early as 1897 in *La Passion du Christ*. This relationship has shifted over time. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by a broadly reverential treatment of religious communities, while the sexual revolution and growing secularization from the 1960s onward brought a more critical stance toward the Church and other religious institutions (Detweiler 2009).

If we reflect on religious themes in classical cinema up until the middle of the twentieth century, they were most often expressed through several recognizable narrative and aesthetic strategies. These included adaptations of religious stories, the use of religious symbols and metaphors, the representation of rituals, and the construction of clearly defined religious figures such as priests, nuns, or saints. Music and sound also played an important role in emphasizing the sacred dimension of the cinematic experience. Such an approach is visible, for example, in films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), where religion functions as a stable value system and narratives often have an affirmative, didactic, and at times even evangelizing function.

The period from the 1970s onward marked a significant transformation in both cinema and religious representation. Influenced by second-wave feminism, postcolonial critiques, and growing religious pluralism, filmmakers increasingly turned their attention to marginalized voices and subjective experiences of faith. Throughout the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, these developments reshaped cinematic engagements with religion, moving beyond institutional and doctrinal concerns toward lived experiences of spirituality, identity, and social transformation. At the same time, women filmmakers gained greater visibility within world cinema, opening new possibilities for representing women's experiences within religious and cultural communities. These broader cultural and cinematic developments laid the groundwork for contemporary approaches to religion in film and for more complex representations of faith, gender, and social change.

Building on these developments, contemporary religious films approach religion in a more complex and ambivalent way: instead of reproducing traditional narratives, they reinterpret them, shifting focus from institutional religion toward subjective experience, internal conflict, and lived engagement with faith. Religion thus becomes a dynamic and often contradictory aspect of everyday life, negotiated through identity, gender, and community, as in *Women's Balcony* (2016) (Linze and Desa 2024).

Alongside these evolving religious narratives, cinema has also functioned, from its very beginnings, as a powerful medium for constructing and negotiating gender. Film has participated in constructing ideals of femininity and masculinity, and, at the same time, cinema has often been a space in which existing gender patterns were challenged, sometimes in subtle or hidden ways (Hole et al. 2017). In this context, it is important to mention Teresa De Lauretis's concept of film as a "technology of gender", that is, a mechanism through which gendered, but also classed, racial, and religious power relations are reproduced (De Lauretis 1987). Film does not merely reflect social norms; it actively participates in their production and maintenance. Feminist theorists therefore do not advocate avoiding problematic representations but rather critically analyzing them by asking the question: "Is women's experience adequately represented... or is women's experience distorted?" (Makarushka 1995, p. 144).

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, a theorist of religious art and visual studies, argues that the image plays a central role as a primary communicator of gender identification and

theological values, while media representations of women serve as a cultural barometer of prevailing ideas about women's proper role in society and in religious institutions. She therefore maintains that careful analysis of cinematic representations of women can make a significant contribution to discussions about women's roles within social and religious communities (Apostolos-Cappadona 1997, p. 112). Although there is a rich tradition of research on religion in film, scholarly research dealing with representations of religious characters—that is, believers in general—remains relatively limited and most often focuses on priests and nuns. Far less attention has been devoted to representations of believing women, especially in contemporary cinema. It is precisely from this research gap that the interest of this paper emerges.

Drawing on perspectives from feminist film and religion studies, this paper explores how believing women are represented in contemporary cinema, especially in films directed by women in the twenty-first century. The aim is to understand what roles are assigned to such characters, which qualities they embody, and to what extent these portrayals reflect changes in the understanding of female identity and action within religious communities. As Wagner observes, “Telling women's stories is a new and powerful trend and can help to offer insights into how women today are making new sense of religious traditions that have historically presented few meaningful choices for women” (Wagner 2011, p. 468).

Special emphasis is also placed on the question of female agency. Are believing women portrayed as active agents of the narrative, or do they remain confined within traditional patriarchal patterns of representation? In this context, attention is paid to the ways in which female characters participate in social and religious change and how their decisions influence the communities to which they belong. Female agency is understood here not merely as individual autonomy but as the capacity to act within and in relation to existing social and religious structures. Feminist theories emphasize that agency does not necessarily imply open resistance or the rejection of tradition but may also involve its reinterpretation, negotiation with norms, and transformation from within (Mahmood 2005, p. 154). In cinematic representations, this means that believing women are not viewed exclusively through the binary opposition of obedience versus rebellion but through more complex forms of action that include moral judgment, care for the community, and the creation of alternative models of relationships and authority.

Since conflict is a fundamental element of cinematic storytelling, this paper also analyzes the ways in which believing women in film act in relation to conflict, particularly within religious communities. The focus is on whether these characters embody models of nonviolent action, reconciliation, and social transformation, or whether their actions fit into dominant narrative patterns of resolving conflict through domination and aggression, stereotypically associated with male approaches to conflict. In this way, the paper seeks to contribute not only to studies of religion and film but also to discussions of gender representation, demonstrating how contemporary cinema can become a space for reflecting on the relationships between faith, gender, conflict, and social change.

Accordingly, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How are believing women represented in contemporary films directed by women?
- (2) What strategies of agency do female protagonists employ when negotiating religious, gendered, and social conflicts within their communities?
- (3) How do these films represent nonviolent forms of peacebuilding and social transformation?

Film thus becomes a space not only for representing religion but also for reinterpreting it through women's experiences. For this reason, the paper analyzes three contemporary films directed by women, all of which feature female protagonists situated within conflicts shaped by religious and gendered contexts: *Wadjda* by Al-Mansour (2012), *God Exists*,

Her Name Is Petrunya by [Strugar Mitevska \(2019\)](#), and *Women Talking* by [Polley \(2022\)](#). These films are significant for the analysis of female agency because they depict women as active participants in shaping religious meanings and social relationships, often through nonviolent and relational forms of action.

2. Women, Religion, and Film

Feminist consciousness emerges from the recognition that men have historically dominated the shaping of religious beliefs, institutions, and interpretations, as well as the film industry and its narrative structures. As Ursula King summarizes, “patriarchy is not only about social, economic, religious and political power structures, but is rooted even deeper [...] in attitudes, values, language and thought” ([King 1993](#), p. 24). It is precisely this deep-rooted character of patriarchy that explains why both religious and cinematic texts have long reproduced similar patterns of female representation.

2.1. Feminist Film Theory and the Male Gaze

In the 1970s, parallel to the development of the feminist movement, film history began to be reassessed from a female perspective. One of the key insights of this process was the recognition of the male gaze as the dominant perspective shaping cinematic representations of women. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, Laura Mulvey, in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, defines the concept of the male gaze according to which women in classical Hollywood cinema function as objects of visual pleasure—passive, beautiful, exhibitionistically displayed, and created for the male eye of both the camera and the spectator. The male character is active and drives the action, while the female character exists to be looked at, desired, and controlled. Pleasure is therefore divided into active/male and passive/female, automatically placing women in a subordinate position. The female subject is thus doubly excluded; she is neither narrator nor active agent but rather a visual object and narrative motivation for the male protagonist ([Mulvey 1975](#), pp. 11–13).

Feminist film theory has particularly problematized the ways in which cinema constructs female characters within the “male symbolic order”, where women occupy a central place only insofar as it is assigned to them by masculine desire. As Raymond Bellour states in relation to classical cinema, it is “a system of representation in which the woman occupies a central place only to the extent that it’s a place assigned to her by the logic of masculine desire” (cite in [Marshall Ott 2008](#), p. 265). In such representations, women are not moral agents, “but rather the representation of their moral agency according to an order that renders them objects rather than subjects” ([Marshall Ott 2008](#), p. 265). In this sense, Cheu concludes that “radical creative energy relies on freeing femininity from the repressive masculine gaze” ([Cheu 2007](#), pp. 10–11).

2.2. Religious Archetypes of Women in Cinema

One of the ways in which gender representations become stabilized is through archetypal patterns that also have theological roots. Ortiz points to the enduring presence of three dominant figures—the virgin, the temptress, and the mother—which continue to shape Western perceptions of women. Although contemporary cinema offers more ambiguous and complex portrayals, these archetypes still often function as implicit interpretative frameworks. The historical development of cinematic representation demonstrates how female characters have oscillated between object of desire, moral ideal, and threat to social order, while narratives frequently punish female autonomy and self-determination ([Ortiz 2008](#), pp. 170–71).

One of the clearest examples of the intertwining of religious and cinematic representations of women is the figure of the “vamp”, which functions as a secularized version of Eve. This character embodies patriarchal fears of female sexuality by presenting women as seductresses who destroy moral order. Similar patterns appear in cinematic portrayals of biblical women such as Delilah, Salome, and Mary Magdalene, who are often framed through narratives of temptation, sin, and repentance. Such representations reveal the deep connection between religious narratives and cinematic stereotypes about women (Sever Globan and Anić 2018).

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, in her article “From Eve to the Virgin and Back Again: The Image of Woman in Contemporary (Religious) Film”, also discusses these dominant archetypes in Western culture, which portray women through the symbolic figures of Eve, the temptress, and Mary, the virgin and mother. While the myth of Eve represents human weakness and the loss of paradise, Mary symbolizes holiness and the restoration of paradise. Eve is associated with disobedience toward male authority, sensuality, risk-taking, and moral ambiguity, all of which are coded as dangerous or evil. Mary, by contrast, is associated with obedience, submission to male authority, virginity, and the ideal of female perfection. This ambivalent vision of womanhood—degraded on the one hand and glorified on the other—forms part of a long-standing Christian heritage that continues to shape contemporary cultural imagination and remains a metaphor to which filmmakers frequently return (Apostolos-Cappadona 1997, pp. 111–14).

2.3. Women’s Authorship and Feminist Theology

Digital technologies and global film distribution have expanded access to production and enabled greater visibility for women and minority filmmakers within world cinema (Hole et al. 2017, p. 3). As women’s participation in film production has increased, representations of female experience have also begun to change. Instead of the dominant male gaze, contemporary narratives increasingly offer what Wagner calls the “absence of the controlling male gaze” and provide more contemplative and complex portrayals of women’s lives, including their religiosity (Wagner 2011, p. 467). These shifts are especially visible in films directed by women, which forms an important context for the analysis undertaken in this paper.

The development of feminist filmmaking and feminist film theory brought attempts to subvert dominant representational patterns. Women began making films “by, for and about women”, developing alternative narratives and aesthetic approaches. As Ruth McCormick argued, “we need women making films about themselves [...] these films should have a lot of anger in them, and as much humor as possible” (McCormick 1977, p. 291).

Reflecting on the relationship between feminist film theory, female authorship, and postfeminist popular culture, Hoi F. Cheu argues that women’s cinema represents an important space for social imagination, survival, healing, and transformation. Cheu views women’s film as a space of resistance to cultural conformity, the development of feminist aesthetics, and the creation of new narratives of identity, community, and social change. At the same time, he warns that postfeminist culture can appropriate feminist discourse while simultaneously restoring patriarchal structures. Popular films, he argues, often present strong women while ultimately reaffirming patriarchy through the logic that “The good, strong woman always returns to the man’s world” (Cheu 2007, p. 7). He also emphasizes that feminist film theory must include women as authors, and not merely as objects of analysis; otherwise, we arrive at what he calls “feminism without women” (Cheu 2007, p. 8)—the symbolic recognition of feminism without genuine space for feminist authorship and women directors (Cheu 2007, pp. 5–10).

Feminist theology has developed along a trajectory similar to feminist film studies. Rather than approaching religion exclusively as a source of women's oppression, feminist theologians have critically examined patriarchal and hierarchical structures within religious traditions while emphasizing women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of theological reflection. Their work has sought to recover women's voices, symbols, and historical contributions that have frequently been marginalized or misinterpreted within religious communities and theological discourse.

Feminist theology has also challenged dominant female archetypes and questioned the exclusion of women from religious authority and communal life. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that patriarchal religious structures are historically constructed rather than constitutive of religious faith itself and are therefore open to critical reinterpretation (Ruether 1993). Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of the "discipleship of equals" envisions religious communities as spaces of mutual participation and shared responsibility rather than hierarchical domination (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). Such feminist theological perspectives are particularly relevant for contemporary cinema, where believing women are increasingly represented as active moral and spiritual agents who negotiate questions of faith, gender, and social justice while remaining deeply embedded within their religious communities. The female protagonists analyzed in this study do not reject religion; rather, they reinterpret and transform their religious communities through acts of solidarity, resistance, and peacebuilding.

3. Cinematic Representations of Religious Figures

Cinematic portrayals of religiosity often rely on recognizable archetypes that shape public perceptions of religious communities, something especially visible in the characterization of female figures. Stereotypical portrayals of religious characters are not gender neutral but are deeply marked by gendered patterns that additionally shape perceptions of believing women. In the Christian context, while male religious figures are often portrayed as morally ambivalent—weak, hypocritical, authoritarian, or even corrupt—female characters more frequently remain trapped within limited and symbolically burdened roles.

One of the most striking examples is the figure of the "Catholic girl", represented as simultaneously pure and sexualized, thereby reproducing the deep tension between the religious ideal of purity and patriarchal control over the female body and female desire (Keyser and Keyser 1984). Such portrayals often culminate in narratives in which female autonomy is punished or morally disciplined, especially when women deviate from the normative expectations of the religious community. A significant example is *The Magdalene Sisters* (Mullan 2002), whose protagonists are young women confined to Irish Catholic Magdalene Laundries and punished for "moral transgressions" such as pregnancy outside marriage, flirtation, or even physical attractiveness. Female sexuality is represented as something that must be disciplined and controlled, while the religious institution functions as an extension of patriarchal power. Women's autonomy is systematically punished through humiliation, labor, and isolation (Sever Globan 2025).

Similar patterns are visible in representations of maternal figures within religious frameworks. Religious mothers are frequently portrayed as excessively strict, emotionally distant, or fanatically devoted to faith, with religiosity itself becoming a source of repression within the family. Examples such as the psychotic, fanatically Protestant mother in *Carrie* (De Palma 1976) illustrate how religion can be represented as a tool of control, particularly over daughters, thereby reinforcing the connection between religion, authority, and patriarchal discipline. Another recurring type is the "insensitive mother", whose rigid beliefs create an unbridgeable emotional distance between herself and her child (Rendleman 2008).

In such narratives, motherhood is not a space of care and relationality, but rather a site for reproducing rigid norms and fear.

Nuns also occupy a particularly important place in religious cinema, oscillating between two extremes. On the one hand, they are represented as cold, strict, and repressive figures who embody institutional authority and moral surveillance (e.g., *Novitiate*, 2017). On the other hand, cinema often offers idealized depictions of kind, caring, and self-sacrificing women (e.g., *The Nun's Story*, 1959). This ambivalence points to a broader problem in the representation of women in religion: women are either moral ideals deprived of individuality or representatives of a repressive institutional system. Such portrayals rarely allow for more complex depictions of their spirituality, inner conflicts, or personal vocation (Sever Globan 2025).

In “Hollywood Catholic Women: Virgins, Whores, Mothers and Other Images”, Schleich (2003) analyzes representations of Catholic women in Hollywood films in order to determine whether these portrayals reproduce traditional gender stereotypes or suggest possible changes in the representation of women within the film industry. Schleich argues that portrayals of women in Hollywood cinema remain deeply shaped by patriarchal patterns of Western culture, in which women are frequently associated with fear, unreliability, or moral suspicion. According to Schleich, these patterns also have religious roots, especially in Christian traditions where women were long understood as secondary and incomplete without men. Within such a framework, socially acceptable models of female life were reduced to two possibilities: either remaining virgins devoted to religious life or marrying and becoming mothers. This is the myth that, according to Haskell (1987, p. 2), Hollywood cinema has continuously reproduced and reinforced. In this way, Schleich argues, both the Catholic Church and Hollywood cinema have contributed to cultural narratives that position women within marginality, silence, and social subordination. Schleich therefore asks whether the growing presence of women in the film industry, especially after the Second Vatican Council, has improved representations of women. Her conclusion is rather pessimistic. Although exceptions exist, most films continue to reproduce a pattern in which women who deviate from patriarchal norms—through nonconformist behavior or rejection of traditional roles—are narratively punished. Catholic women are often portrayed as victims exposed to humiliation and violence, while their capacities are diminished through depictions of emotional, moral, or intellectual weakness. Dominant female models are reduced to a few stereotypical types: women as virgins (often associated with motherhood) or as disobedient and sexually “deviant” figures, modern versions of Eve. Between these two extremes, there is almost no third space for female action, which further confirms the limitations of representational frameworks shaping believing women in film (Schleich 2003).

When it comes to portrayals of Muslim women, stereotypes are additionally burdened by orientalist and colonial perspectives. Women are most frequently represented either as passive and oppressed victims of religious structures or as exoticized and sexualized figures. They are often reduced to the archetype of the “belly dancer”, one of the “three Bs” of stereotypical representations of Muslims (billionaires, belly dancers, bombers) (Kozlovic 2007). Such portrayals fit within broader processes of “othering”, in which Islam functions as a cultural and religious “Other”, while the female body becomes a symbol of oppression or danger defined primarily through its relation to male characters. In both cases, Muslim women are denied representation as active believers negotiating their identities within religious and social contexts. Ortiz (2009) notes that until the mid-1980s, commercial cinema frequently relied on sensationalism, including rape and sexual violence, to attract audiences, thereby reducing female characters to objects of suffering. More contemporary films critically challenge such stereotypes through powerful visual symbols such as the

burqa. In *Kandahar* (Makhmalbaf 2001), for example, the opening and closing shots of the protagonist seen through the mesh of her burqa symbolize her restricted vision and freedom, while clothing itself functions as a means of controlling female sexuality. *Osama* (Barmak 2003) radicalizes this representation through the story of a girl forced to pretend to be a boy in order to survive in a society where women are forbidden to work or move freely without male accompaniment. A significant break from traditional stereotypes emerges with women directors who, particularly after the 1970s, began responding to censorship and patriarchal practices such as stoning, honor killings, and domestic violence. For these filmmakers, cinema ceased to be mere entertainment and became a tool for social change, focusing on issues such as forced marriage and child abduction, thereby actively participating in redefining the identity of Muslim women in the contemporary world (Ortiz 2011).

In representations of Jewish characters, although stereotypes are more frequently attached to male figures, women are implicitly positioned within narratives of tradition, family, and continuity. Jewish identity is often reduced to recognizable rituals and symbols functioning as “visual shorthand”, while women appear primarily as guardians of tradition or mediators between religious heritage and contemporary life (Wright 2009).

In all these cases, film not only reproduces religious stereotypes but also codes them through gender, limiting the space for portraying women as complex religious actors. Women are repeatedly represented through predefined roles—virgins, mothers, temptresses, or moral guardians—that correspond to both religious and cultural expectations. Precisely for this reason, contemporary films portraying believing women as active, reflective, and morally autonomous subjects represent an important shift away from dominant representational patterns and open up space for a different understanding of the relationship between gender, religion, and agency.

While scholarship on religion and film has devoted considerably more attention to Christian—particularly Catholic—representations of women in cinema, the selected films in this study intentionally draw on diverse religious traditions, including Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Mennonite communities. Rather than comparing doctrinal or denominational differences among these traditions, the present study focuses on the ways in which women negotiate questions of faith, religious authority, and communal life across different religious and cultural contexts. The comparative perspective adopted here allows for an exploration of women’s religious agency and peacebuilding practices that transcend specific confessional boundaries.

4. Film, Gender, and Peacebuilding

Religious motifs in film often serve as a framework for exploring identity, social conflict, and ethical dilemmas, making cinema a space of encounter between art, religion, and culture (Linze and Desa 2024). Since conflict is a fundamental element of cinematic storytelling, it is important to note that representations of peacemaking in film are far less common and have received considerably less theoretical attention. As Jolyon Mitchell observes, film research has been predominantly focused on the effects of violence, while “consideration of how films represent, challenge and celebrate peacemaking” (Mitchell 2008, p. 101) remains much rarer. Precisely because of the persistence of real, ongoing, and often structural forms of violence, cinematic peacemaking deserves more systematic analysis.

Mitchell further raises questions concerning representation itself: how is the transition from conflict to reconciliation portrayed in film, and can depictions of violence paradoxically contribute to the promotion of peace? Although such portrayals remain relatively rare, film has the potential not only to expose deeply rooted patterns of violence but also to “cel-

celebrate different kinds of peace” and to highlight “the difficulties and opportunities that are available to peacemakers” (Mitchell 2008, p. 107). Michael Braswell similarly emphasizes that visual culture enables deeper self-reflection and can encourage audiences to engage more actively with questions of justice and peace on personal, social, and global levels. Films, he argues, offer viewers a choice between superficial fascination with violence and confrontation with the realities of suffering and the possibilities of hope. They can either allow us to “remain comfortably voyeuristic” or “drag [...] toward a new understanding of suffering’s reality and hope’s possibilities” (Braswell 2003, p. 293). Crucial transformations, however, do not occur through spectacular displays of victory, but through quiet individual acts of courage and compassion—in “the uncertain whisper of a compassionate heart” (Braswell 2003, p. 299) that makes peacebuilding possible.

Building on Galtung’s distinction between negative and positive peace (Galtung 1969) and his conceptualization of peacebuilding (Galtung 1976), this paper understands peacebuilding as an active process of transforming social relationships and communal structures in ways that promote justice, solidarity, inclusion, and reconciliation. Peacebuilding is therefore conceived not merely as the absence of conflict or violence but as the creation of social conditions that enable individuals and communities to address conflict through nonviolent forms of agency and collective action. Within the selected films, peacebuilding refers to the ways in which female protagonists contribute to the transformation of religious and social communities through acts of resistance, solidarity, and moral leadership.

Feminist theories of peacebuilding further deepen this understanding by emphasizing the inseparable connection between peace and gender equality. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 represents a turning point because it explicitly recognizes women not merely as victims of conflict but as key actors in peacebuilding processes. As Carol Cohn notes, “Women are not just victims of violence. They are often the driving force for peace,” while “no approach to peace can succeed if it does not view men and women as equally important components of the solution” (Cohn 2004, pp. 8–9). Nevertheless, women remain significantly underrepresented in peace negotiations, postwar reconstruction, and reconciliation processes, reflecting deeply rooted gender inequalities within global structures of power.

The feminist perspective on peacebuilding, particularly developed in the work of Birgit Brock-Utne, understands peace not simply as the absence of war, but as a positive process involving justice, cooperation, and social transformation. Brock-Utne demonstrates that peace studies and feminist studies are inextricably connected because gender inequalities and patriarchal structures contribute to the reproduction of violence. Patriarchal systems privilege domination, control, and competition, whereas feminist approaches emphasize cooperation, empathy, and care as essential preconditions for sustainable peace (Brock-Utne 1985).

Such a redefinition of power is especially visible in analyses of women’s peace initiatives. Diana Brown Sheridan demonstrates how women peacebuilders act from marginalized positions within patriarchal societies yet precisely from these positions develop distinctive strategies of action. Their approaches include connecting with other marginalized groups, employing creative and emotional forms of expression, and emphasizing interdependence instead of hierarchy and control (Sheridan 1988, pp. 37–42). In this context, power is no longer defined through domination but through processes of awareness, solidarity, and transformation.

Stefanie Knauss therefore proposes understanding the relationship between religion and film as a dialogue grounded in openness toward different perspectives and religious traditions. Film becomes a space of interreligious and intercultural encounter because it enables audiences to engage with diverse religious experiences. In this sense, films can por-

tray religious conflicts, processes of memory, reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding between religious communities. Film thus becomes not only an object of analysis but also an active participant in cultural and religious dialogue (Knauss 2020).

Recent scholarship on religion and peacebuilding has challenged the assumption that religion functions either as a source of violence or as an inherently peaceful force. Rather, religion possesses what R. Scott Appleby calls an “ambivalence of the sacred” (Appleby 2000); it can simultaneously contribute to conflict and provide powerful moral resources for peacebuilding and social transformation. Religious traditions contain internal pluralism and offer competing interpretations of justice, authority, and communal life, making them capable of legitimizing both violence and nonviolent forms of social engagement.

Appleby further argues that religious peacebuilders are best understood as “nonviolent religious militants” (Appleby 2000, p. 19) who actively draw upon religious teachings and practices such as forgiveness, reconciliation, dialogue, hospitality, and solidarity in order to transform conflict and promote social change. “Religions, despite the shameful record of a minority of their adherents, are strikingly accomplished in developing their own traditions of peace-related practices and concepts. Lifting up, celebrating, and empowering those elements of the religious community are acts of civic responsibility in today’s world.” (Appleby 2000, pp. 306–7). Particularly important is the role of grassroots peacebuilding processes, through which individuals and communities cultivate cultures of nonviolence and reconciliation from within. These insights are especially relevant for contemporary cinematic representations of believing women, whose religious agency frequently emerges through acts of solidarity, resistance, and community-building rather than through institutional or political power.

5. Methodology and Film Selection

This paper employs a qualitative interpretative approach to film analysis that combines theories of female representation in cinema with feminist film theory and approaches concerned with the representation of religion in film. The corpus consists of selected films originating from different cultural and religious contexts, yet sharing a common focus on female protagonists situated within religious communities marked by conflicts rooted in gendered and religious dynamics.

The analysis focuses on women who act within religiously structured and often patriarchal environments and who, through various strategies of action, contribute to processes of social transformation. Cinematic representations of female characters are therefore examined as potential models shaping perceptions of women’s agency within religious communities. Particular attention is given to the ways these films offer alternative scenarios that move beyond traditional and stereotypical portrayals of women in religious contexts.

Methodologically, the analysis is structured around several key categories: (1) the position of female characters within religious communities; (2) the type of conflict represented (religious, gendered, or social); (3) the protagonists’ strategies of action—including nonviolence, empathy, solidarity, and care; and (4) the narrative outcome in terms of transformation, reconciliation, and the possibility of social change. Within this framework, the concept of peacebuilding is approached through the distinction between “negative peace” (the absence of violence) and “positive peace” (the presence of justice, restored relationships, and social cohesion).

The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate that female protagonists in these films do not function merely as narrative elements but as carriers of alternative models of action that expand the space of female agency, challenge gendered religious stereotypes, and offer imagined yet emotionally persuasive paths toward peace and reconciliation. In this sense,

film functions as a space for the cultural reinterpretation of religion and gender but also as a potential tool for reflecting upon and shaping practices of peace in contemporary societies.

The films selected for analysis in order to examine how believing women and their agency are represented in contemporary cinema with religious themes are the Saudi Arabian film *Wadjda* directed by Al-Mansour (2012), the North Macedonian film *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya* directed by Strugar Mitevska (2019), and the USA film *Women Talking* directed by Polley (2022).

The choice of these films is deliberate. Although they come from different cultural and religious settings—Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestant Mennonite communities—they share a common concern with women’s lives, faith, and social conflict. Directed by women, they place female protagonists at the center of the narrative and offer more complex portrayals of religious women than those traditionally found in cinema. At the same time, their different contexts make it possible to compare how women’s agency and peacebuilding are imagined across diverse religious communities. Taken together, these films provide examples of nonviolent resistance, solidarity, dialogue, and care as possible ways of responding to conflict. The choice of films directed by women is also significant because these films foreground female experience and spirituality and contribute to contemporary discussions on women’s cinema.

a. Analytical approach

The analysis follows the tradition of close reading in film studies, an interpretative method that attends closely to dialogue, framing, editing, mise-en-scène, and recurring symbolic motifs, reading these formal elements in relation to feminist film theory and theories of religion, gender, and peacebuilding outlined in Sections 2–4. Each film was viewed multiple times; key dialogue, recurring visual motifs, and narrative turning points were transcribed and organized according to the four analytical categories described above. This iterative process of viewing, transcribing, and re-reading allowed emerging patterns to be checked against the film as a whole rather than isolated scenes.

b. Operationalization of theoretical concepts

The theoretical concepts discussed in Sections 2–4 were operationalized as concrete analytical questions applied to each film. Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze was operationalized through attention to camera position, framing, and point of view in scenes involving female protagonists, asking whether the camera constructs women as objects of a controlling gaze or as subjects of their own perspective. De Lauretis’s notion of film as a “technology of gender” was operationalized through analysis of institutional settings (school, church, religious community) as sites where gendered norms are enforced or negotiated. The distinction between negative and positive peace (Galtung 1969) was operationalized by identifying moments in which protagonists respond to conflict through nonviolent, relational strategies (persistence, dialogue, solidarity) as opposed to domination, revenge, or aggression, and by tracing whether narrative outcomes restore mere absence of conflict or more substantive justice and dignity.

c. Validity of interpretations

To support the trustworthiness of the interpretations offered, each reading was checked for internal consistency across the three films (the same four categories were applied uniformly) and was situated in dialogue with existing scholarship on each film, used to test and refine rather than simply confirm the analysis.

d. Analysis Matrix

Film	Position Within Religious Community	Type of Conflict	Strategy of Action	Narrative Outcome
Wadjda (2012)	Ten-year-old girl within a Saudi Islamic community; negotiates rules from within, does not leave the community	Gendered/religious (mobility, voice, bodily autonomy)	Persistence, humor, small nonviolent acts, negotiation with religious practice (Qur'an competition)	Positive peace: acquisition of the bicycle, expanded personal freedom, solidarity with mother
God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya (2019)	Unemployed woman within an Orthodox Christian community; ritual space defined as male domain	Religious/gendered (right to participate in ritual, public dignity)	Calm, persistent refusal; nonviolent resistance to pressure from Church, police, community	Positive peace: recognition of dignity, cross returned to her, symbolic reconciliation
Women Talking (2022)	Women within an isolated Mennonite community; excluded from decision-making, taught obedience	Religious/gendered (sexual violence, forced forgiveness, faith used as control)	Collective dialogue, deliberation, solidarity; decision to leave rather than fight or remain silent	Positive peace sought outside the community: safety, justice, and a new social order, not simple reconciliation

e. Reflexivity

This analysis is conducted from a position informed by feminist film theory and religious studies, and the author's own disciplinary training shapes the interpretative focus on nonviolent, relational forms of agency rather than, for instance, a purely theological or purely cinematographic reading. As with any close reading, the interpretations offered here are not the only possible readings of these films; they represent one coherent, theoretically grounded perspective among others that could be developed from different disciplinary or cultural vantage points.

f. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis of three films does not permit generalization about the representation of "believing women" in contemporary cinema as a whole; the films were selected because they share a specific configuration of themes (female protagonists, religious communities, gendered conflict) rather than because they are statistically representative of religious film more broadly. Second, close reading is inherently interpretative, and other readings of the same material, informed by different theoretical frameworks, remain possible. Third, the corpus is limited to films that achieved international distribution and critical visibility, which may exclude other relevant films from the same or related cultural and religious contexts that address similar themes with less international reach.

5.1. *Wadjda* (2012)

Haifaa al-Mansour's film *Wadjda* (2012) portrays the coming-of-age story of a ten-year-old girl in Saudi society, where gender roles are strictly determined by religious, social, and patriarchal norms within the Islamic community. The film is particularly significant because it does not depict female resistance as an open revolution but rather as a series of small, persistent, and nonviolent acts through which the girl attempts to expand the space of her own freedom. In this sense, *Wadjda* becomes a character through whom female agency, resistance to gendered and religious stereotypes, and the possibility of building more just relationships within the community can be analyzed.

Already in the opening scene, the girls in Wadjda's classroom recite a religious text from the Qur'an: "I gave myself to God and I think he has a place for me in the eternity of Heaven/With the martyrs and the pure/I will always be there." The recitation suggests that a brighter future for women awaits only in the afterlife, as though they have nothing to seek for themselves in earthly life. Simultaneously, the camera focuses on the girls' feet. All the girls wear similar dark shoes except for Wadjda, who wears sneakers. This detail visually distinguishes her from the group. Unlike the others, she does not stand still but moves her feet restlessly. From the very beginning, the film suggests that she is different, that she does not fully fit into the prescribed order, and that she carries within herself a desire for movement, change, and freedom.

School is one of the key spaces in the film. It is portrayed not merely as a place of education, but also as an institution of control over the female body, voice, and behavior. This is visible in the warnings of the teachers: "Women's voices shouldn't be heard by men outside" and "A woman's voice is her nakedness." Girls are taught that they must not be loud, laugh in front of men, or behave in ways that attract attention. According to [Nabila and Yurisa \(2025\)](#), the film thereby depicts everyday forms of gender inequality in Saudi society, especially restrictions on women's mobility, women's dependence on men, and imbalances of power within public space. School therefore becomes a micro-community in which patriarchal rules are reproduced and transmitted to new generations.

Radovic rightly emphasizes that peacebuilding includes "having a voice and being heard" ([Radovic 2016](#), p. 79), namely the possibility for marginalized subjects to gain recognition within the community. This is precisely what Wadjda does. She refuses to remain silent and invisible and, through a series of nonviolent acts, demands the right to action, movement, and participation in public space, something she ultimately achieves through the purchase of the green bicycle, the riding of which was forbidden to women. Wadjda differs from the other girls precisely because she refuses to accept these rules without question. When the girls run inside because men might see them, one of them says: "Respectable girls go inside. The rest stay where the men can see them." Wadjda ironically responds: "Why? Are they Superman?" This line clearly demonstrates her mode of action. She does not directly attack religion or the community, but instead questions rules that appear irrational and unjust. Her resistance is quiet, humorous, and deeply embedded in everyday life. [Ceuterick \(2020\)](#) associates such forms of action with the concept of willfulness, understood as the capacity not to "go with the flow" and to create space for oneself where no such space had previously existed.

The main symbol of this space of freedom is the green bicycle. For Wadjda, the bicycle is not merely a toy; it represents movement, independence, and the right to be equal to boys. She therefore searches for every possible way to obtain it. When she tells her friend Abdullah, "If I had a bike, you would see," she is expressing her desire to participate in a world forbidden to girls. [Hambuch \(2019\)](#), in her study of "liberating bicycles," argues that the bicycle in *Wadjda* functions as a powerful symbol of female mobility and emancipation. It enables physical movement, while simultaneously symbolizing the broader possibility of escaping restrictive gender roles. The bicycle functions as the film's central symbol of freedom; it is the one object Wadjda pursues across every register of the narrative—economic (she saves and sells bracelets), religious (she enters the Qur'an competition), and relational (her mother ultimately buys it for her)—making it a condensed sign of independence and resistance to patriarchal restriction (cf. [Fikriyah and Muassomah 2025](#)). In this sense, the film recalls the neorealist classic *Bicycle Thieves* by Vittorio De Sica (1948), in which the bicycle also functions as a metaphor for freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, while children symbolize the possibility of a better future.

The conflict surrounding the bicycle reveals multiple layers of tension: gendered, social, and religious. Wadjda's mother asks her: "Have you ever seen a girl on a bike?" and later tells her: "Bikes are dangerous. You think you can act like a boy?" She additionally warns that riding a bicycle may prevent her from having children. In this way, the film demonstrates how gender restrictions are often framed as concern for girls' health, honor, or well-being. [Almenia and AbdelFattah \(2025\)](#) describe this form of control as benevolent oppression because limitations on freedom are presented as protection. Importantly, these prohibitions are not enforced solely by men but also by women who themselves have internalized patriarchal norms. The mother, teachers, and headmistress all speak the language of a system that simultaneously limits their own lives.

Nevertheless, Wadjda refuses to give up. She does not choose violence, escape, or open confrontation, but instead uses the means available to her. She sells bracelets, negotiates, saves money, and attempts to purchase the bicycle herself. The clearest example of her agency is her decision to enter a Qur'an recitation competition in order to win the prize money. In doing so, the film demonstrates that religion is not represented solely as a space of prohibition but also as a space within which Wadjda can act. Wadjda's decision to enter the Qur'an recitation competition demonstrates that she does not reject the religious community in order to pursue her goal; instead, she uses a practice sanctioned by that community—reciting the Qur'an—as a legitimate means toward a personal, emancipatory end. Religion here functions not solely as a space of prohibition but as a space that also permits self-realization (cf. [Najihah and Rohanda 2025](#)). This aspect is particularly important for understanding female agency. Wadjda does not completely reject tradition but negotiates with its rules. She studies the Qur'an, participates in the school competition, and respects institutional forms, while her goal remains personal and emancipatory—to buy a bicycle and become free and equal. In the context of film and peacebuilding, Radovic emphasizes that transformative practices often occur not through spectacular revolutions, but through concrete acts by which marginalized subjects seek recognition and dignity ([Radovic 2016](#)). This is precisely how Wadjda acts. She does not seek power over others but rather the right to be seen as equally valuable.

During the competition, Wadjda recites the verse: "When it is said to them 'make not mischief on the earth', they say 'why, we only want to make peace'. Certainly, they are the ones who make mischief. But they don't realise it." Within the context of the film, these words carry particular significance. They can be interpreted as a commentary on those who claim to protect morality, religion, and social order, while in reality producing injustice and exclusion. Wadjda wins the competition because she has worked hard, learned the rules, and demonstrated talent. However, when the headmistress discovers that she intends to spend the money on a bicycle, she donates it to charity instead. She tells Wadjda: "You know, a bike isn't a toy for girls. Especially not for well-behaved, devout girls who protect their soul and honour." This scene clearly demonstrates that the problem lies not in religion itself, but in its patriarchal interpretation, which denies girls freedom and mobility.

The headmistress is an important figure because she illustrates how women can become guardians of systems that oppress them. Although she possesses institutional authority, she uses that authority not to empower girls but to discipline them. The headmistress illustrates how women themselves can become custodians of the very system that constrains them. She holds institutional authority, yet uses it to discipline rather than empower Wadjda, donating her prize money to charity rather than allowing her to buy the bicycle (cf. [Fikriyah and Muassomah 2025](#), who similarly read this figure as sustaining patriarchal structures from within a position of power). When she tells Wadjda, "You think you can act however you want and people won't notice? Your stupid behaviour will haunt you forever," she articulates the logic of a society that constantly monitors female

behavior. Yet Wadjda refuses to remain fully subordinate to her authority and responds back, demonstrating that she is not merely a passive object of education and control.

Particularly important is the relationship between Wadjda and her mother. The mother is herself a woman suffering within a patriarchal marriage. Her husband seeks another wife because she has not given birth to a son. She attempts to maintain his attention through clothing, hairstyles, and physical attractiveness, yet increasingly recognizes the injustice affecting both herself and her daughter. It is precisely here that the possibility of female solidarity emerges.

At the beginning of the film, the mother refuses to buy the bicycle, but in the end she purchases it herself. She tells Wadjda: “You don’t need them or their money” and “I want you to be the happiest person in the world.” This act carries profound symbolic significance. The mother redirects the money she had saved for a red dress—a symbol of her own dependence on the male gaze—toward the green bicycle, a symbol of her daughter’s mobility and future, but also indirectly of her own. Ceuterick (2020) interprets this moment as an affirmative act. Negative emotions such as humiliation, sadness, and injustice do not end in destruction, but are transformed into support and the possibility of change. In the context of this paper, this can be connected with the concept of peacebuilding. Peace here does not simply mean the absence of violence—what Johan Galtung would call “negative peace.” Instead, peace also involves the creation of more just relationships, dignity, support, and the possibility for a girl to occupy her rightful place in the world—“positive peace.” The mother’s purchase of the bicycle therefore represents not merely a private family gesture but also a small act of restoring relationships and interrupting cycles of oppression.

The relationship between Wadjda and her friend Abdullah is equally important for the themes of peace and reconciliation. Abdullah is not portrayed as a threat, but rather as a boy capable of accepting a girl as his equal. He teaches her how to ride a bicycle and supports her desire to race him. When he offers her his own bicycle, she replies: “Then how will we race?” This line is highly significant because it demonstrates that Wadjda does not desire freedom that would deprive someone else of freedom. She does not seek to replace one form of domination with another. Instead, she desires a relationship in which both can ride, move, and compete equally. The film thereby presents an image of equality rather than revenge, and both children become symbols of a possible new and better future grounded in egalitarian relations.

The final scene, in which Wadjda rides her bicycle while saying “Catch me if you can,” symbolizes her self-realization. Drawing on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Najihah and Rohanda (2025) interpret this moment as the culmination of her journey toward self-actualization. Wadjda fulfills her need for self-respect, freedom, and recognition. Her victory lies not only in obtaining the bicycle, but in demonstrating that a girl can become an active subject in her own life. The final shot presents Wadjda in close-up at a crossroads while riding her bicycle. Smiling, she looks left and right because she now knows she has a choice and can decide autonomously which path to take. It is precisely in this moment that her greatest agency becomes visible.

Wadjda is therefore particularly important for the analysis of female religious characters because it demonstrates that female agency does not necessarily require abandoning religion or tradition. Wadjda acts from within her community, yet she refuses to accept all of its norms as final. She questions, negotiates, uses available spaces, and gradually creates small forms of freedom. In this sense, the film departs from stereotypes of religious women as passive, obedient, or completely trapped by tradition. Wadjda is neither a passive victim nor an aggressive rebel. She is a girl who thinks, desires, acts, and learns how to change the world without violence.

Ultimately, *Wadjda* offers an emotionally persuasive example of positive peace. This peace does not emerge through a dramatic political revolution, but through small transformations in relationships: a girl gains the right to movement, a mother chooses solidarity, a boy accepts equality, and religious practice reveals itself as a space that can also serve personal empowerment. The film thus demonstrates how a more just world can be built from within, through everyday acts of courage, care, and persistence.

Wadjda's bicycle is therefore not merely a bicycle. It becomes a sign of the possibility that girls and women may have a voice, space, bodily autonomy, and a future. In 2013, shortly after the international success of the film, Saudi authorities officially allowed women to ride bicycles, although under strict conditions—only in recreational areas and parks, while wearing an abaya and accompanied by a male guardian. While no direct causal link between the film and this policy change can be established, the temporal coincidence raises questions about the relationship between popular culture and broader public debate on women's mobility in Saudi Arabia at the time. Rachel Shabi's description of the film as a work that "gave Muslim feminism a voice" (Shabi 2013) speaks to this perceived cultural resonance rather than to a demonstrated policy effect.

5.2. *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya* (2019)

At first glance, Teona Strugar Mitevska's *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya* (2019) appears to be a satire about a bizarre event in a small Macedonian town, but it quickly becomes much more than that. The film tells the story of a woman who, for the first time in her life, does something entirely spontaneous, and that single act changes her life completely. At the center of the narrative is Petrunya, a thirty-two-year-old unemployed historian who still lives with her parents and endures the daily humiliations imposed by those around her. Society does not see her as a person with talents, knowledge, and an inner world, but rather through her appearance, age, and unmarried status. From the very beginning, it becomes clear that Petrunya lives in a society marked by corruption, gender inequality, and deeply rooted patriarchal patterns. As Papadimitriou observes, the film stages a conflict between the "traditional, religious and chauvinistic status quo" and a woman who decides for the first time to fight for her own rights (Papadimitriou 2021, pp. 25–26).

This becomes particularly evident during a job interview in which the potential employer dismisses Petrunya because of her age and physical appearance, treating her primarily as an object of male evaluation rather than as an educated and capable individual. The scene clearly exposes a society in which a woman's value is closely connected to her physical attractiveness and desirability to men. Within such a world, Petrunya is invisible. She has no job, no partner, and no social status, while even her relationship with her mother lacks emotional support. Her mother constantly criticizes her, instructing her how to look and behave and treating her like a child. As a result, Petrunya initially appears passive, exhausted, and defeated, as though she has stopped believing that she can influence her own life. Hambuch (2019) notes that the opening scenes already portray a society in which women must constantly negotiate with a system that systematically humiliates and renders them invisible.

It is precisely at this moment, however, that the turning point of the film occurs. After the humiliating interview, Petrunya accidentally arrives at a traditional Orthodox ceremony of cross retrieval. In this ritual, a priest throws a cross into the river, and men dive into the water in the belief that the person who retrieves it will enjoy good fortune throughout the year. This ritual, known in Macedonia as *Vodici* (Epiphany, the Blessing of the Waters), commemorates Christ's baptism in the Jordan and is traditionally celebrated over two days—"Mashki Vodici" (Male Vodici) and "Zhenski Vodici" (Female Vodici)—a

structural division that already encodes the separation of genders into distinct ritual roles. The cross-retrieval ceremony itself, however, has historically been an exclusively male domain, understood as a display of vigor and blessing reserved for men, while women's participation in the wider Epiphany celebrations has traditionally taken different, non-competitive forms. Notably, the scene in the film is based on a real incident in the town of Štip in 2014, when a woman who retrieved the cross first was likewise pressured by onlookers and clergy to return it, underscoring that the conflict staged in the film reflects an actual, documented tension within contemporary Macedonian Orthodox practice rather than a fictional exaggeration (Marusic 2014). The atmosphere of the scene immediately reveals that the ritual is no longer experienced as a spiritual act, but rather as a display of masculine strength and ego. Men shout, push, and aggressively compete against one another. Religion is therefore not portrayed as a space of peace and community but as a site where hierarchies of power are reaffirmed. Hiltunen and Lähdesmäki (2025) describe this ritual precisely as a space in which the conflict between traditional religious norms and contemporary ideas of gender equality becomes visible.

Petrunya observes the event from the margins. She does not arrive intending to rebel or deliberately provoke conflict. Yet when the priest throws the cross into the river, she instinctively jumps in and retrieves it before all the men. This moment radically changes the direction of the film. The men cannot accept that a woman has won the cross, and collective aggression immediately turns against her. They attempt to take the cross away from her, insult her, and physically attack her. At this moment, Petrunya refuses to step back for the first time in her life. She manages to keep the cross and escape home. It is here that her transformation begins.

What is particularly significant is that her act is not aggressive. Petrunya does not seek to humiliate anyone or start a revolution. She simply refuses to return something she won fairly. It is precisely in this refusal that her agency becomes visible. Her resistance is neither violent nor spectacular but calm, stubborn, and persistent. As the film progresses, Petrunya increasingly becomes the subject of her own life. She no longer accepts that others should determine her value or her place in society. Hiltunen and Lähdesmäki (2025) emphasize that her agency is manifested not only in the act of retrieving the cross but even more in her later refusal to surrender it under pressure from the Church, the police, and the wider community.

This transformation is symbolically reinforced through the motif of the male mannequin doll that Petrunya carries at the beginning of the film. While escaping with the cross, the doll falls into the river and is swept away by the water. This image can be interpreted as a rejection of the idea that a man or a romantic relationship must define her value and identity. For the first time, Petrunya discovers something truly her own—not a partner, but dignity, voice, and inner strength. The cross she retrieves becomes a symbol of her new identity.

The religious context of the film is crucial. Although we never learn whether Petrunya herself is personally religious, the narrative unfolds within the framework of an Orthodox ritual and clearly demonstrates how religious traditions can become intertwined with patriarchal structures of power. Women are forbidden from participating in the retrieval of the cross because this ritual is considered a male domain. This is precisely why Petrunya's act causes such panic. The problem is not merely the cross itself, but the fact that a woman has disrupted the symbolic order of the community. González del Valle-Brena, Díaz-González, and Fernández-Holgado argue that in the film "the rights and dignity of the protagonist collide with tradition and culture" (González del Valle-Brena et al. 2024, p. 16), while religious institutions become spaces of control over female bodies and behavior.

Interestingly, even the priest himself appears confused. He seems to recognize the absurdity of the situation, yet still insists that they must “calm the people.” In this way, the film demonstrates how religious institutions often sustain injustice not necessarily because every individual within them believes in it, but because they fear change and the reaction of the community. Religion here becomes a means of preserving social order even when that order produces humiliation and violence. Papadimitriou (2021) therefore argues that the film critiques conservative interpretations of religion that function to preserve existing hierarchies and male privilege.

Once the police arrive to take Petrunya into custody, the film assumes an almost biblical dimension. Her detention and interrogation evoke Christ’s trial. This association is further emphasized in the scene where Petrunya lies naked on her bed with the cross resting on her chest, her arms spread apart, while the camera films her from above in a “God’s-eye view.” Visually, the image recalls the crucified Christ. This motif recurs throughout the film because Petrunya is repeatedly filmed from above. Such shots may be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, they emphasize how small and powerless she is in relation to the system; on the other, they suggest a kind of divine perspective, the feeling that someone is watching over her.

At the police station, everyone attempts to persuade Petrunya to return the cross. The police officers, the priest, and the men gathered outside behave like an enraged mob. They demand that the cross be taken from her because “women cannot participate.” Throughout these scenes, Petrunya remains remarkably calm. She neither shouts nor threatens anyone. She simply repeats that she stole nothing and asks why she should return the cross if she won it fairly. She tells them to arrest her if she has committed a crime, and if not, they should let her go. It is precisely this calmness that gives her character Christ-like qualities. She does not respond to violence with violence but remains faithful to herself and to what she knows is true.

The men outside the police station insult her, spit at her, and call her a whore. Particularly important is the character of the man who had wanted to retrieve the cross himself and who becomes the primary instigator of aggression against Petrunya. His reaction reveals how fragile a model of masculinity based on domination and privilege actually is. The problem is not merely that he lost the cross, but that he lost it to a woman. The film thereby clearly demonstrates that gender conflict is deeply connected to questions of power. Papadimitriou (2021, p. 26) observes that the young men in the film react as though not only the cross but also their “male privilege” has been taken away from them.

Nevertheless, the film does not portray all men negatively. Several male characters support Petrunya and become, in a sense, disciples of her nonviolent resistance. Her father stands by her and supports her decisions. The police officer Darko also undergoes a transformation. He admits to Petrunya that he admires her and wishes he possessed her courage. In this way, the film suggests that patriarchy harms men as well because it forces them to participate in a system they themselves do not necessarily consider just. The meaning of Petrunya’s name is equally significant. The name recalls Peter—the rock—but also Saint Petronilla, a Roman virgin martyr associated with female resistance and questions of control over women’s bodies.

In the context of peacebuilding, the way Petrunya acts is particularly important. She does not seek to destroy the community or humiliate men. She could easily have returned the cross and avoided conflict, but by doing so she would have lost herself. Her act therefore becomes significant not only for her personally but also for other women. She demonstrates that social change can begin nonviolently through the simple refusal to accept injustice. In this sense, the film distinguishes between negative and positive peace. Negative peace would mean that Petrunya returns the cross and the conflict is silenced.

Yet nothing would truly change. Positive peace would require a transformation of power relations and recognition that women have the same right to participate in public and religious life. It is for this reason that [González del Valle-Brena et al. \(2024\)](#) connect the film with the idea of a European normative culture grounded in human dignity, dialogue, and equality.

At the end of the film, the police chief returns the cross that had previously been taken from Petrunya. This moment symbolizes recognition of her dignity and her right to be seen as an equal human being. Yet the ending does not present a grand social revolution. The change is small, but significant. Petrunya leaves smiling, appearing for the first time genuinely free and relieved.

When she realizes that Darko is romantically interested in her, she is no longer the desperate woman seeking validation through male approval. She now knows her own worth. Particularly meaningful is the final act in which Petrunya gives the cross back to the Orthodox priest, telling him that he and his flock now need luck more than she does. This gesture demonstrates that she is not motivated by revenge or hatred. After everything she has endured, she still chooses kindness and mercy. It is precisely here that her character assumes a Christ-like dimension. Like Christ, she undergoes humiliation, public condemnation, and a symbolic “way of the cross,” yet she ultimately refuses to answer hatred with hatred. The film seems to suggest that forgiveness does not mean accepting injustice but rather refusing to become violent oneself.

God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya is therefore an important example of contemporary cinema in which religious symbolism becomes a space for questioning gender relations, power, and social justice. Petrunya is neither a conventional heroine nor a revolutionary leader. She is an ordinary woman who says “no” for the first time in her life. It is precisely within this simplicity that the film’s strength lies. Through her nonviolent resistance, the film demonstrates that female agency does not need to be spectacular in order to possess transformative power. Sometimes it is enough that one woman refuses to return a cross she won fairly.

In many respects, the film can also be connected to Haifaa al-Mansour’s *Wadjda*. Both protagonists live within religiously and patriarchally structured communities in which certain spaces and symbols are reserved for men. While *Wadjda* desires to ride a bicycle, Petrunya insists on keeping the cross she fairly retrieved. In both films, an apparently simple object—the bicycle and the cross—becomes a symbol of women’s right to visibility, dignity, and participation in public life. Both protagonists act nonviolently and do not seek to destroy the communities to which they belong but rather to expand spaces of freedom within them. Their agency is grounded in persistence, peaceful resistance, and refusal to accept injustice.

It is also significant that both films conclude with scenes of movement and liberation. At the end of *Wadjda*, the protagonist rides her bicycle and races Abdullah, while Petrunya leaves smiling after experiencing inner freedom for the first time. In both cases, these are small victories that do not transform the system overnight but nevertheless open the possibility of a different future.

In the final scene, Petrunya walks through the snow, where the reflection of the cross can symbolically be seen, while the last shot presents a deer in close-up. The concluding image of the deer can be interpreted as an important symbol of Petrunya’s inner transformation and of the peacebuilding dimension of the film itself. In Christian symbolism, the deer often signifies spiritual longing, peace, and the search for God, recalling the well-known Psalm: “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God” (Ps 42:1).

Although Petrunya is not portrayed throughout the film as an overtly religious person, her journey gradually acquires a spiritual dimension. After humiliation, public condemna-

tion, and a symbolic way of the cross, the appearance of the deer suggests a form of inner reconciliation and liberation. The deer is traditionally associated with gentleness, nonviolence, and vulnerability, and its presence further emphasizes that Petrunya consistently acts peacefully throughout the film, refusing to answer aggression with aggression. At the same time, the deer may symbolize Petrunya herself as a female being exposed to social “hunting,” humiliation, and attempts at control. Just as the deer is often prey, Petrunya becomes the target of an enraged crowd determined to punish a woman who has disrupted the patriarchal order. Yet the final scene suggests that despite everything, she survives, preserves her identity, and ultimately finds inner freedom.

5.3. *Women Talking* (2022)

Sarah Polley’s *Women Talking* (2022) is one of the most powerful contemporary films about women’s faith, trauma, solidarity, and the possibility of social transformation. The film is based on Miriam Toews’s novel, itself inspired by real events in an isolated Mennonite community in Bolivia, where women and girls were drugged and sexually abused for years.¹ However, Polley avoids depicting violence directly or sensationalistically. Instead, she focuses on what comes after violence: conversation, attempts at understanding, decision-making, and the question of how to survive without reproducing the same violence.

At the center of the film are not the male perpetrators, but the women who survived the abuse. This shift is crucial. The film does not portray women merely as victims, but as individuals who think, argue, doubt, believe, become angry, forgive, refuse to forgive, and struggle to find a way to save themselves and their children. In this sense, *Women Talking* can be understood both as a film about female agency and as a film about peacebuilding. Peace here is not defined as silence or the absence of conflict but as the creation of conditions in which women can be safe, hear themselves, and be heard by others.

The position of female characters within the religious community is portrayed as deeply restricted. The women live in a strictly patriarchal society in which men hold authority, interpret faith, and preserve social order. The women are illiterate, excluded from formal decision-making, and taught obedience from childhood. Their faith, which should function as a source of hope and meaning, is simultaneously used as a mechanism of control. After the abuse is exposed, the women are told that they must forgive the perpetrators or risk losing their place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This becomes one of the central conflicts of the film: faith is used against women, yet the women themselves do not wish to abandon faith. They seek a way to remain faithful to God without remaining faithful to a system that destroys them. This recalls dynamics already visible in *Wadjda*. For this reason, the film is not a simple story about rejecting religion. The women do not leave their community because they stop believing. Rather, they leave because they wish to preserve faith from violence, coercion, and manipulation.

This is particularly significant for the representation of female religious characters in contemporary cinema. The women in *Women Talking* are neither passive believers who unquestioningly accept what they are told, nor characters who reject religion entirely. Instead, they reinterpret faith from within. They ask what forgiveness means, what pacifism means, what responsibility toward children requires, and what it means to live with dignity before God. In doing so, they move beyond stereotypes of religious women as silent, submissive, and powerless.

Almost the entire film takes place inside an old barn, where the women collectively deliberate about what to do before the men return from town: forgive them, fight back, or leave. This physical space carries powerful symbolic meaning. On the one hand, the barn evokes the isolation, poverty, and confinement of the community. On the other, it becomes a space of freedom. For the first time, the women speak aloud to one another about what

they have been forced to silence for years. The barn becomes a place of dialogue, listening, and decision-making. It is precisely here that their agency begins.

One of the women declares: “We have some options. We will not do nothing!” This sentence marks a decisive turning point. The women no longer accept passivity. They may lack political power, education, or financial independence, but they possess voice, experience, and the ability to think collectively.

Hays and Polley (2022), in an interview for Cinéaste, emphasize that the process of conversation itself is central to the film. Although the title *Women Talking* may initially sound passive, conversation in the film is profoundly political. The women have lived in a community where no language existed for what had happened to them. The men interpreted their trauma as the work of demons, female imagination, or hysteria. Consequently, conversation becomes the first step toward liberation. Once the women begin naming violence, they begin reclaiming their own narrative. They no longer allow others to interpret their bodies, pain, and faith on their behalf.

The film clearly presents three possible responses available to the women while they wait for the men to return after the perpetrators have been arrested: do nothing, stay and fight, or leave. Each option carries moral weight. If they do nothing, they continue living in violence. If they stay and fight, they risk becoming violent themselves. If they leave, they abandon their homes, community, familiar world, and perhaps, according to the teachings imposed upon them, even their eternal salvation. Their decision is therefore not a simple escape, but a profound moral and spiritual choice.

The film portrays multiple forms of violence: drugging, rape, incest, forced pregnancy, physical abuse, and religious manipulation. Yet it does not remain focused solely on suffering. Instead, it explores how violence produces psychological, physical, and social consequences (Utami and Setyabudi 2024; Janzen 2023). Some women respond with anger, others with silence, withdrawal, panic attacks, or resignation. Polley deliberately avoids depicting the assaults themselves, thereby refusing to transform women’s suffering into spectacle. Instead, the camera remains with the women while they speak. Their bodies, faces, silences, and pauses become spaces of testimony. This is important because the film demonstrates that trauma is not merely a past event. It continues to live within the body, in fear, damaged relationships, and the inability to trust, but also in the desire to imagine a new beginning. The character of Nettie/Melvin, the young person who after trauma begins identifying as male and communicates only with children, reveals how deeply trauma can reshape identity and one’s relationship to the world. Yet the film never reduces its characters to their trauma. They are wounded, but also capable of thinking, loving, deciding, and creating something new.

The gender conflict within the film is intense. Men are the perpetrators of violence, but the film demonstrates that the problem extends beyond individual men. The true issue lies within a system that grants men almost total authority over women. The women understand that violence will not disappear simply by punishing individual perpetrators while leaving the structure intact. Their discussion therefore becomes a discussion about the future of the community itself. They ask what should happen to boys, at what point boys become men capable of violence, and how cycles of abuse can be interrupted. This becomes one of the film’s most important contributions to peacebuilding discourse. Peace is not merely about protecting present victims. Peace means preventing future generations from repeating the same violence, and, in this context, a gender-based violence.

The religious conflict emerges most clearly in the question of forgiveness. The women have been taught that they must forgive. Yet the film asks whether forgiveness can be genuine if it is imposed. Ona, played by Rooney Mara—who portrayed a similarly spiritual role as Mary Magdalene in the film of the same name—asks: “Is forgiveness that’s forced

upon us true forgiveness?" This becomes one of the film's central theological questions. Another woman asks: "Is there such a thing as forgiveness that is not good?" The response that gradually emerges is: "Perhaps forgiveness can sometimes be confused with permission." These lines clearly distinguish forgiveness from permitting violence. Forced forgiveness is not peace; it is simply violence continued by other means. Genuine forgiveness requires time, safety, truth, and transformation of power relations.

At this point, the film acquires a powerful peacebuilding dimension. The women do not reject forgiveness itself, but they reject forgiveness imposed as obligation. They do not seek revenge, but neither do they accept false peace. Their decision to leave can therefore be understood as an attempt to create positive peace. Negative peace would simply mean the absence of open conflict while violence, fear, and injustice remained intact. Positive peace requires safety, justice, dignity, and restored relationships. The women recognize that such peace is impossible within a community that demands silence and obedience.

The film is also notable because it lacks a single conventional protagonist. Although Ona stands out through her calmness, wisdom, and ability to imagine another world, the film ultimately functions as an ensemble narrative. Each woman contributes a different perspective. Salome embodies rage and the instinct to protect her child. Mariche carries the wounds of domestic violence and initially responds aggressively to vulnerability. Agata and Greta bring memory, experience, and wisdom. Ona offers hope, gentleness, and openness toward the future. These differences are not weaknesses, but conditions for authentic collective decision-making. The women do not need to think identically in order to act together.

Ona is especially important for the themes of female religious identity and peacebuilding. She is neither passive nor naïve. She is a dreamer, but her dreaming is not an escape from reality. When she says, "We are women without the voice. We have nothing to return to. Even the animals are safer in their homes than we women are. All we have are our dreams. So of course we are dreamers," she demonstrates that imagination itself can become a form of survival and political thought. She does not seek to destroy the community, but to imagine a new one. In this sense, her character possesses Christ-like qualities. She is calm, compassionate, and willing to understand even those who have gone astray, while simultaneously refusing injustice. Her gentleness is not weakness but strength.

In contrast, characters such as Salome and Mariche demonstrate that anger also has an important role. The film does not condemn female rage. Instead, it portrays it as a legitimate response to violence and as a means of establishing boundaries. Yet the film simultaneously shows that anger alone cannot build a new world. Dialogue, listening, and collective decision-making are equally necessary. This is why the process within the barn is so important. The women do not suppress their differences, but speak them aloud. They argue, interrupt, cry, insult one another, pray, fall silent, and begin again. It is precisely through this process that collective agency emerges. Their strength comes not from sudden unity, but from learning how to make decisions together.

Janzen (2023) describes this process as a form of utopian democracy. This does not mean that conversation is ideal or easy, but rather that the film presents a rare situation in which people genuinely listen to one another and are transformed through dialogue. This is deeply significant for peacebuilding. Peace is not created by suppressing conflict, but by articulating conflict and finding ways of acting that do not reproduce violence. For this reason, the women's departure is not the failure of dialogue, but its result. They leave because conversation has led them to recognize that remaining would not mean peace. Particularly significant is the line: "We want our children to be safe. We want to be steadfast in our faith. And we want to think." This sentence encapsulates the entire ethical framework of the film. The women do not seek domination over men. They seek to

protect children, remain connected to faith, and possess the right to think. It is precisely this right to think that had been nearly unimaginable within their community. Their decision therefore becomes deeply subversive. They are not destroying faith but rejecting a religious system that forbids conscience.

The role of August, the only adult man who remains with the women while the others travel to town, is also important. He is the sole man permitted to be present during the discussions. Yet he does not lead the conversation. He writes it down. His role is service rather than authority. He represents a different model of masculinity: a man who listens, who does not occupy women's space, and who helps without taking power. Hays and Polley (2022) emphasize that this aspect of the film is essential because it suggests that renewed relationships between women and men are impossible without transformation in male identity itself. Men cannot become women's saviors, but they can cease to function as guardians of oppressive systems. Polley further suggests that patriarchy harms men as well as women; men are also victims of a system that distances them from their emotions, intimacy, and capacity for love while indoctrinating them into beliefs about their own superiority.

The narrative outcome of the film is not traditional reconciliation. The men do not repent before the women. The community is not restored. There is no grand forgiveness or conventional happy ending. Instead, the film concludes with departure. Yet this departure is not escape, but a conscious decision to break cycles of violence. The women leave to protect themselves and their children, but also to avoid becoming violent themselves. They choose not revenge, but the creation of a new space.

In this way, the film demonstrates that sometimes the first step toward reconciliation is not staying but distancing oneself from structures that make truth and justice impossible. The ending remains open; there is no final reconciliation or closure. Instead, the film marks the beginning of a journey toward peace, one requiring transformed power relations, recognition of harm, and the creation of space for justice. Within the framework of peacebuilding, *Women Talking* clearly distinguishes between "negative peace"—the mere absence of violence—and "positive peace"—the presence of justice, restored relationships, and social cohesion (Galtung 1969). The women's decision to leave is therefore not simply escape, but a conscious act of creating a new social order. The film suggests that the path toward peace is grounded in self-compassion rather than revenge. Polley implies that genuine peace becomes possible only when marginalized voices are heard, when communities confront their own pain, and when decisions are made collectively through solidarity and faith. *Women Talking* demonstrates that peace cannot exist without the voices of victims. If women are expected to forgive before they have even been heard, then peace is not being built; existing power structures are merely being preserved.

The film therefore sharply distinguishes silence from peace. Silence may resemble peace, but it often conceals violence. True peace begins when women are able to speak about what has happened to them, name evil, and decide for themselves how to move forward. Conversation thus becomes a form of justice.

The film also demonstrates that female agency does not need to be individualistic. In many films, strong women are portrayed as solitary heroines confronting systems alone, as in *Wadjda* or *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya*. Here, however, strength emerges from collectivity. The women need one another. Even when they disagree, they remain in conversation. This collective form of action is especially important for peacebuilding because it suggests that liberation is not only personal autonomy but also the rebuilding of community. The women do not leave individually; they leave together. For this reason, *Women Talking* strongly aligns with the goals of this analysis. Female religious characters here are not passive symbols of suffering, but active agents of moral, spiritual, and social transformation.

They expand the space of female agency by demonstrating that women possess the right to think, speak, decide, and interpret faith for themselves. They challenge gendered religious stereotypes by refusing the idea that obedience to men equals obedience to God. They offer a path toward peace because they reject both revenge and false forgiveness. Their decision is painful, but it is ultimately oriented toward life. Ultimately, *Women Talking* is a film about women who become political, moral, and spiritual subjects through dialogue. Their faith does not disappear but is purified through questions of justice. Their community is not saved, but the possibility of a new community emerges. Their departure is therefore not an ending, but a beginning. In this lies the peacebuilding power of the film: in the conviction that positive peace cannot be built upon the silence of victims, but only upon truth, solidarity, safety, and the courage to imagine a different world.

The female protagonists analyzed in this study can be understood as examples of what Appleby describes as “nonviolent religious militants”. Their religious commitments do not lead them toward withdrawal from religious communities or the rejection of faith traditions. Rather, religion functions as a moral and social resource that enables them to challenge injustice, transform relationships, and contribute to processes of peacebuilding within their communities. Their agency is therefore not expressed through institutional authority or political power but through dialogue, solidarity, nonviolent resistance, and the creation of more inclusive communal practices.

6. Conclusions

One of the key issues emphasized by feminist theories is the historical absence of women’s voices. Despite the rich tradition of women’s religious experiences and writings, these experiences have often been marginalized or silenced. Feminist efforts, both within religion and within film theory, seek to reclaim this unjustly lost space for women’s voices and experiences. Film plays an important role in this process because, as an interdisciplinary medium, it connects art, philosophy, and social discourse while making complex theoretical debates accessible to wider audiences. For this reason, cinema can become a space for critically reflecting on gender, religion, and society but also a space for creating new narratives about women and faith. This paper has explored how contemporary cinema represents believing women and what kinds of roles are assigned to them. The theoretical framework demonstrated that women, whether in religious or secular contexts, have long been represented through the perspective of the male gaze and patriarchal gender stereotypes. They were often reduced to simplified dichotomies such as virgin and temptress, good and bad woman, mother or lover, while simultaneously remaining objects of observation—beautiful and silent figures without real power to act. The second wave of feminism began seriously questioning such representations and emphasized the need for a greater presence of women within the film industry, as well as for more complex female characters who would not merely serve as supporting elements within male-centered stories. Under the influence of feminist film theory and feminist theology, portrayals of believing women gradually began to change. The films analyzed in this paper clearly demonstrate this shift. These works, directed by women filmmakers from different cultural and religious contexts—Saudi Arabia, North Macedonia, and the United States—place at their center women living within Islamic, Orthodox Christian, and Protestant communities. Although they come from very different social environments, their protagonists share similar experiences: beginning from positions of passivity, marginalization, and adaptation to communal rules, they gradually move toward autonomous and conscious forms of action. All of them experience internal and external conflicts connected to patriarchal gender norms, and it is precisely through these conflicts that they discover their own desires, needs, and possibilities for action. This process becomes the path toward their agency. Wadjda, Petrunya, and the women in *Women*

Talking seek freedom, dignity, and the right to self-determination. From passive figures defined by their communities, they gradually become active subjects capable of shaping their own lives. Wadjda pursues a bicycle, Petrunya a cross, and the women in *Women Talking* the possibility of a new home and a different kind of community. These symbols become signs of emancipation, freedom, and new forms of female agency. Importantly, their actions are not destructive. They do not turn to violence, revenge, or domination, but instead rely on persistence, dialogue, solidarity, empathy, and moral integrity. Their struggles are not directed solely toward personal freedom but also toward transforming the communities in which they live.

All three films clearly distinguish between negative and positive peace. Negative peace signifies merely the absence of violence, while positive peace implies more just relationships, equality, dignity, and the possibility of living fully human lives. Wadjda opens space for girls to become equal to boys; *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya* demonstrates that women have the right to participate in religious spaces from which they have historically been excluded; and the women in *Women Talking* attempt to create a new community grounded in safety, equality, and mutual care. Their actions are therefore not merely individual, but socially transformative.

It is particularly important to emphasize that the protagonists of these films do not resolve conflicts through patterns of domination, revenge, or destruction that are often characteristic of classical cinematic narratives. Their strategies are based instead on nonviolence, dialogue, mutual listening, emotional honesty, solidarity, and moral perseverance. Wadjda does not confront oppression through open aggression but through quiet and persistent insistence on her right to freedom. Petrunya does not answer humiliation with violence, but with dignified resistance and refusal to accept an imposed role. The women in *Women Talking* attempt to resolve conflict through collective reflection, consensus, and the creation of a safe space for future generations.

It is precisely within these forms of action that the transformative potential of female agency becomes visible—an agency based not on power *over* others, but on power *with* others and on the transformation of relationships and communities. By connecting film with feminist peacebuilding, this paper suggests that contemporary cinema—especially films created by women directors—has the potential to present alternative models of action. Instead of spectacular narratives of violence, these films emphasize the everyday, relational, and ethical dimensions of peace: care, solidarity, nonviolent resistance, and the transformation of community. In this way, film becomes not only a reflection of social conflicts but also a space in which alternative feminist visions of peacebuilding can be imagined and articulated.

It is also important to note that faith in these films is not represented primarily as formal or institutional religiosity. Petrunya, for example, is not portrayed as conventionally religious, yet her belief in dignity, justice, and nonviolence deeply connects her with Christian values. She refuses to respond with violence, endures humiliation with dignity, and ultimately gives the cross back to those who condemned her, thereby acquiring almost Christ-like characteristics. Similarly, Wadjda does not reject Islam, but rather questions interpretations that deny girls freedom and dignity. The women in *Women Talking* likewise do not abandon faith itself but instead seek ways of living it outside violent and oppressive structures. In all these cases, religion is not abandoned but reinterpreted from within.

The films analyzed in this paper also demonstrate a clear departure from traditional gender stereotypes and the logic of the male gaze. Female characters are neither sexualized nor reduced to objects of male observation. The directors critique misogyny, sexism, and social systems that value women primarily according to physical appearance or obedience to men. This is especially visible in *God Exists, Her Name Is Petrunya*, where society rejects

the protagonist because of her appearance, while the film itself refuses to present her body as an object of erotic spectacle. In *Wadjda*, the mother gradually realizes that her appearance cannot save her marriage and redirects her attention from pleasing her husband toward investing in her daughter's freedom. In *Women Talking*, sexual violence is not sensationalized; instead, the focus remains on conversation, solidarity, and collective decision-making.

Contemporary films with religious themes therefore reveal a significant shift in the representation of women. At their center are protagonists who, through their own actions, construct different models of community, peace, and religious identity. They are no longer reduced to simplistic oppositions between saint and sinner. Film thus becomes a space in which more just and egalitarian societies can be imagined but also a space of ethical reflection on the ways people live together. As Gordon Lynch suggests, cinematic narratives can offer idealized models for resolving human dilemmas and portrayals of lives grounded in virtue, making them important resources for reflecting on our own ethical choices (Lynch 2005, p. 31).

Although film can divide audiences, it simultaneously possesses a powerful potential to connect people through shared emotional experiences. Films can communicate values such as hope, forgiveness, courage, and justice, while encouraging viewers to reflect on possibilities for social change. As Hoi F. Cheu writes, “stories are an agent of change” (Cheu 2007, p. 2). For this reason, contemporary films about believing women are important not only as representations of religion or gender, but also as spaces for imagining different worlds—worlds in which women possess the right to voice, agency, and their own interpretation of faith.

Beyond its contribution to film and gender studies, this analysis also carries specific implications for religious studies. By foregrounding believing women as active theological and moral agents rather than as passive objects within male-centered religious narratives, the study empirically illustrates and extends feminist theological claims—such as Ruether's critique of patriarchal religious structures and Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of a “discipleship of equals”—within a contemporary, transnational corpus. The comparative reading of Islamic, Orthodox Christian, and Protestant Mennonite contexts further demonstrates that women's negotiation of faith through nonviolence, dialogue, and reinterpretation from within is not confined to a single religious tradition but constitutes a broader pattern relevant to comparative religious studies. In this way, the paper also reaffirms the value of cinema as a legitimate site of theological and religious reflection—a *locus theologicus* in which lived, everyday religiosity, rather than institutional doctrine alone, can be studied and understood.

It should be acknowledged that the analysis of only three films constitutes a limitation of this study. Given its qualitative, case-study design, the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the full range of cinematic representations of believing women across world cinema and religious traditions. The three films were instead selected purposively, for their capacity to illuminate recurring patterns of female religious agency across three distinct traditions—Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestant Mennonite faith—rather than to offer an exhaustive or representative survey of the genre.

This study also points to the need for further research on the relationship between religion, female agency, and peacebuilding in contemporary cinema. Future studies could explore a broader corpus of films and religious traditions or examine how cinematic representations of believing women contribute to contemporary understandings of religious identity, conflict transformation, and social change. Contemporary cinema directed by women increasingly offers alternative imaginaries of believing women as active participants in processes of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Future research may

therefore benefit from paying greater attention to religious women not only as subjects of representation but also as moral and religious agents whose faith informs their engagement with questions of justice, solidarity, and social change.

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Note

- ¹ Toews frames her novel as both a fictional response to these real-life events and an act of female imagination—a phrase that deliberately reclaims the language used by the colony’s men to dismiss the women’s accounts of sexual assault as “wild female imagination”. Importantly, the collective deliberation that structures the narrative never actually took place but was imagined by the author as a means of granting voice and agency to women whose experiences were largely silenced and whose words were never recorded. The adaptation therefore does not seek documentary accuracy; rather, its fictional nature enables a powerful representation of female voice, moral agency, and collective decision-making, themes that are central to the present analysis.

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