

## FILM REVIEW:

### *CONCLAVE* (2024)<sup>1</sup>

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Berger, Edward, director. *Conclave*. Focus Features, 2024.

Edward Berger's *Conclave* (2024), an adaptation of Robert Harris's novel, deploys the political thriller form to question several notions of the modern Catholic Church, particularly the socio-political architectures. While the film's narrative ostensibly revolves around the ceremonial election of a new pope—an event that holds considerable significance among Christians around the world—Berger is primarily concerned with the underlying ideological structures—colonial, patriarchal, and theological—that shape institutional decision-making. Through ascetic visual language, carefully modulated performances, and a dramaturgy grounded in silence and ritual, the film stages the conclave not as a sacralised moment of divine discernment, but as a crucible where rivalling logics of power, exclusion, and identity collide.

The film's aesthetic fabric is intricately woven through a disciplined minimalism. In fact, cinematographer Stéphane Fontaine uses shadow-heavy lighting to emphasise the interplay between the light and darkness. He also makes use of a narrow depth of field and the architectural confinement of the Vatican to situate the characters within a claustrophobic political arena. This emphasis on enclosure, spatial, ideological, and psychological, reflects the conclave as an apparatus of control rather than a site of religious transcendence. Echoing the documentary sensibility of Savannah Leaf's *Earth Mama*, Berger utilises slow yet deliberate close-ups and extended silences to reveal the emotional and political tensions that lie beneath ecclesiastical authority. In these

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moments, the Church appears less as a unified theological system than as a fragmented institution negotiating its own instability.

One of the film's most incisive interventions concerns the Church's entanglement with race and coloniality. During a discussion of African candidates for the papacy, Cardinal Goffredo deploys coded and inherently racist rhetoric that reflects long-standing colonial hierarchies within global Catholicism (00:25:29). His remarks implicitly downgrade African ecclesiastical leadership as less legitimate or less "ready." As he speaks about the African candidates, we are reminded of the colonial invention of the binary "us versus them." This scene showcases a Eurocentric imagination of spiritual authority is reinscribed. This moment crystallizes the persistence of colonial thinking within Vatican governance, where demographic realities—Catholicism's growth in sub-Saharan Africa—collide with a historical reluctance to cede institutional power. Scholars such as Walter Mignolo in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011) have framed this dynamic as the Church's "colonial difference," in which non-Western Catholic identities are welcomed symbolically but marginalized structurally. Berger refrains from editorializing; instead, he lets the racialized undertones of the dialogue expose the institution's internal fault lines.

The film also foregrounds the conclave as a site of conflict rather than communion. A Cardinal Bellini bluntly asserts, "It is a war" (00:52:47), stripping away any pretence of unified spiritual discernment. This moment shifts the film's orientation: the conclave emerges as an arena where competing theological visions, political allegiances, and personal ambitions clash for the sake of supremacy. Berger aligns this struggle with broader critiques of institutional religion as a locus of power rather than service. The remark thus becomes an interpretive key: instead of depicting the conclave as a process through which divine will manifests, *Conclave* frames it as a battlefield governed by strategic manoeuvrings, ideological combat, and geopolitical anxieties.

This critique reaches a pointed articulation when Cardinal Lawrence laments, "I thought we were here to serve God" (01:25:14) in reference to the increasingly visible institutional self-interest shaping the proceedings. This line functions as the film's moral fulcrum. It foregrounds the disjunction between the Church's professed mission of pastoral service and the political imperatives dominating the conclave. Berger situates this tension within the broader crisis of institutional legitimacy confronting contemporary Catholicism: declining trust, unresolved historical abuses, and theological divisions. The

film therefore could be situated within an established discourse on ecclesiastical self-critique.

Berger's most forceful intervention on gender and voice occurs when a nun is briefly permitted to testify before the cardinals. She recounts how she and other sisters have been expected to remain "invisible," despite possessing "eyes and mouths to attest to what is true" (01:28:30). This testimony deconstructs the gendered economy of silence that has long structured Catholic institutional life. Her insistence on voice recalls feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's claim that Christian institutions have depended on women's labour while suppressing their authority. Although the nun's presence is fleeting, it destabilizes the conclave's masculine homogeneity and exposes a system predicated on the simultaneous reliance upon and erasure of women. The film refuses to frame this as an isolated grievance; instead, it reveals the structural exclusion that underpins the Church's governance.

Religious othering and geopolitical antagonisms are foregrounded where Cardinal Goffredo, after the bombing, refers to Muslims as "animals" and insists that conflict with Islam must be conducted "in a religious war" (01:39:00). Berger presents this rhetoric not as odd but as symptomatic of a broader xenopolitical logic embedded in certain Vatican factions. The cardinal's perspective exemplifies how some Church leaders conflate pastoral mission with civilizational combat. This moment resonates with Talal Asad's critique of "religious boundary-making," where institutions define themselves through opposition to imagined external threats. Berger uses this brief but disturbing scene to illustrate how Islamophobia and global geopolitics among many other things shape the conclave's ideological terrain, which, in turn, reveals an institution whose moral discourse often coexists with exclusionary and violent imaginaries.

The film's final act centres on the unexpected election of cardinal Vicent, whose intersex embodiment—revealed discreetly and never sensationalized—serves as an allegorical pivot. His acceptance of his own corporeality stands in contrast to the Church's long-standing fixation on bodily normativity, gender binaries, and reproductive ethics. Berger presents this revelation with a calm subtlety that allows its symbolic significance to unfold naturally. The image of a physically nonconforming body occupying the pinnacle of a historically patriarchal and doctrinally rigid institution introduces a powerful dissonance against the often-perceived uniformity and conservatism that define its public image. It suggests both the possibility of institutional transformation and the

contradictions inherent in an organization whose public moral teachings have often stigmatises bodily difference. This intersex embodiment becomes a hermeneutic lens through which the film critiques the Church's uneasy relationship with sexuality, identity, and corporeal diversity. Despite these rich thematic explorations, *Conclave* maintains the formal seriousness that characterizes Berger's filmmaking. Much of the film's power derives from its sound design, which emphasizes ambient silence, the rustle of garments, and the reverberation of footsteps through echoing halls. This sonic minimalism does not merely enhance atmosphere; it foregrounds the institutional emptiness and moral ambiguity that the film interrogates and mirrors. Hence, silence becomes a structural metaphor.

Ultimately, *Conclave* is a rigorously constructed examination of an institution grappling with its own contradictions. By highlighting the themes of coloniality, gendered invisibility, racial exclusion, xenopolitical aggression, and corporeal normativity, Berger situates the Vatican not as a timeless spiritual authority but as a contested political space structured by historical and contemporary biases. The film's concluding gesture—an intersex pope ascending to the throne—opens a paradoxical horizon: one that gestures toward transformation while exposing the fragility and incoherence of the institution's moral architecture. *Conclave* thus stands not just as a testimony to the greatness of the electoral procedures of the pope in the Vatican but also and more importantly as a compelling contribution to contemporary cinema's ongoing interrogation of faith, power, and institutional ethics.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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