The Apostate

To lapse or convert are the most recognized means of withdrawing from one’s religious affiliation. For Catholics especially, a more formal option has been apostasizing, denial of what some at adulthood consider an involuntary initiation via baptism that has been documented and filed that they would desire to rescind. The penalty is an indelible “stain of apostasy”, according to Revelations, the mark of the beast.

A movement is under way in countries like Spain, where The Apostate is set, seeking, let’s call it a “de-baptism.” A major problem here is that both the baptism and the record are thought by purist clergy to be inviolable. How can one undermine, or at least go around, dogma? The solution in this film, co-written by Spanish actor Alvaro Ogalla, who portrays smart but low-energy Gonzalo “Gonza” Tamayo, and talented director Federico Veiroj--a Jew from Uruguay in case it matters to anyone—is to proceed the way of the ancients: a formal request to the Church to essentially eradicate his Catholic existence.

All of Veiroj’s films deal with entrapment in a metaphoric prison, seeking a remedy for his protagonists to avoid being defined by an institution or a set of beliefs. Most personal are the rites of Jewish coming-of-age in Montevideo in Acne; and a world limited by the sole vantage point of cinema in A Useful Life, drawn from his experience as a programmer in that city’s cinematheque. But even in the Catholo-centric The Apostate, his protagonist feels besieged in a milieu of intellectual discourse that is terrain not far from his own cerebral makeup.

Religion is not the only object of apostasy. It can be broader, a cutting of ties with, say, a political party. In one of film’s many dream sequences, a group of twentysomething men express the desire to apostasize both the church, eliminating its hold on adherents, and, in the same breath, the secular tyranny of political regimes. The irony of Tamayo’s strict adherence to centuries-old protocol lies in the fact that it is, as his mother claims with fairly accurate perception of her son, a “whim.” He is a rebel so without a cause that he has grabbed onto this one, perhaps because the procedure is laid out enough that he need not labor to figure out what other approaches may or may not pan out. It’s a case of structure at the service of the unstructured. He has convinced himself that he is persecuted by a non-consensual relationship with the church.

Is there a less severe path toward apostasy for Tamayo? The process, which is for him black-and-white, is clarification hell, in which paranoia infuses his fantasies, more nightmare than dream. Yet here is another example of irony: Even when apostasizing comes off here as less straitjacketed, more free-flowing, more natural—when bureaucracy and dogma are diminished, and an elliptical structure overrides one that is linear, that would lead to a point distant from where the challenge begins--it still manages to feel guided by a higher presence. An alter boy keeping his vow of silence is a mute key to a brilliantly executed resolution.

This relatively undeveloped, immature approach to a social role is a flimsy surrogate for freedom in the larger sense, easily explained, in large part, by his state: He is stalled in childhood. Memories of his adolescence surface and symbiotically coexist with the lost, unemployed, failing student of the present. It is a phase that keeps threatening to bud into an adult sensibility. From that dissonance emerges the film’s dramatic tension.

Though half-alive in some ways, Tamayo is complicated. As a child, he was pampered. Boredom is, and will remain, his biggest problem. Instead of compensating like he will later on when he apostasizes and digs up trouble, in his youth he bullied. He says that he feels ennui from the bit of work he does, creating and delivering cryptic invoices for his father—himself rather cryptic. Yet he finds comfort in memories of childhood. He does not want to relinquish it and the little pleasures it offers, like going woman to woman for sex. At the same time, he has a superiority complex. His professor accuses him of hubris grounded in ignorance.

What could move him to a more adult phase is a new dual relationship, with the cute neighbor, Antonio (Kaiet Rodriguez), whom he tutors, and the boy’s beautiful single mother, the kind, level-headed Maite (Barbara Lennie). If he becomes more involved in the child’s life, that would take him out of the quagmire he is stuck in; he would grow up. And if he becomes more involved with the mom, he could depart from the unevolved pattern of relating to women he has done to death. I mean, his married cousin?

He appears lost on both the spiritual and intellectual planes. Recuring theological discussions with Bishop Jorge (Juan Calot CK) and some cerebral sparring with the Professor carry equal weight; the sacred and profane are not separate. Veiroj undercuts all of it, much of the verbiage accompanied by surreal, even vulgar fantasy scenes. An orgy of nude couples, the males erect or screwing or both, is matched only by an absurdist sequence on a bus in which a much older woman channels her attraction to the curly-headed young man into a hand, then a bulge rub, followed by his reciprocation, lips to breast, in full sight of the passengers. All of this while the bishop quotes St. Ignatius and St. Augustine, casting them and their words of wisdom in a heretofore sacrosanct light.

It’s funny. So are such incongruities as nuns in full garb working the computers. The writers do not want any of this to be taken too seriously. To make sure it is not, and to decimate any sense of consistency that would require, Veiroj creates an eclectic soundtrack out of Prokofiev, Spanish movie scores from the mid-twentieth century, Flamenco guitar and song, and Basque post-punk. He uses counterpoint to good effect for the music and the narrative.

Inconsistency does not mean discontinuity. The glue that holds the film together is a Tamayo’s voice-over, from beginning to end, reading from a letter he has composed for his old friend Javi, who no longer lives in Madrid. This could be a cheap way of connecting the dots, especially when fantasy and reality collide, but it works, mainly on account of scenes revising visual continuity, and loads of brilliant sound bridges. A shot of Tamayo listening to music in headsets tracks down his pants along an electric cord to his teen incarnation, from the bully years. The film creates mobility within stasis, and that keeps the narrative going—even during scenes not really necessary (one in a café, another in a bookstore) but which add texture to the proceedings. And, it should be noted, aid Veiroj in his trademark connection of characters to the spaces and structures around them.

The subject of apostasy suggests melancholy. Sly, sometimes twisted comedy and creative, no-frills execution pull The Apostate out of the darkness and into a joyful light.