

Analysis: ‘Gravity’ and unanswered questions of unbelief

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DALLAS (RNS)—Reviews of the new hit movie [Gravity](#) note it’s an unusually fine science fiction film. What they don’t mention is that the main character represents an increasingly common theme in American religion—the spiritual “none of the above.”

Yes, the special effects are splendid. And I’ll take the word of astronauts who say the visuals capture amazingly well what it’s like to work in the microgravity of near-Earth orbit.

But there are moments where spiritual and philosophical themes take center stage.



An accident in space brings spiritual and philosophical themes to center stage. (Photo courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)(Spoiler alert: If you really want to know nothing

about the movie, see it first.)

There's precious little dialogue in this relatively short film devoted to anything but technical details. So it's perhaps a bit surprising that a significant chunk of it is about faith—or the lack thereof. Ryan Stone, a researcher-turned-newbie astronaut played by Sandra Bullock, is eventually alone and probably facing imminent death, stuck in a damaged tin can zipping through shrapnel-loaded airless space.

'No one will pray for my soul'

So she starts a monologue. "No one will mourn for me," she muses. "No one will pray for my soul. ... I've never prayed. ... Nobody has taught me how. ..."

But she sort of prays through action. Stone is one Right Stuff space jockey once the early panic wears off. And then she sort of gives up. And in a way, the answer to her prayers shows up in the person of the experienced astronaut played by George Clooney—sort of.



George Clooney as Matt Kowalski in Warner Bros. Pictures' dramatic thriller "GRAVITY." (RNS Photo courtesy Warner Bros.)(As a friend of mine told me: "I mean, he's my answered prayer, but seriously?")

Central questions of existence are raised: “What’s the point of going on? What’s the point of living?”

Why, indeed? Stone, we’ve learned, has been emotionally adrift since her 4-year-old daughter died in an accidental fall. But somehow, somewhere, she comes up with an answer that she doesn’t monologue to those existential questions. She does talk about her daughter as an angel and asks the spirit of one of the characters who hadn’t made it to give the kid’s spirit a hug.

And when she finally ends up safely—we assume—on a beach somewhere on Earth, she grabs a handful of sand and murmurs, “Thank you.”

But who is she talking to?

The ‘Nones’

And that takes us to the “nones,” the religiously unaffiliated who make up one in five Americans these days. If they’d all sign up on a list, only the Catholic Church could claim more members in the United States. The whole point of being unaffiliated, of course, is that they don’t want to sign on to any constraints. When asked to identify their faith on a list, they’ll choose “none of the above.”



Sandra Bullock portrays

Ryan Stone in "GRAVITY." (RNS Photo courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures) But there's pretty good survey evidence most of the nones, like Sandra Bullock's Dr. Ryan, aren't "nothings." Some embrace the title "spiritual but not religious," and even some who say they're atheists retain some religionish trappings.

A 2008 [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) report found about half the unaffiliated surveyed said they believed in some kind of life after death—including 18 percent of the atheists and 35 percent of agnostics. About 40 percent of the unaffiliated believe in heaven—including 12 percent of the atheists and 18 percent of agnostics. And on the big question, only 30 percent of the unaffiliated said they were pretty sure there was no God.

As for prayer, the issue raised by the fictional Dr. Stone? Almost half the unaffiliated said they pray at least occasionally. And while this survey didn't probe it, I'll bet the likelihood of interest in prayer goes up when confronted with imminent death.

The few details we get about Bullock's character don't suggest an open hostility toward religion. Just a lack of contact—and a personal tragedy of the sort that pushes even some of the devout into doubt.

So where does she find the spiritual strength and internal fortitude to persevere in the face of overwhelming odds? Maybe the same place that so many other Americans are looking these days: To overcome her peril in the sky above, Dr. Stone turned to "none of the above."