

GOLDEN GIRLS FILM

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WEGA FILM

WHAT HAPPENS IF **WOMEN** TAKE OVER **RELIGIONS**  
INSTEAD OF FIGHTING THEM?  
RADICAL FEMINIST **INNA SHEVCHENKO** (FEMEN) LEADS A  
GROUNDBREAKING JOURNEY INTO THE AGE-OLD  
CONFLICT BETWEEN RELIGION AND WOMEN.

# GIRLS & GODS

A FILM BY  
**ARASH T. RIAHI & VERENA SOLTIZ**



austrian  
film institute **OFI**

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# LOGLINE

In a groundbreaking personal journey, Inna Shevchenko meets extraordinary, inspiring women, some are fighting against religion, others defend religion, and surprisingly many, who started to reform religion. They all are united by one belief: Women are magnificent. No god - neither in heaven nor on earth - may deprive them of their rights or subordinate them to men.

# SYNOPSIS

Can feminism and religion coexist? Girls & Gods is a fearless journey spearheaded by Inna Shevchenko – the project’s author and initiator – to explore this very question. Once renowned for leading FEMEN’s topless protests against patriarchal power structures, Shevchenko now trades protest for dialogue, engaging priests, imams, rabbis, theologians, and fellow activists in candid conversations. Together, they confront the divide between women’s rights and religious tradition, asking if age-old faiths can embrace gender equality and whether feminism can find a place within sacred halls.

Directed by Arash T. Riahi and Verena Soltiz, Girls & Gods is more than a visually striking film– it is an artfully crafted narrative that challenges long-standing traditions and hierarchies. The directors weave a compelling and provocative journey, inviting the audience to reimagine sacred iconography through a feminist lens and transform symbols of faith into powerful visions of female empowerment. The result is an accessible yet provocative documentary that invites viewers to witness a transformation—one that could reshape the relationship between faith and feminism.

# TECHNICAL DATA

Duration: 104 min

Shooting Format: various, mainly 2K

Screening Format: DCP 2K, DCI flat, 5.1

Aspect/Ratio: 1.85:1

Pictures / Sec: 24fps

Colour: Colour

Sound Format: 5.1

# TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWUk8V4rEuc>



GIRLS & GODS Press Kit

„MONSTRAMUS - wir zeigen“  
by Ina Loitzl im MMKK

# INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR INNA SHEVCHENKO AND DIRECTORS ARASH T. RIAHI & VERENA SOLTIZ, BY KARIN SCHIEFER (AUSTRIAN FILM COMMISSION)

***Inna, you were at the starting point of the film project, GIRLS & GODS. You have always clearly identified yourself as "Girl vs God" underlining your thesis that Religion and Feminism are incompatible. Is it over-interpretating or does this small shift from "vs" to "&" capture the fundamental idea of this film?***

INNA SHEVCHENKO: You're reading the title exactly as it was meant. The initial idea is deeply rooted in my long-standing activism—an activism that has always defied power structures that push women back. I define myself as a rebellious, feminist atheist. But choosing film as the medium came from a need to go beyond slogans, beyond easy answers. After years of facing the world with very defined statements, I reached a point where I felt I couldn't go further without asking deeper questions. This film, with all its conversations, is not a reflection on my activism—it is the evolution of it.

That's why it's not Girls vs. God, but GIRLS & GODS. The fundamental idea was to

go in-depth, to explore the complex relationship between historic antagonists—free women and the God of organized religions. The film also reveals the thin line between devotion and defiance. Throughout this journey, I discovered how small the step can be between dedicating oneself to something vast and unquestionable—and beginning to challenge it, sometimes while remaining within its structure. We called the film GIRLS & GODS because it was never meant to impose a clear set of answers or beliefs. It embraces complexity, even contradictions. And that's what makes real discussion possible. From the beginning, we called GIRLS & GODS a debate-film—not a film that provides answers, but one that forces us to ask the right questions.

***Verena and Arash , you are the two directors of GIRLS & GODS. How did you come together as a team of three? Who contributed what input?***

ARASH T. RIAHI: I was involved from the very beginning and encouraged Inna to explore it. Religion has always influenced my life from childhood on. We had

to flee from Iran due to an Islamic government, we lost several family members because they were not believers, on the other hand there are my grand-parents who are believers and who'd never harm anybody. When I met them in Saudi Arabia for my documentary Exile Family Movie in 2005 they said, "If we had real Islam you wouldn't have had to flee." Very often I heard the expression "real Islam". What does that mean? Everybody think to have the right of interpretation. If someone like Inna, who had done so much radical protest and radical feminist actions reaches out a hand to meet progressive elements inside those religions, I thought that's what we need in our current situation. We have to look at the world, not only with a utopian vision. We have to focus on what kind of fight is realistic. 95% of people are non-violent believers, they just want to have their religion. We said, "Let's make the women visible who try to change the systems from inside. I've been knowing and working with Verena Soltiz for twenty years. We appreciate her freshness, her visual approach, her input to the whole project. A femal-driven project needed to be balanced genderwise and it was obvious for us to ask Verena ...

VERENA SOLTIZ:... and we're still friends after all the many debates we had. They were totally worth it. It was a very inspiring and intense collaborative work.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: I must say, I always left the fighting to the directors (laughs).

Artistic decisions were their prerogative. Even on an artistic level, this was always a debate-film. As the writer of the documentary concept, my role wasn't just about shaping the narrative or structuring the film dramaturgically—it was about full immersion. I had to step inside the debates, not just as an observer but as a participant. To challenge, to provoke, to carry the questions I have always carried—and to confront the answers we encountered along the way.

The ending was the result of a truly collective process between the three of us. This film doesn't hand an easy victory to any side—because it was never about winning. We knew we were working with a controversial and sensitive subject. I came in with my narrative, I stand by it, and I fight for it—but from the beginning, we committed to the premise that no single narrative would dominate. That openness extended even into the editing process—every decision was part of the debate. This film, from start to finish, was built as a conversation.

***One of the fundamental visual elements of this film is the presence of art: sculpture, caricature, photography, body art, murals with feminist themes, literature, music... You use a very wide range of artistic expression. Why did you choose art as a key vector in engaging with this topic?***

INNA SHEVCHENKO: This was Verena's contribution.

VERENA SOLTIZ: There is a lot of talking with very outspoken people in our film. One of our aims was to give a voice to persons who normally don't get one in movies. I thought that "visual opinions" expressed by works of art also matter, and sometimes touch the heart even more. We wanted to give the stage to poets, musicians, graffiti artists etc. who contribute to the discussion in their way, and we also searched for a balance. It was easier to find artists in opposition to religious dogmas, but we also find some who are in favor. At every location we went for shooting we searched for art that contributed to the topic. Every piece of art has its own little story.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: Turning to art felt natural—it's deeply rooted in political activism. I come from a culture, where activism isn't just about words, but about performance, disruption, and symbolism. Those who challenge rigid systems of control must be inventive—because often, creativity is the only way to voice dissent when direct protest is silenced. Art offers space to say what needs to be said, in ways that can't be easily censored. Art stands in direct opposition to propaganda. Propaganda imposes certainty—art provokes questions. It doesn't dictate answers; it invites people to search for their own. That was central to this film. And beyond that, it was about the artists themselves. While we spoke at conferences, we also met incredible artists who were using their work as a form

of resistance. Their presence in the film wasn't just intentional—it was essential.

ARASH T. RIAHI: I stated a parallelism between the women who try to reform the religious institutions from inside and those who are openly against it. I see the same parallelism in art. Religions always were in a dialog with art. You can find beautiful paintings in churches etc., at the same time artists were the enemy of the church, of religion. Think of the members of Charlie Hebdo who were killed for their artistic work. This shows the power of art, that's why art had to be part of the film. We want to raise awareness on so many little things carrying a message out there, when you walk through the streets.

***Pieces of art allow to compress contradictions within one single image. I'm thinking of the opening sequence that shows artistically designed vulvas in a church, which implies a progressive and provocative dialog between the church and feminism, the fact that they are exhibited on metal rods nevertheless adds also something violent. What made you choose these images as the opening of GIRLS & GODS?***

VERENA SOLTIZ: It's an installation by the Austrian artist Ina Loitzl. A large tongue is exhibited in Klagenfurt Cathedral, under the guidance of the open-min-



Masih Alinejad und Inna Shevchenko -  
New York

ded priest Peter Allmaier. After the installation, hundreds of people launched an online petition demanding its removal and claiming that the cathedral was being abused by the artwork. The priest rejected the request, as he wanted to emphasize the importance of empowering women within the church. While the installation sparked an international protest, the local community was very supportive. Many women, including elderly women, expressed their admiration and respect for the priest, praising his courage in giving Ina Loitzl such a platform and standing firm against the criticism. Therefore this installation is the great symbol for our film.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: If this opening picture evokes these contradictory feelings, it means that we have made the right choice for the entry scene. I'd like to mention the eye in the center of the exhibition, meaning that we want to open our eyes and we hope that this film is an eye-opener for many people.

***The French cartoonist Coco is the most present artist in the film. Can you talk about her role? Maybe there are some more artists you absolutely wanted to have in your film on top of those you discovered on location while shooting.***

INNA SHEVCHENKO: Everywhere we went, intense research was done. Verena was hunting for art in local museums, searching for what was happening at that very moment. But of course, some artists were essential to this discussion from the start. One of them is Coco. Her presence in this film was not just important—it was necessary. Without her, Girls&Gods would be a different film. Coco's story is a statement in itself. A survivor of the Charlie Hebdo attack, she remained committed to her art, despite everything. And like this film, she brings contradiction into a heavy debate. Her drawings can feel light, innocent, even playful—but they also carry profound weight. Those who can laugh, will laugh. But the message stays. For me, it was impossible to make this film without Charlie Hebdo—just as it was unthinkable to make it without ex-Muslims who left their faith as apostates. This is a story rarely given enough attention. These are people who once deeply believed, but whose decision to leave their communities—out of conscience—often costs them everything.

***The second basic approach consists in going inside religious communities and take very different views, often with members who have critical, sometimes rebellious voices. What was the leading idea in choosing your protagonists?***

INNA SHEVCHENKO: The guiding principle was to make contradictions visible. There is no single religious experience—there is a vast spectrum of beliefs, even within the same faith. We wanted to bring that plurality to the screen. Take the hijab—one of the most controversial topics in feminism today. We have two protagonists who wear it, yet their perspectives could not be more different. And that is valuable. It forces us to step beyond simplistic narratives and see how diverse religious experiences really are. Our main goal was to seek out plural voices and make them coexist within this film. Debates on hijab, on abortion, on anything related to women’s autonomy are happening all the time—but only in closed circles, among those who already agree. This film breaks that pattern. It brings opposing perspectives into the same space and forces them to meet.

VERENA SOLTIZ: I think that Inna is one of the bravest women I ever met. She stands for her own opinion; she is always respectful and she dares to ask questions nobody dares to ask. The strength in this film is Inna herself. GIRLS & GODS encourages to question the things you were told a long time ago and it includes very many surprising points of view with revolutionary answers that might head us to a new future.

ARASH T. RIAHI: In our society we’re stuck with totally polarized views. One is for

it or against it and there’s nothing in between. One of the reasons why we ended up in this situation lies in the weakness of the left to address societal problems out of fear of hurting political correctness. There’s too much fear of harming feelings only on one side. The manipulative mechanisms of social media cause us to remain in our bubble. GIRLS & GODS is also an outbreak out of our own bubble to encounter the other side, to discuss different topics with religious people, to enhance our own thinking and hopefully also their thinking.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: I think the most heated discussion in the film happened with a woman in a mosque. She didn’t move a step from her position during the whole conversation. We absolutely disagreed, but I respect her for the fact that she fought for her vision. And when the camera was off, she said to me, “You have good arguments.” There was a mutual recognition with many of the protagonists. Each of us was a decent defender of their own narrative. None of the protagonists is weaker than the other.

This film goes further than these debates about religion itself, it raises the question: Are the biggest power structures of this world really so immovable as we think? The film shows how many things within these very power structures are moving and how many people want them to move. I hope that people will un-



Pride Parade - London

GIRLS & GODS Press Kit

derstand our potential of changing things in this moment of history in which we think that big power and only guys wearing proper suits decide everything for us. We can see that not only people so radically against power structures like me want change, but that people inside those power structures are doing a lot to move those systems.

***Formally speaking, the film is conceived as a journey through various cities in Europe and the US. Can you tell us about how you built the trajectory of GIRLS & GODS?***

ARASH T. RIAHI: Some of our protagonists were already defined at a very early stage. Since it was a project over a long period of time, reality changed, some personalities became more important, others became less available, so, of course, we had to deal with changing and adapting our lists. We wanted to have people from three categories: people who are against religion, people who are fighting those who are against religion and people who are changing it from inside. The complexity of the journey results from the fact that normally there's a hero that starts from a certain point and who is in the end of the film a different person. One thing was clear: Inna would not become a believer by the end of the film. Dramaturgically speaking we had to transfer our journey to a different level.

VERENA SOLTIZ: Still, I think Inna had her own journey. During the making of the film Inna became a mother which changed her completely. During the edit I tried to carve out her journey, how she comes a little bit into peace with the world even though she remains very strong in her opinions and never give up fighting. Beneath the structure of the film lies Inna's personal journey.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: It's an interesting point that everyone presume that I have to follow the very classical dramaturgy. The film is rooted in a change that happened inside me: my will to go beyond slogans. One comes to terms that you can't change the world with a one-time act or a slogan. It requires non-stop, permanent collective action which only can happen together with those who think differently but share similar needs. Needs of getting rid of control systems, of hierarchies that put women behind. How many religious women who fully dedicated themselves according to the dogma are unhappy with the fact that they can't celebrate their God in the way they wish and feel it. Many of them say "I can't fully enjoy my religion because of discrimination imposed by the scripture". Here's a contact point and you start understanding each other even though you come from an absolutely opposite point of view.

ARASH T. RIAHI: The film is a homage to the huge number of people who oppose the patriarchal, capitalistic representatives of religion, who are very few but

powerful having the dogmas behind them. They have the power and the money to use and exploit women. It's a modern form of slavery and nobody realizes it. This film is for reaching out to each other. As Inna puts it, "Even those who hate me, I somehow think that one day they will be on our side." There's a core message that suggests, "Let's not think that we are so fundamentally different."

***Inna, you're repeatedly on screen—sometimes in agreement with your protagonists, sometimes listening, sometimes questioning, sometimes arguing. These scenes are complemented by visual memories of your dismantling the cross in Kyiv, the terrorist attack in Copenhagen... Does the film also document what it means to be an activist?***

INNA SHEVCHENKO: It was never making another film about me. I'm fully inside this project, precisely because I wanted to step away from telling my story,- which is anyway always twisted by everyone. Here, I wanted to go fully into exchanging opinions and definitely not tell for another time a story, even if from my own angle.

ARASH T. RIAHI: I observed a lot of things happening in the last years. So many people, especially from the media, had their own say about Inna, about Femen. The story was always told in a way that served the interest of their media. It was

very important for us to avoid making a propaganda film for Inna, but on the other hand to let her the floor to tell something without anybody instrumentalizing her. The goal was to make an honest film in which Inna breaks her roles and her image, she shows herself vulnerable, self-critical, she shows the way she has changed in the course of time. It's not a film about Femen either. It's about some of the topics they fought for, but millions of other women also do.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: I'm glad you see that the film also speaks to what it means to be an activist. Coco doesn't say a word, but her presence alone—being part of Charlie Hebdo—says everything about what it means to be a cartoonist who dares to tackle taboo subjects. Nadya Tolokonnikova from Pussy Riot spent three years in a Russian prison and cannot return to her country. Agents from the Islamic Republic attempted to assassinate Masih Alinejad on American soil. Maryam Namazie, an ex-Muslim, lives under constant death threats. The Vatican refuses to recognize female priests as believers. Each protagonist carries a story of what it means to challenge power. The film began as my initiative, but each of these women embodies the same truth: defiance has a cost.

***The film closes on images that allow a positive outlook, by showing that there are ways to free oneself, ways of living one's faith beyond the dogma. How important is this positive energy at the end of the film?***

ARASH T. RIAHI: All my films have to end with hope even though hope is not everything. Hope without action won't change anything. The idea was to show how many great people are doing things so that there is reason to hope. None of our protagonists was sitting at home being depressed. They were full of energy. We were for example able to capture so much energy while shooting at the pride parades in London and Berlin.

***One of the very last images shows people visiting a former sacral building overgrown by nature which gives me the impression that you also convey a possible future "after religion".***

VERENA SOLTIZ: It's an image of hope showing the beautiful architecture of traditional forms taken over by mother nature.

ARASH T. RIAHI: I'd rather opt for the science fiction version. Nature and art go in a peaceful way together, but it's about something that maybe someday we won't need any more. I'd like to recall the very last image showing the sky. There's a possible interpretation that once the institutions have rotten away, there's a path between us and God, if he or she or whatever exists.

INNA SHEVCHENKO: Each of us sees something different in this image, it is meant this way. And I hope the same will be true for the audience. Coco's message to God—'Let's just stay the way we are. I will be a blasphemer, and you will be the perfect subject for my cartoons, since that's all you can be for me'—is one stance. But there are also women in this film who challenge power not by rejecting it, but by taking over the space. The ending is intentionally plural. But if there is one message that unites all these voices, it is this: oppression is outdated. And that is something we stand by, with our different attitudes towards religions, without hesitation.



Inna Shevchenko -  
Conference in Amsterdam

# DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

## ARASH T. RIAHI

born in Iran, moved to Austria in 1982 as the son of political refugees. In 1997 he co-founded the production company Golden Girls Film. Co-president of the Austrian Academy of Film since 2021. His body of work as a director & producer won more than 200 awards and comprises various short and experimental films, documentaries, including 'Exile Family Movie' (Winner of Leipzig Filmfestival) or the cross-media project 'Everyday Rebellion' (CPH:DOX Audience Award). His first fiction film 'For a Moment Freedom' was Austria's candidate for the Academy Awards in 2010. His second fiction film „Where no one knows us“ was Austrias most successfull film in 2020, winning 22 awards.

### FILMS AS DIRECTOR (SELECTION)

DUNKLE WASSER | 2022 | TV-Movie

WHERE NO ONE KNOWS US | 2020 | Feature Film

KINDERS | 2016 | Cinema Documentary

EVERYDAY REBELLION | 2013 | Cinema Documentary

NERVEN BRUCH ZUSAMMEN | 2012 | Cinema Documentary

FOR A MOMENT FREEDOM | 2008 | Feature Film

EXILE FAMILY MOVIE | 2006 | Cinema Documentary

THE SOUVENIRS OF MR. X | 2004 | Cinema Documentary

## VERENA SOLTIZ

worked for the main Austrian TV-channel ORF which led her to work exclusively for Red Bull channel on a variety of documentaries and TV programs. In 2006 she directed a music video for the New York band Nada Surf alongside Kristian Davidek. The video had a strong presence around the world and was screened in festivals like Resfest, hand in hand with work from directors like her admired Michel Gondry. In 2011 she directed a cinema documentary about Thierry Henry.

### FILMS (SELECTION)

#### DOCUMENTARIES

1:1 - THIERRY HENRY | 52min | Golden Girls & Red Bull Media House

MOMENTUM - MARK WEBBER | 25min

MOMENTUM - LILOU | 25min

POINT | 25min

#### TV

RED BULL BC ONE - PARIS | Red Bull Media House | Degn Film

SENDUNG OHNE NAMEN - RAUSCH | ORF & Superfilm | magazine

GLOBAL CULTURE MAG | Red Bull Media House & Kobalt

#### MUSIC VIDEOS

BLANKEST YEAR | Nada Surf,

ES GEHT NICHT | Valerie,

RUNNING IN YOUR MIND | Cardiac Move

#### SHORTFILM

COURAGE | Red Bull Media House | art direction

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### DISTRIBUTOR

Filmladen (Austria)

### WORLD SALES

Cat & Docs

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