

Rita NEHME

Blasphemy or Faith

A Commentary on *The Last Temptation of Christ*

“The Church today depicts a distorted image of Christ,” a viewer of *The Last Temptation of Christ* remarked. “There were times during the film where I sensed this great provocation. I felt like destroying the screen. However, towards the end I realized how much we are being misled by the fundamental teachings and how far we are from the real Christ!” “I did not like the movie at all! It is nothing but a pure mockery of the Christian faith,” another viewer commented.

These remarks were made by two viewers who watched the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* at a conference organized by the Orthodox Youth Movement in Lebanon. It is well-known for the world-wide controversy that it aroused. Is the film a real alteration of Christianity as some have claimed, or is it a representation of faith in a new context? I support the latter.

I have no specific plan to motivate you to watch the film. Although this article will summarize several critiques surrounding it and will tackle several main themes that can be drawn from it. My main objective remains, however, to pinpoint the hazy issues that the fragmented Church has laid before us. The main question remains: does this fragmented, partitioned Church of today resemble, to a great extent, the adulterous woman in *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

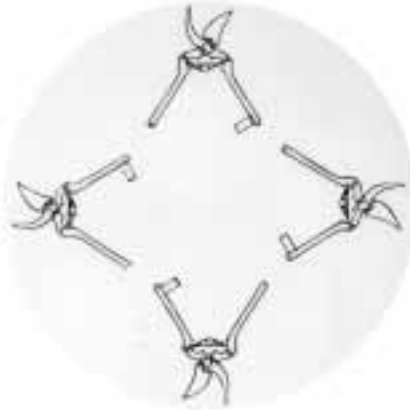
In other words, if the Church is foreseen as the upcoming bride of Jesus, as Saint John points out in the Book of Revelation, “and I, John, saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,” (Rev. 21:2) then what kind of bride is being prepared? This article works through collected reviews to confront this question.

Divinity and Humanity

Martin SCORSESE’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was based on Nikos KAZANTZAKIS’ 1955 novel in which, “Jesus appears as a tormented, fearful young man confused by sex and uncertain of his path in life.”¹ Carol IANNONE remarks that the film was condemned by virtually every Christian denomination, both in the United States and abroad. It was protested, picketed, subject to boycotts and bomb threats, and excluded from titles carried by the movie rental mega-chain, Blockbuster Video.

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¹IANNONE Carol, *Commentary*.



Even today this film is still banned in the Middle East region. When one of the Student Christian Movements decided to show the film during a recent conference on *The Bible in Art and Literature*, organizers took the risk of getting the film then translating it into Arabic.

This movie has indeed overwhelmed critics for many years. In most cases it was condemned as “an international attack on Christianity,” as Joseph REILLY of *Morality in Media* described. The film drew criticism not only for its affront to conventional piety but also for æsthetic reasons as well.

However, the astonishing controversy raging around this film, as Roger EBERT notes, was primarily the work of fundamentalists who have their own view of Christ. They are offended by the film because they feel that the movie questions the divinity of Christ. EBERT adds that most critics, who ironically have not seen the film, have issues with the final passages, during which the Christ is on the Cross, in great pain, and begins to hallucinate and imagine what his life would be like if he had been an ordinary man.

Even though Christianity teaches that Jesus was both God and human, this fact has remained the central mystery of the Christian faith. Christian theology holds that Jesus was fully human: it is as heretical to deny Christ’s humanity as to deny his divinity. In this context, KAZANTZAKIS wrote in the

introduction of his novel, “this book was not written because I wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles; I wanted to show him that he must not fear pain, temptation or death – because all three could be conquered, all three have already been conquered. Christ suffered pain and since then pain has been sanctified. Temptation fought until the very last moment has led him astray, and temptation was defeated. Christ died on the Cross, and that instant death was vanquished forever.”

He added that the book is not a biography. Instead, it is a confession of every human who struggles. Through publication, KAZANTZAKIS fulfills the work of a person who struggled and led a much embittered life. He was certain that every reader would love Christ more than ever before.² On the contrary, those who read the book acted differently. The book has led to KAZANTZAKIS’ excommunication from the Greek Orthodox Church. The novel was placed on the Roman Catholic Index of Forbidden Books, and Protestant fundamentalist groups in the United States sought to have it banned from libraries.

Efforts of the Ordinary Human

As for SCORSESE, if Jesus was so easily, so effortlessly, so unambiguously divine, “then when temptations came to him surely it was so easy to resist them because he was divine.” SCORSESE declared that the teaching of the Catholic schools placed so much emphasis on the divine side that if Jesus would walk into a room, you would know that He is God because He glowed in the dark, instead of being someone “you could sit down with, have dinner and eat with.” Being a holder of this view, SCORSESE just like KAZANTZAKIS was drawn to a portrayal of the human Christ who had to struggle with fleshy desires and limitations. Tom POLLOCK, the producer of *Last Temptation* noted that some Christians “are very uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus is fully human.”

In this regard, IANNONE seconded KAZANTZAKIS’ and SCORSESE’S views by saying that *The Last Temptation of Christ* seemed to her the effort of an ordinary man to understand Christ’s sacrifice from the inside and to experience it as his own. In order to speak to modern people, arriving so late in the ages of belief, Jesus must be made to bear the infirmities of *our* age – the doubt, the angst, the fear and trembling, the existential dread, and yes, even the sexual obsession. Moreover, in an age of complacent materialism Christ must be tempted not only by extraordinary evil but by the possibility of a life of ordinary pleasure as well – not only by lavish indulgence but also by the life of middle-class satisfactions.

She also viewed that the sensational material that was used in the film proved necessary in order to bring out the full idea of what the sacrifice entails and some sense of the need to transcend the simple and humanly understandable desire for self-satisfaction.

Generally, KAZANTZAKIS presented, and SCORSESE followed, a four-fold division of Jesus’ adult life. After a period of morbid doubt and dread, he journeys to an

² KAZANTZAKIS Nikos, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. 1954.

essence-like enclave where he is freed of many of his besetting demons and emerges with enough strength and grace to heal and preach – though a little uncertainly and reluctantly, since each sign of his special nature brings him closer to the awesome realization that he is the anointed one. His message at first is a sweet child compendium of love, peace, acceptance, and forgiveness. However, he is driven to a second stage by the harsh apocalyptic teaching of John the Baptist. He recoils to the desert, is sorely tempted, and emerges with a philosophy of the “ax” – the need to destroy the evil power in the world.

He is for a time swayed into thinking he must be the messiah of the zealots who will transform the earth through revolution. Finally, he realizes, with the help of a vision from the prophet Isaiah, that his mission is to be the sacrifice, the complete and willing sacrifice of self that will “save the world”, “save humanity from its sins” and show the triumph of the spirit over the flesh (or the “transubstantiation” of flesh into spirit, as KAZANTZAKIS might put it). However, at the penultimate moment, Satan (who had promised in the desert that they would meet again) returns in disguise, claiming to be from God, and urging Jesus to relinquish the delusion that he is the Messiah, leave the Cross, and live a normal life instead.

In his turn Steven D. GREYDANUS highlighted the art in making the movie. He said in this regard, “a work of art be, on the whole, generally evocative of the truth about its subject.” In other words, the work of art should be reasonably true to that subject, that it not turn the subject into something antithetical to itself. “A movie about the man Jesus may have value if it shows Jesus to be recognizably and authentically human, while at least minimally leaving room for his divine nature, remaining at least compatible with Christian belief in his deity – in a word, while not turning him into an fallible, fallen man, one who could not be God.”

Creativity vs. Corruption

Unlike IANNONE and EBERT, GREYDANUS remarked that *The Last Temptation* is a bad film if it is to be viewed from a religious perspective. He said in this regard, “in short, my conclusion is that the religious critics who think *Last Temptation* a bad film are correct. Does this mean that the fans and film critics who think it a creative masterpiece are wrong? I have made my case for the film’s spiritual bankruptcy, but what about its value as art?”

It is quite true that a film can be morally or spiritually objectionable and still have significant artistic or entertainment value. This is the entire point of GREYDANUS specialized ratings system. As a movie critic, GREYDANUS had grave moral objections to *The Cell*, *American Beauty* and *Being John Malkovich*, but he gave them all high marks for artistic and entertainment value. Whatever other faults these movies may have in his opinion, each of them is in its own way interesting to watch. “Parts of them I might even want to see again,” Greydanus remarked.

Yet, for him at least, *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a complete wash. Not because of a directorial failure on SCORCESE’s part, but simply because no director in the world could possibly make this material into a film worth sitting through for its own sake. GREYDANUS holds that it is possible to prescient from a movie’s offensive use of themes and appreciate its achievements in spite of its moral failings.

However, how it is possible to bracket all the objections that must be raised to all that is anti-Christian in *Last Temptation* and still have something worthwhile left over to appreciate or enjoy? Past a certain point, objectionability obliterates all hope or desire of approaching a work as art or entertainment. “No level of production values or technically proficient filmmaking could make it worthwhile to watch a movie that indulged in child pornography, or that relentlessly celebrated the Holocaust, or that overtly romanticized the degradation and abasement of women. Cross a certain line, and message overwhelms medium, substance overwhelms style, what you have to say drowns out how you might be saying it”, says GREYDANUS.

Although *Last Temptation* goes way over that line and could be both poisonous morally and spiritually, GREYDANUS finds himself reflecting on the significance of the fact that this film represents the collaboration of a writer of Greek Orthodox heritage and a filmmaker of Italian Catholic background. Despite his severe criticism for some parts of the film, GREYDANUS summarizes, “only artists so steeped from childhood in the rich profundity of Christian tradition could possibly create something so profoundly antithetical to that tradition, so deeply heretical and blasphemous. Even a lapsed Protestant could never have made it by an ordinary nonreligious or atheistic filmmaker.

Where are we Heading?

As you have seen, many well-known movie and novel critics held quite different opinions regarding Kazantzakis’ novel or Scorsese’s movie, *The Last Temptation*. Obviously no one could deny the artistic values entailed in both the film and the novel. However, I believe that there are many other points that one can still raise in the same context, especially the issue of the Christ’s humanity. In this regard, as SCORSESE himself noted, the Church rarely puts emphasis on this aspect. I would go further to say that the fragmented Church, through its leaders, presents Christ the way it enjoys. I believe that the extra weight the Church puts on the divinity of Christ is a cheap way of eluding the believers. The only way for church leaders to preserve hegemony is to illustrate an “omnipotent and glowing” Christ instead of a fully human one.

Besides, the concept of marriage (immensely highlighted both by the film and the novel) is not merely a physical or a sensual matter. What is wrong and offending about it is that Christ is marrying an adulterous woman. Marriage itself should not be the disturbing issue here, as I have pointed out earlier in the introduction referring to the Book of Revelation in the Bible. However, I hold that the Church, with its present segmentation, greatly resembles an adulterous woman that knows very well how to torture her husband through her betrayal. Perhaps the most poignant point of closure comes from the inscription on KAZANTZAKIS’ tomb, “I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free.”

Bibliography

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Rita NEHME: Blasfemia o fe.

Un comentario sobre *La última tentación de Cristo*

Este ensayo es un comentario sobre la película “La última tentación de Cristo” de Martin Scorsese. Un largometraje que fue basado en la novela de Nikos Kazantzakis, publicada en 1954. El ensayo recoge una buena cantidad de comentarios referentes a la película, y trata de enfrentar diferentes puntos de vista así como plantear una nueva visión respecto al filme. Por muchos años los críticos han elevado una crítica ácida respecto a “La última tentación”. Sin embargo, pocos la consideran, tal y como lo ha hecho Carol Iannone, como el esfuerzo de un hombre ordinario para entender el sacrificio de Cristo desde adentro, y experimentarla como suya propia. Además de Iannone, Roger Ebert sostiene que los críticos, quienes irónicamente no han visto el filme, se alarman y escandalizan fundamentalmente con los pasajes finales en los que Cristo está en la cruz con gran dolor y comienza a alucinar e imaginar cómo hubiese sido su vida de haber sido un hombre ordinario. Ante esto, estos críticos argumentan que aunque el Cristianismo enseña que Jesús fue tanto Dios como humano, este hecho continúa como el misterio fundamental de la fe cristiana. Por otra parte, críticos como Steven D. Greydanus, rechazan el filme desde la perspectiva religiosa, sin embargo lo aprecian como una obra de arte. De todas formas, “La última tentación” es un filme bastante polémico que abre puertas a infinitos puntos de vista, opiniones y criterios.

Rita NEHME: Blasphème ou foi.

Un commentaire sur *La dernière tentation du Christ*

Cet essai est un commentaire sur le film *La dernière tentation du Christ* de Martin Scorsese, inspiré du roman homonyme de Nikos Kazantzakis publié en 1954. L'article réunit une série de pensées sur le film en abordant divers points de vue et essaye de formuler une nouvelle approche. Pendant des années, les détracteurs du film ont soulevé d'amères critiques à son encontre. Néanmoins, quelques rares personnes, comme Carol Iannone, y ont vu l'effort d'un être humain ordinaire pour comprendre le sacrifice du Christ de l'intérieur et le sentir en personne. Roger Ebert, quant à lui, explique que certains critiques, qui ironiquement n'avaient pas vu le film, ont crié haro sur les scènes finales, dans lesquelles le Christ sur la croix, en proie à des hallucinations provoquées par l'intense douleur, imagine comment aurait été sa vie s'il avait été un être humain ordinaire. Dans ce contexte, les critiques signalaient que, même si le christianisme prêche que le Christ était à la fois Dieu et homme, cet aspect est resté le mystère central de la foi chrétienne. Autres critiques, comme Steven D. Greydanus, ont rejeté le film du point de vue religieux, mais en ont apprécié sa qualité artistique. Dans tous les cas, *La dernière tentation du Christ* reste un film controversé qui ouvre la porte à une infinité d'interprétations.