

The Christology of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*

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Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, was heavily attacked by Christians, Jews and Moslems when it was released in 1988. The most vocal criticisms, of course, focused on the suggestion of Jesus' imagined sexual intercourse with Mary Magdalene in the fantasy sequence at the end of the film. It seems to me to get everything wrong, but the more I see it, the more I find it a complex and intelligent film that should not be ignored. It is magnificently misguided and magnificently made, full of raw energy and consistently gripping and disturbing as Scorsese views Palestine and Jesus through a late twentieth-century American filter. Like most portrayals of Jesus, it tells us more about the interpreter than the *subject* and we cannot deny Martin Scorsese, the lapsed Catholic from Lower East Side Manhattan and his writer, Paul Schrader, the lapsed Dutch Calvinist from Grand Rapids, Michigan, the right to probe our culture through his picture of Jesus.

What did Scorsese think he was doing in adapting Kazantzakis' novel for the screen? Well, he tells us:

I found Kazantzakis' representation of Christ, stressing the human side of his nature without denying that He is God, the most accessible to me. His divine side doesn't fully comprehend what the human side has to do; how He has to transform Himself and eventually become the sacrifice on the cross -- Christ the man only learns about this a little at a time. In the whole first section of the book, He is acting purely on human emotions and human psychology, so He becomes confused and troubled. I thought this neurotic -- even psychotic -- Jesus was not every different from the shifts of mood and psychology that you find glimpses of in the Gospel... Christ says, 'Lucifer's inside me, he's saying I'm not the son of Mary and Joseph, I'm the son of God, I am God'. So He thinks it's the Devil inside him saying this, and He thinks He's the worst sinner in the world. I felt this was something I could relate to: this was a Jesus you could sit down with, have dinner or a drink with... So for me this was a very human Jesus. (D.Thompson & I.Christie, *Scorsese on Scorsese* (Faber, 1989), pp. 116-7)

Over the years I've drifted away from the Church, I'm no longer a practising Catholic.... Kazantzakis took the two natures of Jesus, and Paul Moore, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, explained to me that this was Christologically correct: the debate goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when they discussed how much of Jesus was divine and how much human. I found this an interesting idea, that the human nature of Jesus was fighting him all the way down the line, because it can't conceive of him being God. I thought this would be great drama and force people to take Jesus seriously -- at least to re-evaluate his teachings. (op. cit., p.124)

We should hope that the Episcopal Church in New York is being misinterpreted here, and its bishop doesn't think that a bit of Jesus was divine and another bit human. Scorsese picks up Chalcedon's distinction of two natures in Christ and filters it in two ways.

First of all, he reads it through Kazantzakis' eyes: for the Greek novelist, the Christological mystery of the union of divine and human in Jesus becomes the key to the split in human identity. Kazantzakis portrays Jesus as the prototypical man (the masculine is important

here) whose strength of will in overcoming temptation signals the achievement of human existence at its pitch, the exemplification of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. Kazantzakis also subjects that most Christ-like of saints, Francis of Assisi, to a similar treatment in *The Poor Man of God*. Each of his central fictional characters becomes a cipher for human potential: in an antagonistic world, the 'superman' achieves perfection through his struggle to free his spirit from the depredations of matter and the flesh, from everything that would prevent him defining himself in the solitary exercise of his freedom. A quotation from the novel stands at the beginning of the film:

Every man partakes of the divine nature in both his spirit and his flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for a particular creed: it is universal. The struggle between God and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation. Most often this struggle is unconscious and short-lived. A weak soul does not have the endurance to resist the flesh for very long. It grows heavy, becomes flesh itself and the contest ends. But among responsible men, men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty, the conflict between flesh and spirit breaks out mercilessly and may last until death. (N.Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation* (Faber, 1975), p.7)

For Kazantzakis, the divine in Christ is the paradigm of 'spirit' in all human beings; the human in Christ is the heavy weight against which spirit must struggle and quash because flesh is not that which makes us human but that which prevents us from being human. I'll return later to this form of dualism, but I first want to note the second filter through which Scorsese reads Chalcedon, the archetypes from his other films. Scorsese's Jesus is recognisably in the same personal and psychological mould as the violent and disturbed characters who appear in his other films, such as Jake La Motta, the boxer in *Raging Bull* and Travis Bickle, the psychotic hero of *Taxi Driver*. (You will notice that in the first quotation I gave you, Scorsese speaks of Jesus' human nature as neurotic, even psychotic.)

The second root of Scorsese's portrayal of Jesus is his trilogy of *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980): a trilogy of powerful studies of violence, disordered and dislocated existence, all of them making use of the extraordinary screen presence of Robert de Niro. (If de Niro had played Christ, you would have had the Sermon on the Mount preceded by 'Look at me while I'm talking you, Look at me...') Scorsese's characters in these films are rootless and psychologically unstable, whether it be the anomie which afflicts the lost soul of Travis Bickle, the taxi driver who is driven to a peak of insane violent frustration by the evil and moral corruption he sees in the streets of New York, or the confused violence of Jake la Motta, for whom the boxing ring is the only context in which anything like consistent behaviour occurs, in the experience of inflicting violence or receiving it. What the boxing ring is for La Motta, and what guns are for Travis Bickle, the cross is for Scorsese's Jesus. Jesus is added to the list of cinematic heroes who fulfil their identity through violence.

There is the same psychological typology, except that for Jesus it is not by being an enraged agent of violence, but through the passive experience of violence, that his personality expresses itself. The film is a re-statement of themes, familiar in the Scorsese *oeuvre*, about the relationship of violence and selfhood, within which the features of the historical Jesus are lost. The Mean Streets of Nazareth and Jerusalem may be far from London, but they're not very far from Brooklyn.

I quote from Robert Kolker's analysis of *Taxi Driver*, written before the release of *The Last Temptation*, because I think it can be applied to Scorsese's film about Christ:

The film defines its central character not in terms of social problems... nor by any *a priori* ideas of noble suffering and transcendent madness, but by the ways the character is perceived and perceives himself and his surroundings. He is the climactic *noir* figure, much more isolated and very much madder than his forebears. No cause is given for him, no understanding allowed; he stands formed by his loneliness and trapped by his isolation, his actions and reactions explicable only through those actions and reactions (186). . [it] is the portrait of an obsessive, a passive obsessive, so oppressed by his isolation that when he does act, it is only upon the dark and disconnected impulses triggered by his perceptions. There is... no analysis of, nor reasons, given for his behaviour – none, at least, that can make a great deal of rational sense. (Robert Philip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p.194)

It could well stand as an analysis of Scorsese's Jesus, a passive obsessive driven by an inner compulsion to find his identity through the cross. When we first see him, he is pathologically obsessed with crucifixion, a carpenter who carves crosses on which his fellow Jews will be crucified. 'I make crosses so that God will hate me', he says. Jesus is a severely disturbed individual, under immense internal pressure, a man whose personality is unformed, even dislocated, inarticulate and socially inadequate, in search of something which will give him a sense of identity which he lacks. He is haunted by the emptiness he finds inside himself, and looks towards violence and pain as a way of resolving this unbearable pressure, showing himself in the final assault on the Temple to be unable to give his followers the signal to begin the attack. He is unable to become the agent of violence, but it is only as by becoming the passive object of the violence of others that the emptiness within him will be filled. This may be a divine destiny, but to me it looks more like a masochism in which the personality is raised to a pitch of awareness. The self will be healed only in violence.

Jesus is in search of a redemptive experience which will be efficacious primarily for himself: it is he who needs the crucifixion, in order to resolve the internal dislocations of his personality. He is driven to his death on the cross by the compelling demand within his psyche to find something which will bestow on him a tangible sense of identity. Blood is everywhere: the slaughter of sacrificial animals, the blood-besmirched bodies of crucified zealots. The apple plucked from the tree burst open with blood as he eats it. At the last supper, the wine in the chalice is turned into blood, and even the scene in which Jesus holds his heart in his hand, which could have been a Bunuelesque comment on Catholic spirituality, is a gruesome example of the ravages within Jesus' psyche.

If we take Scorsese at his word, these disturbances are the symptoms of Christ's human nature which is being invaded by a divine nature which it is unable to accept. Divine nature, it seems, presses on him, invades him, creating symptoms of psychosis and disturbance which are removed only after passing through the last temptation, the realisation that suffering is the only way. But I want to ask, 'the only way to what?' The Jesus of Scorsese and Kazantzakis redeems himself from the psychological hell of self-alienation. In both the novel and the film, it is suggested that the loneliness of the human condition and its concomitant anguish can be overcome, neither by opening oneself to God's fulfilling love, nor by the experience of human intimacy but by allowing the human spirit to detach itself from everything that infringes its autonomy. Scorsese's Jesus brings pain upon himself because he cannot know himself satisfactorily in any other way. The New Testament theme of the divine wisdom of the cross and the mysterious necessity that the Son of Man must suffer is replaced by Scorsese's judgement that Jesus' death is required by nothing more than the disturbance within the mind of Jesus.

Here I turn from the psychological aspects of the film back to what Scorsese draws from Kazantzakis. I have pointed to the theme of the supremacy of the will as the locus of human selfhood. It is ironic that when the film was released, many of the protests complained about the sensuality attributed to Jesus. In fact, both the film and the novel present human bodiliness as essentially separable from the human self. They present the 'flesh' as both the vehicle of physical pain necessary for the 'spirit' to reach a full grasp of itself, and as the bond of human solidarity which must be left behind by the strong man. And again, the masculine word is important here. For Kazantzakis, Jesus is an archetype of human identity viewed as exclusively male, and women should have justifiable doubts about how they are meant to fit into this account of existence in which the strength of will of the *Übermensch* is the determinative category of existence.

This Gnostic dualism lies behind the treatment of the last temptation when Christ is led away from the cross by an angelic child and taken to a paradise landscape where Mary Magdalene is dressed for their nuptials. They set up come in a cottage in the woods; then there is a scene of marital intercourse, followed by her pregnancy, in the course of which she dies. The angel comes to the grieving Christ and tells him, 'There is only one woman in the world, one woman with many faces'. The child takes him to Mary of Bethany whom she marries and has children by her. While she is away from the house one day, the angelic child urges him to have sexual relations with her sister Martha.

This seemingly inexhaustible supply of women should be noted for it is a recurrence of an idea propagated by the Gnostics that the women in the Gospel, many of whom are called Mary, are multiple manifestations of a heavenly female principle who are brought into union with Jesus, the heavenly male principle. The individuality of the women of the Gospel is thus undermined: they become ciphers in sexual relation to whom Jesus, and presumably all men, define themselves. And the message is that 'real men' the kind that don't eat quiche and don't have floppy disks, cannot afford to allow themselves to be distracted from their masculine task of being isolated individuals who establish their identity in freedom from everything.

All relations with women are devil-inspired distractions from the task of being a man. It's no accident that the strongest bond in the film is that between Judas and Jesus. The male bond with women -- the dimension of 'flesh' -- is, in Kazantzakis' words, a sign of 'a weak soul', but, again his phrase, 'responsible men, men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty', who struggle to let 'spirit' win through, can have no such bond, because in the end, male human identity is solitary and solipsistic, knowing only itself in splendid isolation. Women don't matter to those 'responsible men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty'.

So in a strange way, although the film was criticised for allowing a dimension of bodily sexual desire to Christ, the underlying message of Scorsese and Kazantzakis is that the body and its desires are irredeemable obstacles to human male wholeness. You don't need, me to draw out how far this is from a Christianity which sees in the enfleshment of the Son of God the deepest mystery of God's love. The Incarnation takes place not in order that the Son of God should reject the body, but in order that, within the structures of human bodiliness, there should occur the physical and sacramental enactment of the 'love which moves the heaven and the other stars'. But that is a mystery beyond the reach of Kazantzakis' Gnostic dualism and Scorsese's pathology of male violence.

Under the guise of giving us a fully human Jesus -- his declared intention -- Scorsese has in fact given us a Jesus who is a very problematic model of human life. The real difficulty with the film, then, is not its Christology -- what it says about divine and human in Christ -- but

more fundamentally what it says about what it means to be a human being. Purporting to offer an accessible and recognisably human Jesus, it cannot see beyond torture and violence as the High Road to human wholeness. It construes the isolated human will, experiencing only itself, as the core of selfhood; and, in spite of its sexual explicitness, it refuses to countenance love as a channel of human fulfilment. Finally, by treating God or the divine as an invasive force that possesses Jesus and turns him into a voluntaristic solipsist, it confirms that most of the problems in Christology come from a bad handling of Chalcedon. As if we needed proof of that.