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## Jesus in Armani

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## Jesus in Armani

### Abstract

*5 Minuti* expresses much of Christian theology in a mere eleven minutes. Barbara is about to jump to her death when she is approached by a handsome young man who turns out to be Jesus. She tells Jesus that she will give him five minutes and in that five minute conversation we discover that Jesus is a being beyond time and place, that Jesus suffered greatly on our behalf, that God is the Creator of the Universe, that faith is important to salvation and love is an overriding good, that we should be humble and that we can have an intimate, personal relationship with the ultimate being in the Universe.

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*5 Minuti* is simply one of the best expressions of Christian theology that I have come across.<sup>1</sup> In a mere eleven minutes this film establishes Jesus as a being beyond time and place, describes the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross, identifies God as the Creator of the Universe, shows the importance of faith in the process of salvation, identifies love as the overriding good, provides an example of humility from which many of the most famous representatives of Christianity could learn a lesson, and promotes a personal relationship with Jesus. Not bad for eleven minutes?

The story begins with Barbara standing on the railing of a bridge that spans one of the canals of Milano, Italy. It is obvious that she is contemplating jumping to her death. But at just this moment, Barbara is approached by a handsome young man dressed in an Armani jacket. He is wearing a dress shirt, but no tie. His shirt is not tucked into his pants and he has a five o'clock shadow. The young man asks Barbara what she is doing on the railing. She tells him to go away and leave her alone. But the young man introduces himself to Barbara: "Jesus! You can call me Jesus." Barbara is incredulous and she tells the young man: "The stage name you've chosen for this prank is not funny at all." Jesus responds by telling Barbara: "It is not that I call myself Jesus. I AM Jesus." At this moment Jesus invites Barbara to have a cup of coffee with him and Barbara tells Jesus that she will give him five

minutes--thus, the title of the film. For the next five minutes or so Barbara and Jesus carry on a conversation, a conversation that reveals much of Christian theology.

I have no idea whether the jacket that Jesus is wearing in the film is Armani, but Armani was the only name that came to mind for Italian men's fashion and it made for an interesting title for this essay. That Jesus is dressed in a jacket without a tie, however, is important to the film. That Jesus is dressed that way indicates that Jesus is not someone in a long white robe and beard with bright blue eyes wandering around the Sea of Galilee in a pair of sandals. The movie, by putting Jesus in Armani, indicates that Jesus is much more than the image with which he is often associated. Jesus is, after all, the Son of God and the Son of God is more than a long-haired Galilean. Because of his dress, we are invited by the film to think of Jesus as a universal and timeless being – the Son of God – rather than a particular iconic image to which we may attach greater significance than is warranted.<sup>2</sup>

Although the movie calls on the viewer to think of Jesus as more than the iconic image, this idea is made much more explicit in the twenty-five minute version of the film. When Jesus identifies himself to Barbara, she says: "You don't look like Jesus to me. I don't see any 'time machine.' I see no camels, no Roman soldiers..." Barbara also says to Jesus: "If you are him...Actually HIM...shouldn't you be at least two thousand years old?" And Jesus tells her: "I've always been portrayed as tall, handsome...blonde and blue yes." But "if I appeared as I am now

in heaven, I think you would be a bit frightened.” At one point Barbara tells Jesus that two minutes have passed and that he has only three of the five minutes she’s offered him left. He says, “Perhaps YOU have only three to go. I don’t have time limits. Not anymore.” And, finally, in the longer version, Jesus tells Barbara: “I can’t show you the holes in my hands... This is not the body I used at the time.”

I think that the idea that Jesus is a timeless being – the Son of God – is more subtle in the short version, but the longer version confirms this description of Jesus through the phrases in the paragraph above. The point of portraying Jesus in this way, however, is to get the viewer to move beyond the iconic image. The result is that the power of God is much greater, infinitely greater than the power of the iconic image or the Biblical image of Jesus. For Christians it is important to understand the vastness and timelessness of God and the movie asks us to do this by looking beyond the icon. Once we look beyond the icon, we find the vast power of God and not merely the power of the moment or the power of a particular icon. At the same time, it is more difficult to conscript the power or sanction of God for one’s own purposes when that power is the vast power of the timeless being than when we turn Jesus into an image of ourselves.

At one point in the second minute, Barbara asks Jesus: "That day on the cross . . . is it all true?" Jesus tells Barbara: "That day in Jerusalem was terrible. What pain! It seemed like it would never end. A soldier even broke his wrist as he

was flogging me." He goes on to say: "But more than the lashes, nails, or the humiliation of hanging in front of everyone like a criminal, I was shattered to see who shouted the insults, lies; who spat upon me, all coming from the very people that I loved so much and continued to love even while they were . . . ." In just these few short sentences the movie identifies the pain, both physical and psychological, that Jesus suffered and thereby the movie identifies the sacrifice that Jesus made on behalf of his people, a sacrifice made even greater by the rejection and denial of the very people upon whose behalf Jesus was making the sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

We discover that God is the Creator of the Universe in a little story that Jesus tells Barbara to divert the conversation from sad topics. In the third minute, Jesus says: "I remember like it was yesterday when my father and I created the world. As we created an animal we thought of the faces children would make seeing it." And, then, Jesus says: "I must say that the hippopotamus has been a big hit." In this very short and gently humorous story the movie establishes a basic element of Christian theology--that God is the Creator of the Universe. It also shows God's love for children--for all of his children.

I think it is important to remind ourselves that God is the Creator of the Universe, as the film does, because as the Creator of the Universe, the creator of everything, much of God is beyond our comprehension, a real mystery. And, it is arrogance on our part to claim to know what the Creator of the Universe is all about.

I think this means that when we claim, for example that "God Hates Fags," or that "God has punished Haiti for abandoning Christianity," we are really creating God in our own image and when we do this we diminish the power, mystery, and awesomeness of God. If God is the Creator of the Universe, as the movie reminds us, then we will have to live with great mystery, a being in many ways beyond our comprehension, and we must avoid using God for our own purposes.

After five minutes have passed, Barbara turns to find Jesus now standing on the railing of the bridge where she had stood earlier. It is obvious that he is prepared to jump. Barbara shouts: "No! Stop. Don't do anything stupid." But Jesus explains: "It's called substitution. I've done it already. Don't worry, it works." "I take on me all the things that you wanted to kill with yourself," he says, "and I kill them with myself." "I don't dislike the idea. Like I said, I did this once already, and if I have to do it again in order to save you, . . . . no problem" "Will I suffer?" Jesus asks. "Maybe. But your life will be saved, purged of sadness, depression, guilt and the rest. You will go back to being the light hearted girl you were." And Jesus makes it clear that Barbara's salvation is a matter of faith, a gift from God, and not something that earned by means of actions. Jesus says: "You only have to believe it's true." And, when Barbara asks Jesus what she is to do, he tells her: "Go and live your life. Your faith has finally saved you." In this brief exchange with Barbara, Jesus reaffirms what is said in Ephesians 2:9,9: "For by grace are ye saved through

faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast."<sup>4</sup>

My colleague, Paul Allen Williams, pointed out that in Christian theology the death and resurrection of Jesus is a singular event. It is not repeated from time to time as the scene mentioned above might suggest. In an interview with the director and screen writer, the filmmakers acknowledged that the death and resurrection of Jesus were indeed a singular event, but they see salvation--what Barbara is experiencing at this point in the film--as a kind of death and resurrection, the death of the old life or the old ways and a birth into a new life (being born again). They intended the scene above to represent that death and rebirth (what is called in the film "substitution") and not to suggest that Jesus is actually dying for the sins of human beings on an individual basis.<sup>5</sup>

The exchange between Jesus and Barbara discussed above, however, is not only about faith, but also about love. Here Jesus is preparing to die again in order to save Barbara. He did it once already, but he is willing to do it again, "No problem." As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)<sup>6</sup> In this Bible passage Jesus indicates the importance of love in the world and in the movie the willingness of Jesus to die again for Barbara brings this importance home to the audience.



When Jesus says he has loved and continues to love those who "shouted insults, lies; who spat upon me . . . ." he is indicating both the love that he has for his children and the importance of love in general. But, there is another moment in the movie that seems to capture the importance of love as well. In the fourth moment, when Barbara is not quite sure that this is really Jesus, Jesus pulls from his pocket a picture of Barbara as a child and he recounts the events surrounding a moment in her life--a moment that only Jesus could know. After recounting the story of Barbara falling in the bathtub at her Aunt Rosa's house and almost losing an eye, Jesus says, referring to the picture he has shown her: "Pardon me, can I have that back? It is precious to me." That the picture is precious stands for how precious Barbara herself is to Jesus and her preciousness is an indication of Jesus' love for her.

One other element of the film that indicates the importance of love is the song that is sung at the end of the film, over the credits. The song, "Just As You Are (Cosi Come Sei)," by Nincini, is a song about God's love for all of his children. One of the lines repeated in the song is: "I, I love you as you are." For those who do not speak Italian, this element of the film might be missed because the song is sung in Italian. But, the song is an essential part of the film and must be included as part of the message of the movie. For those who do not speak Italian, I have included below the lyrics to the song in English.<sup>7</sup>

One of the elements of the film that struck me is the humility of Jesus. I asked Sergio Mascheroni if he intended to show this humility and what in the film was intended to show that humility. He was adamant that he did want Jesus to be a humble figure in the film. After all, it was Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples. (John 13: 1-17, King James Version) The fact that Jesus is not wearing a tie is of special importance here. Mascheroni told me that if one is wearing a tie in Italian culture that it is a sign of work or business. That Jesus is not wearing a tie makes him "approachable" and thereby open to a more intimate relationship than would be the case if it were a business or professional relationship.<sup>8</sup> The casual dress of Jesus is the only feature of the film that Mascheroni mentioned in relationship to humility and it is the only feature that I could identify specifically in relationship to humility. The kindness, gentleness, even tenderness of Jesus as he interacts with Barbara, however, also can be taken as signs of the humility of Jesus. Jesus is never the focus of the stories that he tells Barbara. The focus is always upon her, her pain, and the possibility of her salvation and the return of her happiness. I think that we also can point to things that are not in the film as indications of the humility of Jesus. Jesus could have put himself at the center of the stories he tells, but he does not. Jesus could brag about who he is. But he does not. Jesus could make proclamations about the world. But he does not. Jesus could boast about what he has done. But he does not. Even when Jesus tells the story of

creating the Hippopotamus, he is not boastful, but merely expressing the pleasure he feels at the joy the children experience in seeing the hippopotamus.

There is a sweetness and humbleness in the Jesus of the movie that stands in marked contrast to some of today's most visible representatives of Christianity. Think of the Pope and all of the trappings of the Vatican. Think of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and his love of the national spotlight. Think of Pat Robertson pontificating on the reasons God sent a hurricane to decimate Haiti. Or, think of the cruel exhibitionism of Shirley Phelps-Roper of the Westboro Baptist Church as she goes to the funerals of American service men and women to tell their friends and family that their child, or father or mother, or friend died in battle because God is punishing the United States for its acceptance of homosexuality. The Jesus of *5 Minuti* is nothing like these highly visible and outspoken representatives of Christianity.

When we try to interpret a film, we usually look at particular features of the film that support a particular interpretation. But, we might also, as we did above, ask what is not in the movie. In *5 Minuti* there is no mention of prayer in public schools, no mention of terminating a pregnancy, no mention of homosexuality or same sex marriage, no mention of using tax dollars to send children to religious schools, and no mention of posting the Ten Commandments on the courthouse wall or placing them in public parks. The Jesus of *5 Minuti* has nothing to say about

these hot button issues that consume so much of the religio-political debate, at least in the United States. Come to think of it, the Jesus of the Bible does not have anything to say on these topics either. Probably the closest Jesus comes to saying something about religio-political topics comes in Mark 12:17, where he says: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, at the end of the scene where Jesus stands on the bridge offering to die again for Barbara, Barbara reaches out her hand to Jesus and we see him take her hand in his. Deborah Brown told me in an e-mail that as director, "that was the first image that came to me as I planned the film."<sup>10</sup> "We were very conscious of the image portrayed... Unlike Michelangelo's image on the Sistine Chapel where man is reaching out to touch the finger of God, I wanted to show that in Christ we can reach out and GRASP the hand of the very real saviour."<sup>11</sup> The relationship between Barbara and Jesus as he takes her hand, is both real and personal. It is not an abstraction in the way that the relationship between God and man is in the Sistine Chapel. Clearly the personal relationship with Jesus is, for Brown, an important element of Christianity. The idea suggested by Sergio Mascheroni that because Jesus does not wear a tie, he is approachable and someone with whom you can have an intimate relationship also provides evidence for the importance of the personal relationship with Jesus. The personal relationship is also suggested by Jesus in the

twenty five minute version of the film when he says: "It's absurd for people to kneel before an image of me, when they can approach the real me."

Given the various and interesting features of this film, there is something that seems to transcend each of these. In the end, the movie seems to promote two seemingly contradictory ideas about God. The first is that God is a timeless being, the Creator of the Universe, and as such is very much beyond human understanding. God is a vast power and a great mystery. God is not made in man's image. God is not the petty being we so often describe when we use God for our own purposes. There is something awesome about God. The second idea is that we can have a personal, intimate, day to day relationship with Jesus. Here there is nothing abstract about God. Jesus is someone with whom we can have a personal relationship. As Jesus says in the twenty five minute version of the film, "Why kneel before an image, when you can have the real thing?" While it may seem contradictory to think of God as both beyond our comprehension and the other in a personal, intimate relationship, this is the message of Christianity. Christianity offers us a personal, individual, real relationship with God, but a God that is beyond all understanding. And this is a feature of Christianity that *5 Minuti* expresses clearly.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *5 Minuti* is directed by Deborah E. Brown and Sergio Mascheroni and is produced by Cinema Verita. Sergio Mascheroni is also the screen writer. The film stars Barbara Sanua and Maurizio Desinan. Eleven minutes. Color. Italian, with English sub-titles. *5 Minuti* is the winner of the 2006 Best Film Award at the 168 Hour Film Project. The 168 Hour Film Project is a faith-based,

worldwide incubator in which teams make a short film in seven days (168 hours). All works are based on a particular theme and a particular verse from the Bible. The theme and verses change from year to year. All films from the Project screen at the annual 168 Film Festival. The eleven-minute version of the movie is available on YouTube. There also is a twenty-five minute version of the movie to which I will occasionally refer throughout the essay. That version can be found at [http://www.cinemaverita.com/5min/5\\_Minuti\\_Subtitle.mov](http://www.cinemaverita.com/5min/5_Minuti_Subtitle.mov). You will need to download it to your computer and open it in the appropriate player (Quicktime, Real Player, an iPod, etc. Windows Media Player can not play .mov files). You can also access the twenty-five minute version at [http://www.CinemaVerita.com/5min/5\\_minuti\\_st.html](http://www.CinemaVerita.com/5min/5_minuti_st.html) (this takes a while to download before it plays smoothly).

<sup>2</sup> Ask yourself: "How would I describe Jesus, the Son of God, if I could not use the popular robe and sandals image?" It is an interesting question to consider and one that the movie invites us to raise.

<sup>3</sup> Ask yourself: "How would I describe Jesus, the Son of God, if I could not use the popular robe and sandals image?" It is an interesting question to consider and one that the movie invites us to raise.

<sup>4</sup> A similar passage can be found in Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." But there is some dispute in Christian theology about faith and works, in part due to the passage in James 2:14: "What doth it profit, my breatheren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?" And, see James 2:17: "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." (King James Version)

<sup>5</sup> Telephone interview with Deborah Brown and Sergio Mascheroni, conducted on Thursday, September 17, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> King James Version

<sup>7</sup> The lyrics to the entire song follow:

*I love you*

I love you  
And I am impatient to know you  
To breathe your breath  
And tell you that I love you.  
I love you  
And I covet the day that I will see you  
Face to face  
You will be like me

I, I love you as you are  
I created you as you are  
Beautifully made

And I will transform you  
I will remake you perfect  
My flame  
Will purify you

I love you  
And I have desire to see my reflection in you  
That your eyes will tell of me, reflect Me  
I desire that you sense My heart beating  
Within you  
For your life, I desire to be united with you.

While aspects of me come down from Me to you  
You will fly high to the point of meeting Me  
My spirit will speak to you of Me  
Of the profound love I have for you

I, I love you as you are  
I created you as you are  
Beautifully made  
And I will transform you  
I will remake you perfect  
My flame will purify you

“And, I, I love you as you are  
I am pleased that you are that way.

<sup>8</sup> Telephone interview.

<sup>9</sup> King James Version

<sup>10</sup> From e-mail correspondence (09/15/10, 04:03 p.m.)

<sup>11</sup> E-mail correspondence.

<sup>12</sup> I have adjusted some of the quotes from the film so that they are more appropriate to the way in which I have written this essay. The comments from my colleagues, Michele Desmarais, Brady DeSanti, Guy Matalon, and Paul Allen Williams on earlier drafts of this paper were quite helpful. Also most helpful in the formulation of the paper were Deborah Brown and Sergio Mascheroni who extended me the courtesy of an interview.