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Babette's Feast: A Religious Film

Abstract

This paper explores the various ways in which *Babette's Feast* might be called a religious film. First, yet perhaps least significantly, the film's subject matter is overtly religious. It treats of a late nineteenth century Danish Christian sect, focusing attention on the tale of two pious women whose life experiences are defined solely by their religious beliefs. Second, the film explores reality through the foundational myth of Christianity and through literary and visual symbols that derive from that faith tradition. Especially it contrasts two modalities of Christian apprehension: one which sees religiosity as primarily a matter of moral living, demeaning sensual engagement in the created world; the other which acknowledges the "sacramental" texture and depths of the created order and discovers there the divine. Third, the film as a work of art, quite apart from its subject matter or its exploration of reality through the medium of Christian symbols, is in itself profoundly religious. This is meant in the sense that its artistry allows the viewer to apprehend reality contemplatively, to take a long, loving look at the real in such a way that the hidden, sacred dimension of reality is revealed.

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What makes a film religious? I asked my class. Or rather, can you name a film you would assign in a course entitled "Religion and Film"? *Jesus of Montreal?* one suggested. Or how about *Little Buddha?* another queried. Yes, I suppose those titles might legitimately be found on a course-list for "Religion and Film". Yet it is something of a commonplace at the present to observe that many teachers of religion as well as their students approach films as they would approach a written text. They focus on the subject matter, attending to the narrative content of the film. If a film is about religion or religious people, especially if it sympathetically tells the tale of an exemplary religious figure like Jesus or Muhammad, it can be called a religious movie. Or, from a more nuanced perspective, if a film wrestles with topics usually considered the concern of religious thinkers - the afterlife, hell, heaven, moral issues - it might qualify as a religious film. Scholars and students of the cinematic arts and filmmakers themselves do not approach films in the same way. Cinema is a complex art-form that communicates many more ways than through plot, characterization and dialogue. Other concerns, for example the dramatic visual exploration of a foundational religious myth or the visual style of the film, art direction, musical score, camera work, might rightfully qualify a film as religious, even if its subject matter could not in any way be construed as such. I would like to consider the 1987 Academy Award winning film *Babettes Feast* (Best Foreign Film) in the light of the above observations, to examine the film as a superb candidate for that course-list for "Religion and Film".

Director and writer Gabriel Axel based his 1987 film, *Babette's Feast*, on a short story of the same name by Danish writer Isak Dinesen. With some exceptions, especially of emphasis, the film is a close rendering of the original tale. The story treats of a sectarian group of persons whose entire lives have been shaped by their religious convictions. In accord with many viewers' common-sense notion of what makes a film religious, *Babette's Feast* would qualify because religious people and institutions are its overt subject matter. The characters pray, worship and conduct their affairs within the context of their faith. Moreover, the narrative is concerned with the inner-dynamics of the religious group over a period of years and takes a perspective on their manner of being religious. But let me offer here a summary of that basic story.

Jutland, Denmark. The later part of the nineteenth century. Two elderly maiden sisters, Martine and Philippa, the daughters of a long-deceased prophet-founder of an austere Christian sect, maintain a simple life of piety and charitable works and carry on their father's memory by presiding over his small band of remaining disciples. As young women, we learn, the two sisters were very beautiful but, as worldly concerns were not valued in their father's austere religious vision, they never married. However, two men, both from outside their remote Danish village, had in the past crossed paths with Martine and Philippa in significant ways. First, Lorenz Lowenhielm, a dissolute young cadet, in summer exile at his aunt's

Jutland home as a result of parental punishment for unbecoming behavior, is captivated by Martine's beauty, has an idealistic vision of a higher, purer life and wins an introduction to the pious circle where he hopes to make her acquaintance. But he soon finds himself at a loss in the rarified atmosphere and leaves, claiming that some things are impossible. The "world," he announces, will be his heritage and he vows to achieve all worldly success, a feat which he duly accomplishes. Next, Achille Papin, a famous opera singer, finds himself on the remote coastland in search of rest. The solitude plunges him into a bleak mood which is relieved only upon hearing Philippa's voice raised in angelic hymnody. Believing that her voice is destined to thrill the heart of Europe, Papin offers himself as vocal tutor and educates his pupil in the operatic repertoire. The frank sensuality of the musical lyrics soon convinces his pupil that she must terminate the lessons and Papin returns to the continent without her.

Years later, the sisters content themselves with lives of piety. Their untiring work among the poor has, in the intervening time, been made possible with the help of a maid, Babette, who one stormy night fourteen years earlier had arrived on their doorstep, a refugee from the terrors of the French civil war whose husband and son had perished. In her possession was a letter of introduction from Achille Papin who, remembering himself to a after thirty-five years and assuring her that in heaven she will be the great artist God intended her to be, implored the sisters to give refuge to

Babette. They did and, at the film's present time, had lived with them for almost fifteen years, doing the work of a domestic servant and preparing the split cod and ale-bread that were the villagers' staple diet.

The prophet's sect by this time has lost most of its early vitality. The few remaining members, all of whom are advanced in years, have fallen into the habit of quarrelling. Old disagreements have reawakened, and past sins cast a heavy pallor over the congregation. Their hymns - "Jerusalem, my heart's true home," "never would you give a stone if a child begged for food" - recall the pastor's eschatological vision of a world transformed but fail to kindle the former devotion and zeal. Hoping to heal some of the community's wounds, Martine and Philippa plan a simple celebration in honor of their father on what would have been his one-hundredth birthday. As the date approaches, Babette receives word that she has won 10,000 francs in the French lottery thanks to a ticket an old friend of hers had renewed each year.

Babette reflects on what to do with her winnings and requests of the sisters that they allow her to prepare, just once, a real French meal, and serve it for the pastor's celebration. Reluctantly they agree. Babette proceeds to order from the Paris supplies the likes of which the sisters have never dreamed: wines, live quail and turtle. Martine and Philippa begin to fear that something akin to a witches' Sabbath is about to take place and they fearfully alert the rest of the disciples. All

agree that they will attend the dinner with their minds on higher things, as if they had no sense of taste.

The evening of the celebration arrives and one of the disciples, the aunt of Lowenhielm, announces that her visiting nephew, now a general, will join them for dinner. Babette is immersed in the astonishing, sensuous and elaborate preparations for her meal. The guests arrive, their somber, otherworldly dress and demeanor in high contrast to the sumptuous table set before them. General Lowenhielm alone, unaware of the group's strategy to remain disengaged, is overwhelmed by the exquisite fare which unfolds in magnificence before them, course by course and liquor by liquor. He speaks of a famous Parisian chef, a woman, who in the years before the civil war, was fabled for her culinary artistry. She had made dining a love affair in which there was no distinction between the spiritual and other appetites. Surely, the general remarks, these delicacies are the very ones he had savored at the fabled Cafe Anglais.

Gradually, warmed by the fine wines and the general's example, the guests begin to respond, not only to the feast itself, but to one another. Old quarrels are healed, past sins genuinely forgiven. The general rises and, echoing the deceased pastor's words, acknowledges the reality of a world illuminated by love. When he departs he tenderly acknowledges to Martine that during the intervening years he had always been with her in love and friendship and that during this evening he had

learned that with God all things are possible. The dinner comes to a close as the disciples leave and, illuminated by moonlight in the village square, they spontaneously join hands in a circle and dance. Inside, the sisters thank Babette for her feast and learn that she was the fabled chef of the Cafe Anglais and that she will not be returning to her native land for she has spent her entire lottery winnings on the meal. With Martine and Philippa aghast, she explains that she had given everything not simply for them but because within each artist's soul is the cry to be given the chance to be the best they can be. Philippa, echoing the words Achille Papin had spoken to her, promises that in paradise Babette will be the great artist God intended her to be.

The film takes a decided perspective on its characters' religious devotion. While the sectarians are certainly not parodied, one feels sympathy for their earnest and good-hearted efforts, yet one feels something has been lost, something is clearly lacking. The disciples' moral uprightness has become small-minded pettiness, their close community insular, their luminous vision shriveled down to pious routine, even their ongoing works of charity feed the body but not the soul. Something must enter to release them for the realization of the fullness of life to which their doctrines point but which they merely await. Figures from the world enter, the cadet and the opera star, and seem to offer some fire that might enkindle but they cannot be integrated into the sect's world. The film takes an interesting

perspective on these strangers from the south. In some sense the two gentlemen-callers represent the secular world and its values. They are not unsympathetic characters but they too are lacking. The young officer is a dreamer, a fact which has plunged him into a life of disorder. When he sees Martine he recognizes his own deeper self which yearns for something higher and better. Papin too, is moved in his depression to a vision of something finer, embodied in Philippa's angelic singing voice. He wants to nurture that and bring it into his world. But secular and sacred are estranged and neither achieves fullness.

On the fundamental level of subject matter and narrative interest, *Babette's Feast* must certainly qualify as a film in which religion features prominently. The film-makers take a distinct perspective on their religious characters and their world. But there is much, much more to the religious vision of *Babette's Feast* than is evident in this common sense matter of subject matter, plot, character and dialogue.

Any viewer could enjoy *Babette's Feast* as a simple narrative in which religious characters come to some sort of awakening. It could be experienced as a story about a group of rather stuffy, old-fashioned folks with a glum otherworldly view of things who, in a wondrous meal, are initiated into the delights of enjoying the pleasures of life. In this vein it could be viewed as a critique of religion itself. But one doesn't have to scratch the surface of the film very deeply to find this a limited view. For *Babette's Feast* is saturated with religious symbolism of the most

specifically Christian kind and read through the lens of that symbolism the film is simultaneously an exploration of the foundational Christian myth of death and resurrection, a study of competing Christian views of reality, and an affirmation of the ultimate sacramentality of the created order.

Within the first minutes of the film, the viewer is treated to a vision of the sect at worship, voices raised in song: "Jerusalem, my heart's true home ..." Already the most fundamental Christian symbolism comes into play. Jerusalem, the image of a transfigured world where, at the end of time, all the deepest human hopes and longings will be fulfilled. There, according to Christian understanding, the eschatological banquet will be served. All that is partial will be completed, all sorrow turned to joy, all that is estranged be reconciled, all that is lost, found. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap for joy. All will be reconciled. The disciples live in anticipation of that other-worldly end-time in the new Jerusalem.

And food, that pivotal Christian symbol, is introduced explicitly at the end of the congregation's first stanza. "Never will you give a stone to the child who begs for bread," they sing, echoing scripture. Already the irony is set up. These earnest believers, inhabiting a stony, barren land where their meager fare is unappetizing ale-bread and split cod (which has been visually presented to us hanging up to dry in the opening shots), beg to be fed at a banquet table of unsurpassed bounty.

Babette's Feast is thus a thoroughly religious film in the sense that it plays with foundational Christian themes and imagery. The heavenly banquet. The redemption of the world.

In fact, *Babette's Feast* is structured to recapitulate the central dynamic of the foundational Christian myth. It visually presents a movement from death to resurrection. And it does so by introducing a salvific figure who transfigures the main characters' world through a loving act of self-giving. Film theorist John R. May has suggested that a film's openness to a religious world view may be best be found in those dimensions of the formal structure that represent the visual analogue of religious questions. [John R. May, "Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film" in *Religion and Film*, edited by John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 23-43.]

Thus the mythic pattern of ultimacy given a religious tradition and its myth - whether it be sin/salvation, or ignorance/awakening or ensnarement/liberation - can provide the basic structure of a film and qualify it as a film that is profoundly religious. Christianity's myth subverts the established reality by attending to mercy's unpredictability and violating the rigid boundaries that separate the created world and God. *Babette's Feast* is a wonderful visual analogy of this myth that undergirds the Christian faith.

On still another level the film plays with Christian symbols. It seems to ask the question: what does it really mean to live the hope held out by the Christian faith? Does it mean that one is to endure the present world as a place of testing, where the forces of evil are loose, tempting one to turn one's eyes from a truer, not yet realizable fulfillment? Does discipleship consist of moral rectitude, avoiding sin and doing good works? Or is the Christian life perhaps about the realization, at least partially, of that fulfillment here and now? Is discipleship about celebration? About the recognition and embodiment of that final banquet? Is the world a sacrament, a visible means of access to what is yet invisible?

The two possible views are hinted at in the film in the dialectic that occurs between the very austere practice of the little northern European sect and the sensuous, even decadent practices of others from outside (General Lowenhielm's frank lust for power and prestige, Achille Papin's aesthetic sensuality and love of fame, Babette's unabashed delight in the lush fruits of the earth). Martine, Philippa and their co-religionists have lived by a creed of moral righteousness in which religiosity consists of valuing the immaterial over the material. The things of the soul for them are paramount and soul and body are clearly demarcated. Romantic love, fine foods, aesthetic indulgence, high office and achievement are considered as negligible, even as sinister lures. This world is a passing place in which ultimate salvation is assured through the practice of works of charity, the restraint of

"worldly" desires and constant vigilance against temptation. All the assumptions by which the sect has lived are challenged by those who come from outside, the chief of those being one who is literally washed ashore, a refugee French woman who asks to serve in exchange for a place to lay her head.

In a limited sense the film echoes the old Protestant vs. Catholic controversy in which the classic Reformed doctrine of an utterly fallen world is compared with the orthodox Roman Catholic affirmation that the created universe, while marred by sin, is nevertheless still clearly revelatory of divine reality. But *Babette's Feast* is hardly a theological polemic and the strict contrast between the two views does not play itself out neatly. At the final feast, not only do the sober disciples awaken to the truth of abundance freely given in the very stuff of the good earth, but the general, who comes to the dinner seeking confirmation of his long-ago choice of "the world," finds instead that he had never lost his earlier, idealistic self. Instead, he has come full circle and for him and for Martine all is fulfilled, love is not lost but found. There too Babette, like Philippa, experiences the truth to which their friend and mentor Papin had alluded, that the artistry which would have been the fullest expression of their being, will in the end find expression. This is not merely a film about the sacred and the secular, about Catholic or Protestant theologies of the created order, it is a film about the reconciling of all things imaged in a banquet

that feeds not only body but soul, that not only sustains but transfigures it. There, all the longings of the heart are met, all hungers filled.

It is the final segments of *Babette's Feast* that are most saturated with Christian symbolism. The pastor's memorial banquet becomes a recapitulation of the Last Supper and, by extension, of the Christian liturgy and the eschatological banquet. With the general added to the remnant, they are twelve at table. With Babette in the kitchen preparing the food, they are thirteen. Even the progress of the supper mirrors the rhythm of the liturgical rite. The general's private examination of conscience serves as the anamnesis, the wiping away of past mistakes, a remembering in a new way. The gathered band then proceeds to recall the days of their early inspiration, when their prophet was with them and life was filled with promise and miracle. Then the banquet begins in earnest with Babette in the background, supplying a meal her guests scarcely have eyes to see or tongues to taste. But gradually as they are fed, they awaken to the miracle taking place in their midst. That miracle resides not only in the food itself but becomes embodied in the community gathered there. Not only are the sins of their past mutually forgiven, these past lapses are seen in a new transfigured light.

Tenderly the husband and wife, rancorous for years over their youthful betrayal of her former husband, kiss one another in reconciled love. Wine flows freely. Food overwhelms in its abundance. The general rises to speak: "Grace

makes no conditions, it takes all to its bosom and proclaims amnesty. That which we have rejected is poured out on us." When the guests finally leave the table they are created anew, their spontaneous circle-dance in the moonlit village square becomes a fitting image of the joy of the new Jerusalem, their heart's true home.

Babette herself is clearly a Christ-image, coming mysteriously and humbly to live with the community, taking on the role of a servant, finally giving all she has to provide a banquet in which the most profound longings of the heart are answered and hungers filled. Wine is poured out in excess. Bread quite literally mirrors manna in the desert. The specialty dish of the Cafe Anglais, which is the centerpiece of Babette's meal, is a dish named "quail in a sarcophagus." Quail being a form of manna and sarcophagus meaning "flesh-eater," the film makes illusion to Jesus' discourse in John, "I am the bread of life ... this is the manna that comes down from heaven ... if you do not eat of the flesh of the Son of Man you will not have life ..."

In the manner of all fine art, *Babette's Feast* is neither slavish nor overly literal in its exploration of Christian symbols. There is not one simple reading of the film to make one point. Multiple interpretations emerge and the richness of the imagery takes on a life of its own, opening out to the ongoing interpretations of multiple viewers. Nevertheless, the film's symbolic matrix is clearly Christian. Whether one sees a critique of a Christianity which over-stresses moral rectitude or

a vision of a universe that is essentially sacramental or the reconciliation of the world and spirit or the movement from death to resurrection, *Babette's Feast* is clearly a film that takes its life from the exploration of religious symbolism.

Michael Bird has written that cinema is the art form most suited to the articulation of the transcendent dimension of reality. [Michael Bird, "Film as Hierophany" in *Religion in Film*, 3-22.] In his view (and he echoes the "realist" school of cinematic theorists) film has a special affinity with reality because it is so intensely physical and thus allows the viewer to encounter the physical with astonishing, detailed vividness. As it remains true to its inherent capacity to record the real, film brings the viewer into the presence of the real in a special way. It can allow the viewer to perceive reality as containing ineffable mystery. Cinematic art can focus our attention on reality so as to call up meaning from its inner depth. Reality itself can be experienced as a place of disclosure of the holy that is embedded in concrete times, places and events. The more specific, the more lovingly apprehended in its uniqueness a person or place is, the more possible it is for disclosure to occur.

As a piece of cinematic art *Babette's Feast* is a profoundly contemplative film, especially if one defines contemplation as a long, loving look at the real. Deliberately paced, spare, even austere, in its presentation, the film invites the viewer into such a long, loving look. The narrative begins in the time just before

the feast and then utilizes a series of self-contained flash-backs to introduce all the elements that will come together at the meal: the sisters and their history, the foreign figures of Lowenhielm and Papin, the evolution of the sect with its ascetic piety and its religiosity that looks to the fulfillment of human dreams in the next world, the story of the servant Babette's strange fated arrival and the years of her humble service.

The scenes are presented in an almost iconic manner. They seem to function much like the visual depictions that one sees of scriptural stories in places of Christian worship. In such worship, specific moments are visually framed - the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Crucifixion, the Ascension - which then function liturgically not so much as pedagogical tools as enticements to contemplation, to the long loving look in which few gestures, few words, one moment, become infinitely rich and layered. These framed moments are religious symbols in the fullest sense of the term - multi-vocal, resonate with implied meaning, allowing the contemplative viewer access to realms of knowing that discursive thought and analysis cannot. Axel's sparsely wrought scenes invite that contemplation. Close attention to the actor's faces, a focus on the slight gesture, the meaningful glance heightens this iconic sense. When we arrive back in the present time of the narrative, we carry with us a pregnant sense of the weight and meaning that the participants bring to the table.

But there is nothing melodramatic about *Babette's Feast*. Instead, the mood is restrained, the emotions highly internalized. Some of this restraint is the product of the director's vision realized through the acting but some of it is also due to the artful use of sound in the film. Throughout, there is little accompanying music, a feature of films most American filmgoers might find unusual. Everywhere one is aware of silence, punctuated only by the natural sounds of waves, wind, the opening and shutting of doors, the rustle of paper. Music is introduced in two major ways: in the hymn singing of the sect which gives us access to the deeply held longings and beliefs of the community and in the use of a solo piano which enters under a few significant scenes like a tremulous and poignant underline. Otherwise, as in contemplation, we are invited into a reality in which our own breathing is potentially as much a part of the experience as the breathing of the film's characters.

The film's scenes and settings underscore this sense of contemplative awareness. The sisters' world is painted in a palate of grays, black and white. They inhabit a chilly, prudent world of tiny cottages huddled in a bare seaside landscape. The fierceness of the climate is ever present: bleak snow, blowing winds. Its austerity is perhaps most vividly depicted in the scenes of food preparation. Sinewy dried cod and pasty, glutinous ale-bread is served in functional wooden bowls. Most telling is the scene in which the sisters instruct the newly arrived Babette in the preparation of the gruel-like local cuisine. In contrast, the later scenes of the film

in which Babette, having spent her lottery money on the ingredients for the meal, prepares and then serves the feast, are astonishingly sensual with color and texture. Fine linens drape the table festooned with gleaming silver candlesticks and elegant china. The food itself is a wonder: wicker baskets of quail, a giant turtle slick from the water, and graceful decanters of wine transform into steaming soup, pastries of lightness, sauces of unutterable delicacy, a gateau (cake) cradled in a nest of ripe fruits and drizzled with sweet liquor. At the end of the meal, there are glimmering grapes and figs that burst open with their own succulent ripeness. Sensual yes, but never overly so, for the filmmaker has managed to create visually a meal prepared by a woman for whom dining is a love affair in which there is no distinction between the spiritual and other appetites.

Each concrete detail of the world in which Martine and Philippa live and the transfigured world that Babette creates for them are dwelt upon with loving attentiveness. The artistry of *Babette's* filmmakers allows us to gaze with contemplative awareness upon the world unfolding before our eyes. Reality has revealed its sacred depths. The fig, the bread, the wine are discovered to be more than they appear. It is nothing less than a sacramental vision of the universe. And as such, the film is profoundly religious.