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Of Gods and Men (2010)

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Of Gods and Men* (2010).

It is, I am sure, not surprising that an essay on the 2010 French film *Of Gods and Men*, directed by Xavier Beauvois, should be included in a journal dedicated to religion and film. The fictionalized subject of the film, the internationally-publicized 1996 incident during which seven Trappist monks were engulfed by the drama of the ongoing Algerian Civil War and assassinated, features overtly religious characters. However, *Of Gods and Men* is not religious merely because of its subject matter but because it is able, through the visual medium, to explore in a compelling way the experience of human religiosity at its most intimate. This is a film that focuses deftly on the particularities of Christianity and of Christian monastic life but, even more than this, it explores the complexities of the human heart that is oriented toward ultimacy and honors the way in which religious practices and ideals enable persons to live deeply and courageously.

The impetus for making the film came from Etienne Comar, a French film producer and a Catholic, whose imagination had been captured by the original incident of the monks of Tibhirine's assassination and who wished to explore the motivations behind their decision to remain in their monastery, despite the gathering political unrest that would eventually engulf them. Along with Beauvois, Comar drafted a screenplay that begins by establishing the symbiotic

relationship between the Christian monastics and the mainly Muslim population of an Algerian village: the monks sell their honey at the street market, locals work alongside them on their farmland, they are invited to neighborhood family celebrations; one of their older members is a physician who operates a clinic and generously dispenses a meager supply of medications and provides wise counsel to the many who line his doorstep. The two writers take the viewer step by step through the fictionalized narrative that they created using news accounts, interviews with the assassinated men's family members and with surviving community members, diaries, letters, and the written testimony of the monastery's abbot, Fr. Christian (played by Lambert Wilson) that posthumously brought the spiritual dimension of the events to international attention. Although the film's plot is advanced by the gathering threat posed by an armed terrorist group bent on upending the oppressive rule of the Algerian government, the focus of the film is upon the internal drama taking place in the hearts of each man and in the monastic community as a whole as they are forced to explore the meaning of their vocations in that particular land and to decide whether or not to leave or stay.

The genius of the film is its ability to cinematically reveal the way in which human religious reflection, shaped in this case by the structures, practices, and symbols of Catholic spirituality in its most distilled, monastic, form works. This is communicated through several means. First, by the pacing of the film: the

director, screenwriters, and cinematographer (Caroline Champetier) have created a felt sense of the deliberate pace and ordinariness of monastic life. Short, albeit deliberate, scenes establish the repetitive nature of the monastic day, shaped as it is by rhythms of communal prayer and manual work. Each scene is economical in its communication and conveys the contemplative undercurrent of the daily rounds: the brothers assemble quietly for prayer in the tiny spare chapel, their voices, honed by years of shared life blend into a simple yet beautiful prayer; Br. Christophe (Olivier Rabourdin) pauses in his labor of seeding the garden to gaze pensively at the beauty of the countryside fanning out below the hill on which the modest monastery structure is built; the doctor Fr. Luc (Michael Lonsdale), tenderly replaces a dressing on the skin infection of a village child and wordlessly discerns the need to rummage in his store of hand-me-down shoes when the child's mother hesitates to leave. These are simple, remarkably ordinary yet telling moments. The scenes are short but move at the pace of ordinary life, thus conveying the reality of the monks' lives. The dusky, slightly muted palette of the film suggests both the austerity of the desert countryside and its subtle fecundity.

Most striking perhaps, and most effective, is the film's lack of a musical soundtrack. Silence punctuated by ambient sounds draws the viewer into the austere sensuality of the monastic experience and the earthiness of the village environment: soft footfalls and the rustle of monastic habits on stone floors; far

away cockcrows and bird song accompany the crunch of a spade thrust into the earth; the quiet is startlingly punctuated by the clamor of a joyous milling crowd - men clapping and women ululating - at a village boy's celebratory rite of passage. The underlying silence experienced throughout the film is, of course, true to foundational Trappist practice. Silence is meant to create a space where attentive listening to the depths of the heart, to the whisper of the Spirit, and to the longing of the world, becomes possible. The contrasts in the ambient sound are thus almost terrifying when violence begins to invade the village: terrorist cars speed into the market at high speed, gears grinding and brakes skidding on dry soil, metal car doors slam as the screaming occupants leap out and attack a group of foreign workers, peremptorily slitting their throats. The horror of the scene comes as much from the contrasting violence of the harsh sounds punctuating the established stillness as from the brutality of the acts portrayed.

Carefully chosen gestures establish the monks love not only of the Muslim people among whom they live but their love of the place itself: strolling along in the garden in conversation, Br. Christophe reaches down to remove a twig that has fallen across the path, the arc of the gesture belongs to someone who knows God intimately in the routine acts of tending the earth; in a troubled moment Abbot Christian finds himself out of doors struggling with questions that confront the community, as he starts up a low hill he merges into a flock of sheep hurrying

up the slope, and as his stride quickly adapts to theirs and his quiet delight becomes evident, we know this is home.

These elements are only some that authentically convey the nature of monastic life. Benedictine monasteries (of which the Cistercians and, from them, the Trappists are reformed versions) are intended to be “schools for the service of the Lord,” transformative environments in which all the elements combine to facilitate a contemplative capacity, the ability to listen deeply and reflectively and to respond to the living Word of God. Among the central practices silence and stability are crucial, as are the two embodied dynamics that define Benedictine life, *ora et labora*, prayer and work. The simple yet sustaining routines of a given day, the committed and shared life, the balance of manual labor and common prayer (about which more will be said), these allow a certain detachment from the frantic striving that so often pervades peoples’ lives. Space and time apart, both literal and interior, is cultivated. All this is designed to foster the capacity to listen attentively and to plumb the depths of the spacious, receptive heart to which the divine is understood to speak most clearly.

The creators of *Of Gods and Men* establish these elements crucial to monastic self-understanding with artful economy. They also honor the formative reality of the liturgical prayer into which the community routinely enters. Periodically we see the brothers gather in the chapel to sit in rows facing one

another and pray the antiphonal psalmody that makes up the bulk of the liturgical offices. The men's harmonizing voices swell and fill the sacred space. Classically, Christian contemplative prayer is said to move from the lips to the mind and from there to descend into the heart. One becomes aware, by the sheer contrast with the rest of the film's use of silence and ambient sound, that this descent is taking place here: these are the words that fall deep into consciousness in the space prepared by silence. This becomes vividly clear as the film progresses. The filmmakers capture this central truth of monasticism, indeed of human religiosity in general: sacred scriptural words form, guide, and entwine with everyday events to provide meaning, nuance, depth and illumination.

As the narrative of the film progresses, this intertwining of events and sacred words is foregrounded. Their Muslim neighbors are terrorized by brutal and random killings. A villager's niece is murdered for not wearing a headscarf. The community is told to allow armed guards to patrol. The government representatives instruct them roughly to leave. As the threats increase the cloister is invaded by a terrorist gang seeking the doctor to treat wounded comrades. The government army begins to suspect the community's sympathies and the community finds itself threatened by both sides in the civil conflict. We have already seen how Fr. Christian is dedicated to study of the *Qur'an* and we know he believes that all people, especially people of the Book, are precious in the eyes

of God. Christian also had a moment of revelation when the terrorist leader, learning that he had burst in on the eve of Christmas, offers an apology and extends a hand in honor of the prophet whom the monks name the Prince of Peace.

It is at this point that the filmmakers allow us to enter into the community's individual and shared discernment about how they should respond. It seems unique to see a film (perhaps American films are particularly prone to avoiding this) where both individual and communal dynamics are held in creative tension. Each of the monks reacts differently to the felt sense of impending peril. But viewers are not treated to a story of one individual against many but to a story about genuine community in which individual struggle is honored and at the same time the integrity and deep bonds of the whole are acknowledged. The oscillation between common and individual dynamics is captured through the filmmakers' choices. When the army wants to thrust its machines and armed men upon the monastery, Fr. Christian peremptorily refuses: this is the antithesis of the life of peace and hospitality (another one of those other Benedictine themes) that he has chosen. But his confreres gently but firmly call him out: we did not elect you to make your own unilateral decisions they say, reminding him of his appropriately humble and un-autocratic role as outlined by St. Benedict's Rule. Alternately, the solitariness of Fr. Christian's burden of leadership is evident as he paces alone

across the remote windswept acres of the monastic lands while wild fowl wing across a vast expanse of sky and dwarf his silhouette.

Thus begins a remarkable series of scenes that reveal the process of spiritual discernment, genuine listening to the Spirit of God as it is refracted through individual conscience, through community members, through others, and through the tradition. This is where the centrality of the liturgical office and the prayer to which the men return again and again becomes clear. The words of the midnight liturgy of Christmas echo powerfully as the shaken community gathers after the terrorists disappear into the night. Allusions to the crucified one and to the sacrifice of love resonate in the music the men sing. As the danger looms, they listen in the refectory to a reading by Carlo Corretto (a French spiritual writer and member of the Little Brothers of Jesus, a community inspired by hermit Charles de Foucauld who lived and was assassinated in the Algerian desert). Corretto's words about surrender sink in, helping to sharpen the discernment the men are making. What is stability? What does it mean to vow fidelity to a community? What does it mean to follow the crucified God of Love? What is martyrdom? What of the people in the neighborhood to whom they have pledged their presence? The filmmakers use some dialogue to explore these questions but much of the questioning, both individually and communally, is visually expressed through facial close ups and by careful attention to the nuances of posture,

gesture, tone of voice, and unspoken interactions among community members as they gather to decide together what they should do.

Individual discernments are the subject of the camera's eye at the same time. Especially poignant is the struggle of Br. Christophe, one of the younger members, whose instinct is to leave immediately. He rejects as repugnant any hint of courting death. As the film advances, we are given access to Christophe's interior anguish. The looming threat shakes him to the core. He prays fervently but encounters nothing. He, once so beatific in his garden, snaps angrily at his confrere. The filmmakers dwell upon Christophe lovingly, recording his pain and confusion at close range with the same deliberate pace with which they began. When, one night alone in his cell, the young monk experiences being wrapped in God's tender embrace, viewers witness what religious people deem a "call within a call," a radical deepening and acceptance of an already surrendered life. When Christophe finally joins the other monks in voting to stay (each having undergone some process of discernment), one senses the freedom and serenity that his arduous spiritual struggle has gained him. All this is communicated by remarkable actors whose interior experience is caught by an intimate, lingering camera lens. While the impending terrors of the storyline may heighten the dramatic tension, one feels that Beauvois never sensationalizes or over simplifies the discernments at which the monks arrive. Instead, what he has managed to capture,

through a heightened example, is in fact the central dynamic of the life of authentic religious faith that is generally played out in more everyday circumstances.

There are any number of overtly Christian symbols of which the filmmakers make use, some more subtly than others. A “Last Supper” scene on the night before they are captured by terrorists, during which Luc surprises the others by serving wine and turning on a tape of Tchaikovsky’s surging finale from *Swan Lake*, is touching in that the panning eye of the camera gives the viewer once again the opportunity to linger on the faces of these men as they wordlessly gaze at their confreres: the years of shared life, tender regard, and poignant knowledge of what may come, all pass across visage after visage. But perhaps the symbolism in this case is overly obvious. More successful, and more subtle and thus in keeping with the understatement that runs throughout the film, is a late scene in which the men are gathered for their customary chanting of the divine office. At this point in the narrative, the viewer is aware that both factions in the Algerian civil unrest are equally threatening to the Tibherine community. The sung office begins to be drowned out by the loud whirring of a helicopter honing in on the monastery grounds (again the use of sound here is stunning). As the threat of some unknown violent incursion hovers closer and closer and settles right over the chapel, the harsh, martial, mechanical sound becomes deafening.

The camera peers down into the chapel as if from above and we see the monks. At first they hesitate in their singing. Then instinctively they move together from their antiphonal arrangement to form an interlocked semi-circle. We see them face in our direction. Looking upward toward the sound above, they resume their prayerful song. As the helicopter noise swells, so do their voices. The sheer beauty of the harmonic music, not forced or strained but rich and full, blossoms and envelops the grating cacophony. Once again, the film conveys the spiritual substance of the monastic life, in this case the power of prayer, without dialogue but in gesture and sound.

The political and historical backgrounds of the film are not missing: one does get a sense of the damage previous French colonial occupation has wrecked. One is able to sympathize for the innocent locals caught up in the violence as well as identify with and decry the efforts of terrorists and government forces alike. At one point, the conflict is described as one group vying for power and another clinging to it. But the true focus of the film is upon religious experience. In the midst of the confusion, the monks are portrayed as attempting to live in peace with all, while struggling to remain true to their call to befriend the people among whom they live, as well as to honor the deeper meaning of their monastic commitment. They are portrayed as fallible, distinct human personalities who, through their commitment to one another and their honest, often painful attempts

to live into the depth of the spiritual journey to which they have pledged their lives, achieve their full humanity.

The title *Of Gods and Men* is taken from Psalm 82:6-7, “I have said, ye are gods and all of you are children of the Most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.” The theological anthropology that supports normative Catholic theology echoes this scriptural phrase: succinctly stated it is that human beings are created in the divine image but that image is wounded through sin thus the task of human life is to heal that wounded image by cooperating with grace so that the true image will be revealed. This seems to be the underlying theology of the film. While this is a specifically Catholic understanding of the specifics of human religiosity, one can only feel that all persons of religious and spiritual bent might recognize the human spiritual task of living fully and reflectively both artfully and accurately reflected in *Of Gods and Men*.