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*Reviews  
from  
a Jungian  
Perspective  
of  
Books,  
Film and  
Culture*

C.G. Jung



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## At the Movies

*The Last Temptation of Christ*. A Film by Martin Scorsese,  
based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis.

Reviewed by Ilene Serlin

I looked forward to seeing *The Last Temptation of Christ* with a special anticipation. Working as a psychologist in a treatment center for Catholic nuns and priests, I have had the opportunity to listen to religious people who needed a safe place to tell their stories. Sharing the anguish of those who wrestled with sexuality and celibacy, unresolved early family traumas, including abuse and terrible loneliness, I witnessed the healing which can come from being able to accept one's fundamental humanity. Their presenting problems, often manifest as co-dependency issues or depression, pointed to workaholic, excessive need to help and please others, inability to feel or express themselves, sexual splitting or acting-out. Psychological and spiritual issues were often confused; co-dependency could be masked as altruism; inability to form relationships as celibacy; and excessive idealization as piety creating unreachable images of Christ, self or others. Spirituality and humanity were not integrated. Through the creation of a safe space, through intensive dreamwork, art work, body work, and milieu therapy, through often brutally honest confrontations with each other and staff over meals and bathrooms, and through arguments and love, these people came to confront imperfection in themselves and even in their God and in Christ. Giving real body to the archetypes revised their ideas of both the sacred and the ordinary: they learned to forgive and, as bodies, souls and spirits, to integrate human with divine.

As I was privileged to travel with these religious people through this process, I was often moved by the sheer power of *witnessing*. Having someone simply listen and affirm allowed an individual to remember and reveal years of anguish. Some of these

people had gone from a childhood of secrecy to an adulthood of silence, from a childhood in authoritarian families to adulthood in surrogate authoritarian families. Some had sought structured religious life as refuge from a painful world, others confused genuine religious striving with a desire to escape reality. Having shrouded themselves in veils of silence, they did not know how to be intimate or how to dialogue. Their loneliness was aching. For them, the simple act of communication was tremendously liberating.

Serving on the assessment committee which screened incoming seminarians, I came to see how useful it could be for the seminarians to have help sorting out these issues early in their training, so that they could enter religious life with a clear understanding of the implications of celibacy, spirituality, and service.

It was with this bias toward bringing struggles over psycho-spiritual issues into the open that I went to see the controversial new film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I did not view the film with the eyes of a film critic (taking issue, for example, with its sometimes embarrassing dialogue), or with historical eyes (scrutinizing its historical veracity), but rather with the eyes of a therapeutic psychologist, intrigued to discover parallels between Christ's spiritual journey in the film and the stages of the therapeutic process with developing religious individuals. It is what I found from this perspective that I want to share here.

#### CONTEXT

Looking at Martin Scorsese's film, I was initially struck by images of the Judean landscape. This land is raw, powerful; people's faces are weathered by it. They have missing teeth and animal expressions, looking more like Bosch's figures than elegant medieval religious portraits. With accents that sound more low-brow Brooklyn than high-brow Roman, these folk are earthy. (Scorsese is still the director who gave us *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*.) We can understand how such people would have acted with passion, brutality, and gotten swept up in Messianic movement. Their faces and the land reminded me of my first trip back to Israel two years ago, when I was in search of my roots. As I stood confronting the immense sweep of the Negev desert where the Essenes had carved their home, I could imagine how they had lived in caves and austerity and how this setting could contain passions of Biblical magnitude. Having tried to read Torah at a liberal suburban temple, I had found the discussions too nice, too rational. But I could well imagine the landscape recalled by this movie giving rise to violent emotions, hal-

lucinations, and irrational actions. Given the fact that there were no hermetically-sealed shopping malls or VCRs, what else was there to do but to mingle in the marketplace, make politics or babies, follow gurus and struggle to survive? In fact, the scene where the Baptists dance in the river reminded me of my own days in the sixties, dancing and communing with nature. The context of the film reminds us therefore of a spiritual search expressed not calmly through study of text and logic, but bodily through action, emotion, and movement. While the actions of people in *The Last Temptation of Christ* might actually look to us moderns as ridiculously exaggerated, hyperbolic, or primitive, it might do us well to remember the context from which this Biblical text arose, a context in which it was still possible to incarnate the spirit.

As Christianity moved through the progressive "purifications" of Paul, St. Augustine, the Middle Ages, the Age of Enlightenment and rationalism, and finally into the transcendent confusions of the age of modernity and post-modernity, it lost a great deal of this earth, passion, and body. It became more masculine and spiritual, lost the feminine and the soul. This alienating split between logos and eros is what many of the priests and nuns with whom I worked were experiencing bodily. The split between a religion grown abstract and sterile, logical and "cleaned up," and its opposite in earth, body and feminine eros is felt as a schizophrenic estrangement of spirit and body and expressed daily as bodily pain. The Christ of *Last Temptation* seems to address this contemporary alienation, even as he takes advantage of the intense physical reality of the ancient Judean desert. Overcoming any duality between spiritual heaven and bodily earth was one of Christ's major purposes in this film. Through the use of imagination, metaphor and symbol, Christ like a powerful analyst turns dualism into dialectic, embraces opposites and plurality and transforms negative emotions into acceptance. As shown in this film, his process is one of deliteralizing opposites, acknowledging fantasy while understanding the difference between fantasy and action, and accepting both light and shadow aspects of himself. His transformation of literal body into subtle body is a paradigm of the transformation some people discover in therapeutic work today. I find it useful therefore to look at this film in terms of the therapeutic principles it illustrates.

#### CONTAINING OPPOSITES

At first, Jesus's suffering in the film is so agonizing that he cannot contain it. It feels to him as if hammers are beating him on the

head: he writhes on the beach as if to rid himself of the feeling. Swinging wildly from one extreme to another, he claims "God loves me, I can't take the pain, I want him to *hate* me." Reminiscent of Rilke's anguished observation in the *Duino Elegies* that "Beauty is but the start of terror," Jesus cannot bear the pain of being loved. Therefore he acts, trying to rid himself of the pain. This is the typical behavior of Western man, in contrast to the Eastern recognition that life *is* suffering. Much of Western "progress," in fact, is geared toward trying to protect man from suffering, whereas Eastern traditions recognize the wisdom of suffering as path. The first step in Buddhist spirituality is to sit, to contain action and not rid oneself of the pain; the first step also in therapy is to acknowledge the "gift" of the pain and to use it as "prima materia" for the therapeutic process. During the film, Jesus is stopped numerous times from running until he is finally crucified and becomes Christ. Crucifixion, read symbolically, means that the hands and feet, normally used for coping with the environment, are fixed. We are immobilized, we cannot act, we must just "be."

#### THE POWER OF THE WITNESS

We are not alone on a spiritual journey. Having learned to sit and "be," having been contained, we engage in dialogue with another person or parts of the self. With the acceptance of a fellow traveller who can also just "be" with us, we can tell our story and accept and transmute difficult emotions. Judas, as the strong companion, engages in dialogue with Jesus. When he says, for example: "If I love somebody, I'd die for them," he is not showing emotions, what he is showing is emotions-as-literalized-action. Jesus, on the other hand, counters this with, "How, then, do you break the chain of evil?" By claiming that it is "by love," he teaches that we cannot simply replace one action with another, or one political group with another, but one must transmute "from top down" the raw energy of anger into love. By shifting from external to internal reality, emotions are contained and transmuted, and the cycle of action-reaction, acting-out, can be broken.

Throughout the film, Jesus has a need to *confess*, to speak about the demons which torture him ("Lucifer is inside me"). Confession, from St. Augustine to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is a way of purging oneself of inner devils, using dialogue to transform guilt and fear into acceptance. Patients entering the consulting room still need to confess, to have their stories heard. This relationship of speaker and listener, of patient and therapist, is central to the

therapeutic process, bringing interior monologue into shared dialogue, dualism into dialectic.

#### RESOLVING INFLATION

Within the context of the therapeutic relationship, the messianic urge in each one of us can also be worked out. Christ himself wonders if he is the Messiah, while his disciples ask "What if he is the one?" Whether or not there is a literal Messiah, psychologically it is human to want to be the perfect individual. One waits for the "perfect" moment, the perfect job, and for Prince Charming. One dreams of rescuing, of offering hope—or of being saved. At one point in therapy the desire to be saved is projected onto the therapist, who is perceived as "god-like," omniscient or omnipotent. The therapeutic relationship is a place to contain the subsequent feelings of betrayal and hurt at not being saved or finding perfection. The patient is then liberated to reclaim his or her own humanly realizable power. Religious persons may have a more extreme case of this "addiction to perfection," to use Marion Woodman's telling name for this syndrome. One of my patients, for example, felt extremely guilty because he secretly did not care for people as much as he thought his priestly role demanded. He experienced himself actually as evil and satanic in the face of his image of Christ, which was of a perfect, patient, caring person. By examining carefully his assumptions about Christ and human goodness, he was able to admit the possibility of a less-perfect Christ ideal, come to terms with his own over-idealized introject, withdraw his inflated projections from me, and integrate his "satanic" self-view with his "Christ" self-view, thus developing a more realistic conception of human goodness and therefore his own priestly role.

#### BODY VERSUS SOUL

The major split faced by Christ was between body and soul. The primacy of the body is spoken in the film by Mary Magdalene, who says, "The body is the foundation," while Jesus asserts that "The soul is the foundation." Her view is his "last temptation." Jesus must reject her literally, in order to assert the soul's supremacy. Mary Magdalene, however, has lessons to teach Jesus. She will not be split off so easily. First, she confronts him with his humanity and keeps breaking through his false piety. In a lush scene, filled with images of men making love to Mary as she lies sprawled among colors, drums, chanting rhythms, snakes and lizards, she appears like a temple prostitute. A thin line between sexuality as sacred and sexuality

as sinful is suggested. (This is the ambiguity emphasized by Nikos Kazantzakis, on whose heretical novel the film is based.) When Christ refuses her invitation to spend the night, choosing instead the austere spirituality of the desert, she mocks: "You want to save my soul—this is where you'll find it (points to her body). You're the same as all the others, only you can't admit it. You're pitiful."

Later, as the voice of a black snake, she taunts, "What arrogance to save the world. Save yourself; aren't your own sins enough?" As the feminine voice, she reminds him to avoid the generalities of masculine logic and spirit, and attend to the feminine, concrete, and real things. Mary Magdalene reminds him that spirit dwells in flesh, in relationship, in eros. When she tempts him, she reminds him that she is like Eve, who came to Adam because he was "lonely" and "only" human.

Taken psychologically, this anima figure's voice reminds us not to split body and soul, but to listen to each. Mary Magdalene's voice, as the voice of embodied spirit, serves as an inner guide for Jesus. He cannot cut off her voice entirely, for to do so would be to cut off the feminine. In fact Mary Magdalene, Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha, and his mother Mary follow him throughout the film and are present at his death.

Mary Magdalene, as a figure, is a necessary catalyst at each moment that Jesus is given an opportunity to sharpen his spiritual power. For example, just after Judas decides to follow Christ, Jesus is faced with his first test: How can he manifest this new power? He admits that he does not know what he will do or say, that the words will come from God and pass through him. Just at this point, his first test appears: Mary Magdalene is being stoned by a crowd. Jesus stops the stoning, turns to the crowd and asks, "Who among you has not sinned? Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone." This famous teaching that we must not judge others, is really a psychological plea to look within. Helping us make the transition from action to reflection, Christ teaches about internalization. As a therapeutic move, to internalize means to withdraw one's projections, blame, envy and power from others, and instead to confront these within one's own soul.

Mary Magdalene also reminds Christ of his relationship to all women and to the archetypal woman within. The appearance of the second Mary, Lazarus's sister, and their presence with Christ's mother Mary at the crucifixion, suggests that the three women are aspects of a common archetype. Mary Magdalene becomes symbolic of all women, as his relationship with her is symbolic of his

relationship with the feminine. And when Mary Magdalene tells him, "You were hanging onto your mother, now me, then God," she is telling him another truth. This is, just as Jesus had to forcibly tear himself away from her that night, he also had to tear himself away from his mother. When he says to her, "You are not my mother, my real father is in Heaven," he is expressing his need to relinquish his attachment to body, earth and mother in order to progress spiritually and psychologically. Jesus's dissociation from part of his masculine nature is a giving up of personal history in order to reach transpersonal or archetypal consciousness as Christ.

Many psychological writers have argued that this kind of spiritualizing separation is a necessary stage for man's moral and psychological development. Certainly, it is necessary during the therapeutic process, to separate from one's literal mother and past. However, Christ recognizes his mother at the end. How are we to understand reconnecting with her psychologically? It seems that in spiritual development first a literal separation from concrete body, personal history, and attachments is necessary. However, as one progresses, the separation becomes more alchemical and less literal. Boundaries not only separate but provide the basis for new mergings; we separate from each other, yet we are also each other's mothers, sisters, and wives, fathers, sons and brothers. We are both human and god to each other. Each moment presents us with the possibility of attachment or separation, of moving from the personal to the impersonal, from the real to the archetypal. As the Buddhists say, it is literal to become too attached to the concept of non-attachment. With psychological sophistication, we can understand "detachment" not as an austere renunciation in the desert, but as on-the-spot letting go. Separation from objects, mothers and sexuality becomes fertile ground for fluid transformation. By re-embracing both sides of the dualisms of body/spirit, personal/archetypal, feminine/masculine, earth/heaven, we can spiritualize eros and eroticize (ground) spirituality.

This part of *The Last Temptation* reminded me of two residents who fell in love. One was a celibate priest sex addict, who had strong unresolved feelings toward his mother and despised women. The other was a co-dependent nun, unable to say "no" and addicted to pleasing. Together, while contained in the therapeutic community, confessing their stories, clearing up unfinished relationships with their mothers and fathers, they took back their projections of hatred and blame from each other and began to internalize their own locus of power and authority. Able to acknowledge their sexuality within

the context of relationship and not act on it freed them to discover a genuine tenderness which helped them heal and guide each other. In the same way, sexuality and regression, taboo and boundary, connection to personal history, can be transformed into love.

#### LANGUAGE AND IMAGINATION; RITUAL AND SYMBOL

Christ's development in the film demonstrates the use of imagination and symbol to transform dualisms of thought and action, fantasy and reality. At one point he says: "I don't know which is more beautiful, the world I can see or the world I can't see." That Heaven and earth are separate confounds him.

Jesus wonders what it means to die, and he admits that he is filled with fear. Then he finds himself at the wedding at Cana where he teaches that everyone should be allowed in just as he wants everyone admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven. Reading this wedding sequence psychologically, we can interpret it to mean that letting all the people in means accepting all the parts of the Self. All parts of Jesus's self include his fear, his sexuality, his desire for transcendence, and his desire to be an ordinary man and father. Tantric alchemical practices teach students to take the three poisons of passion, aggression and ignorance, and transmute them into their wisdom aspects of discrimination, energy, and generosity. In this way, Christ's alchemy was to take the raw materials of fear, lust and other emotions, and transmute them into love.

When Christ points to the wine, during the Last Supper, calling it "my blood," and to the bread, calling it "my body," he is using ritual and symbolic language to de-literalize matter and infuse it instead with meaning. And when he asks, rhetorically, "Do I have to die, is there any other way?" he points to the necessity of sacrifice as part of ritual. Literally, Christ has to die. Yet he arises from the dead. We must then ask, "Who dies? What dies?" Perhaps it is the literal aspect of the self—personal history, confusion, body—which die and give rise to subtle body and transformed emotions. Death, in a psychological process, refers to the death of the personal "self" so that the transpersonal "Self" can be born. All aspects of the original self are accepted, contained, sacrificed, and transmuted in the alchemy of death and resurrection—which produces Christ, the symbol of the Self.

What does this process and this film mean, then, for the ordinary religious person?

My clients learned that suppressing doubts about sexuality and spirituality did not make these conflicts disappear. Rather, secrecy

and shame were often reinforced, and double lives, false piety, and depression resulted. Bringing all parts of the self—personal history, light and shadow, fantasy—into a carefully contained place with an affirming witness and substituting acting-out with imagination, dialogical language, and symbolic ritual helped them answer the question: “Who am I?” Discovering their humanity within their spirituality brought them home again. I think that *The Last Temptation of Christ* can similarly help its viewers to discover godliness in their ordinary human natures. It carries the potential of a truly healing film.

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