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The True Temptation of Christ: "To Suffyr temptacion it is grett peyn"

by
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Reaction to the screening of the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Martin Scorsese and based on the Kazantzakis novel of the same name, can be vehemently negative. Those who oppose the film (most of whom steadfastly refused to see it) on the grounds that it is "blasphemous" probably do not realize that Scorsese continued and re-affirmed, in a new medium, a centuries-old tradition established in the medieval English Cyclic drama wherein The Temptation of Christ is the true temptation of a living, breathing human being. Scorsese reproduces faithfully the medieval thesis demonstrated most clearly in the N-Town cycle but one which is present in all the extant English cycles, a thesis which modern directors all too often ignore and, in so doing, inevitably stage a flat, boring depiction of the devil working feverishly to tempt an all-divine Christ who is not in the least interested in anything the devil has to offer.¹ Indeed, The Temptation of Christ, performed by the Guild of Freemen in York, England, on Sunday, 12 July 1998, with ten other plays of the larger York Cycle at five different stations under the title "York Mystery Plays 1998," unfortunately fell into this category of a "false" temptation, an all too typical interpretation by modern directors of this important struggle between good and evil. At York, the devil hopelessly attempted to tempt a defiantly untemptable and utterly divine Christ, a character in whom we as audience members never saw Jesus the man struggling to remain true to cosmic history.

If the film version of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is blasphemy today, then the N-Town pageant of The Temptation of Christ was also blasphemy during the nearly two centuries of its

¹ Martin Scorsese, dir., *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Universal Pictures, 1988. Screened at the University of Notre Dame 29-30 September 1990. The tumult from this screening continued for the entire academic year, although I must point out the administration never wavered in its support of the screening of the film. Also see Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Trans. P. A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), on which the film is based.

I am indebted both to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts (ISLA) and the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre at the University of Notre Dame (both in the College of Arts and Letters) for financial support which permitted me to attend the plays from the York Cycle, performed in York, England, in the summer of 1998.

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"run."² Both play and film visually depict a genuine, true temptation of a real human being (who also happens to be God) by a disguised, deceitful, and mendacious devil, the same devil who used identical techniques successfully to tempt the first human beings, Adam and Eve, to commit original sin. The human/God, Jesus Christ, ultimately musters the strength necessary to reject this demonic temptation in both medieval cyclic drama and modern film, and, as a result, fulfills biblical prophecy and becomes the means of salvation for all humanity forever.

The biblical account of the Temptation appears in Matthew 4:1-11 and in Luke 4:1-13. The medieval cyclic playwrights follow the sequence described in Matthew rather than in Luke, i.e., (1) turning stones to bread (gluttony), (2) jumping from the parapet (vainglory), and (3) rule of the world through supplication to Satan (covetousness). Scorsese includes additional extra-biblical demonic temptation scenes, including the very controversial "last temptation" where the crucified Christ is tempted down from the Cross to take a fully human life, replete with multiple wives, children, and a natural death in old age.

Of the extant English cycles, the N-Town playwright best depicts a true temptation by first staging a conference between Satan and two other high-ranking officers of hell, Beelzebub and Belial. In his opening speech, Satan says he has "grett dowte" (193, 4) which centers around the true identity and future intentions of Jesus:

The dowte _at I haue it is of cryst i-wys
born he was in bedleem as it is seyde
And many a man wenyth _at goddys sone he is
(194, 14-6)

Satan asks point-blank for advice: "In _is grett dowte what is best to do?" (194, 28). He goes on to describe his apprehensions for the future of hell, should Jesus be God's son, "All our gode days _an Xulde sone be goo" (194, 33).

Belial then proposes the actual temptation of Jesus, "with sotyl whylys if _at _ou may / A-say to make hym to don A-mys" (195, 42-3). Beelzebub advises narrowing the Temptation to specific sins and creates the triune (and biblically correct) number of "synnys thre" (195, 50). Beelzebub alludes, of course, to the three sins Adam and Eve committed when they ate the

² The N-Town cycle has also been labeled, at differing times in its history, the *Ludus Coventriae*, the Hegge Cycle, and the Lincoln cycle. References to the N-Town cycle are from K.S. Block, ed., *Ludus Coventriae*, EETS, ES, 120 (1922; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960) and occur parenthetically in the text.

fruit of the tree of knowledge--gluttony, vainglory, and covetousness--and which successfully brought about the Fall of Humanity.

Satan takes his minions' advice at face value and declares, "I xal apposyn hym [Christ] with-inne A tyde" (195, 47). Satan leaves for earth as Beelzebub tells him that Lucifer "in helle so derke" (195, 57) sends his blessing; Belial says that "All _e deuelys _at ben in helle / shul pray to Mahound" (195, 62-3), one of the many anti-infidel comments in the cycle, to speed Satan's journey and to provide him spiritual comfort as he attempts to carry out what will be a most difficult task, on which, when it fails, sets in motion the Crucifixion.

The N-Town dramatist deals very satisfactorily with the gluttony scene and in so doing begins to establish a true, genuine temptation. He inserts a speech by Jesus describing hunger and how it might be satiated by a morsel of bread. Jesus says:

. . . bred haue I non myn hungyr for to slake
A lytel of a loof relese myn hungyr myght
but murses haue I non my comforte for to make.
(195, 71-3)

When Satan proposes that Jesus "turne these flyntys. . . ffrom Arde stonys to tendyr brede," (196, 81-2) the audience knows that bread is paramount in Jesus' thoughts. Satan repeats his proposal three times in twelve lines, pounding home the thought, "Bread, bread, bread--if you are God, you can make it and satiate your physical, human hunger!" The playwright thus skillfully produces a genuine temptation to commit sin. By constructing a gluttony scene which fuses biblical plot to the cyclic requirement of relating Adam's fall to Christ's temptation, the N-Town pageant retains at the same time the most important aspect of all, the depiction of a believable temptation to commit sin.

The temptation at the pinnacle of the temple follows the gluttony scene. To jump from the pinnacle is to produce a fall, and if Jesus is not the Son of God, then the physical fall will kill him, and Satan will take his soul to hell. If Jesus is the Son of God, then to do Satan's bidding--to be guilty of vainglory--will precipitate a "fall" more cosmic in nature. The N-Town Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle, where he chides him to "preue what _at _ou be" (197, 111). Jesus refuses to jump and rebukes Satan for asking him to tempt God.

Having failed in his first two attempts, Satan goes all out and offers Jesus dominion over the world in exchange for allegiance to him. Jesus' refusal to accept the offer confuses Satan in the N-Town pageant and causes him to despair. Satan has failed to tempt Jesus to commit sin, and he still does not know anything definite about Jesus' true nature.

Jesus in the N-Town pageant explains directly to the audience that he suffered the Temptation "to teche _e how _ou xalt rewle the / Whan _e devylle tothe the Assayle" (200, 203-4), that is, to teach humanity how to exercise self control; Jesus further admonishes mankind to resist the devil even though he admits, apropos to the thesis of this paper, that "To Suffyr temptacion it is grett peyn" (200, 209). Modern productions fail when they ignore Christ's own recognition of the "peyn" involved in resisting demonic temptation by not letting the audience see, feel, and sense the genuine "peyn" Christ the man suffers at each step of The Temptation.

The film effectively carries the true temptation one step further but does so within a tradition of true temptation that has precedent in the medieval drama going back to the fourteenth century. In the film, we see no devils in hell conspiring; the focus is much more on Jesus and his personal dilemma. Is he being tempted by the devil to claim to be the Messiah? Is it God talking to him, or is it the devil in disguise? Who comes to him in the desert, God, the devil, or both? (It turns out both do.) Perseverance ultimately makes it clear who is God and who is the devil, and the serpent imagery clearly and consistently clues the audience in to demonic origin. The connection between God (who is patently good) and the devil (who is patently evil) is very close in this film, and it is not always immediately clear to Jesus (or to the audience) by whom he is being advised. In the final "last temptation," not to be the Messiah but to be "just" a man, the demonic angel claims to be of God and is disguised as a sweet, innocent child. Only when she says, "There is only one woman, but they have many faces," does the audience know for sure she is not of God, although her bringing Christ down from the cross, with references to Abraham ("You have done enough; you have met the test!"), should be a clue to all of us that something is very wrong. The hallucination -- is it real? -- makes it clear that the "last temptation" to be a man only instead of the Messiah is the most insidious temptation of all, because it deprives humanity forever of the possibility for salvation. The preaching will go on and the myth of Christ will be created by Saul/Paul, but true salvation will be impossible in a world where Jesus did not die on the cross for the sins of

humanity. Jesus finally realizes what he must do and leaves this hallucinatory, demonic, futuristic, alternative world to return to the cross to fulfill the demands of prophecy and to create cosmic history as Christians believe it to be.

If Adam's fall prefigures the Temptation, then Satan uses established, successful methods to secure Christ's downfall. He fails, and the relationship of God both to humanity and to Satan begins to dance. In both play and film, Jesus (God as man) rebukes Satan and initiates the reversal that culminates in the freeing of the souls from hell at the Harrowing. This failure of demonic power against one man who is more than one man provides the mirror into which all humanity can look. If humanity freely wills it, humanity too can cause the devil to fail. The Temptation directs mankind along a new route--one that will provide an alternative to the guaranteed hellish damnation of all who have died since the Fall of Man. The newly baptized Jesus rebukes Satan and, in so doing, the certain damnation inherent to Adam's original disobedience to God fades.

Having failed, Satan returns to hell still unsure of Christ's true nature. Insulted and discouraged, he immediately begins to work clandestinely to bring about the death of Corpus Christi, so that he can deal directly with Anima Christi in hell. In the play, the Temptation sets the stage for the next major confrontation between the immortal forces of good and evil, a confrontation which breaks down hell's gates, releases numerous souls, and sends Satan sprawling into hell's deepest pit where he will join Lucifer for a millennium. In the film, the "last temptation" is a bold attempt to prevent the Harrowing, but it, too, is unsuccessful. Lucifer's prologue in *Passion Play, I*, of the N-Town cycle points up well the significance of the Temptation to later events on Calvary and at the gates of limbo. Speaking of his failure to corrupt Jesus, he says: "His Answerys were mervelous. I knew not his intencion / nevyr I had myn intent" (226, 31-2). Before the Temptation onwards, the devil's inability to control temporal events grows until he finally arrives at a disadvantageous, defensive position from which he never fully recovers. The Temptation of Christ marks the beginning of the end of an irrevocably condemned mankind. In the film, the "last temptation" marks the last gasp of a hugely powerful diablerie that has in its grasp all the souls of all the humans who have ever died. When the "last temptation" fails, the salvation of humanity becomes possible, and the cosmos is forever changed as the Atonement, the reconciliation between God and humanity brought about by the death of Christ on the cross, becomes not only possible but palpable.

Why must "The Temptation of Christ," in both medieval pageant and modern film, depict a true temptation? Can we as audience members have our faith reaffirmed just as surely with a perfunctory catechistic temptation scene depicting facile rejections of sin by a perfect man/God? Why have artists for over 500 years created an agonized Christ wrestling with his own very human free will and visceral needs who nevertheless ultimately, if even at the very last moment, "does the right thing" and rejects demonic temptation on behalf of humanity's eternal salvation? I offer three explanations.

First, the audience must understand the true humanity of Christ and his genuine ability and, indeed, requirement to exercise free will. A perfect unhuman God merely inhabiting a human body is very boring dramatically because no conflict can exist or be created, no development of character is possible, no decision making process can occur, and no human exercise of free will takes place in the face of absolute good and evil. God the Father is one of the most dramatically uninteresting characters in literature when he is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (not to mention patently serious). The doctrine of free will must be seen to work for all humans, even god-humans. Was Christ simply programmed to fulfill prophecy or did he make decisions, really tough decisions, which ultimately fulfill prophecy? Jesus the man must exercise as much freedom as any other human has, and he does so in both the cyclic drama and in the Scorsese film.

Secondly, for God's time on earth as Christ to have meaning, Jesus the man must experience being truly human, with all ramifications and complexities, including the experience of true temptation to commit evil. The "soft" but no less deadly sins of Lechery, Gluttony, and Sloth, make the Mary Magdalene sequences in the film both necessary and believable. The body has to want to sin for the rejection of sin to have meaning. Jesus' ultimate rejection of genuine demonic temptation serves to inspire all mortal human beings. We humans can be tempted and yet can persevere and can rise above it. There is no sin in being tempted; the sin is in giving in to temptation. And even if humans give in to sin through their inherent human weakness (as Adam and Eve so dramatically do at The Fall), Christ's demonstrated strength against the devil, as depicted in both pageant and film, makes salvation a continuing option.

Third, when Jesus the human being overcomes and rejects real temptation in both film and play (the triumph of good over evil through the exercise of free will), he elevates all of humanity. Jesus the man consciously rejects demonic temptation and does what is "right," what he must do both to live with his human conscience on earth and to edify his soul and, thus by extension, to edify all souls of all humanity throughout eternity.

Both play and film reaffirm the faith by giving the audience a deeper understanding of both Christ's humanity and the true commitment God made to humanity when he came to earth as Jesus. Half a millennium apart, both play and film artistically and creatively deal with profound issues and concerns shared by Christians everywhere.