

# Saving Jesus from Christianity

## *The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)*

“You work miracles? Make a miracle for us. Make us believe in you.  
Otherwise, go away.”

### Production Information

Directed by Martin Scorsese (*Aviator*, 2004; *Gangs of New York*, 2002; *After Hours* 1985) screenplay by Paul Schrader (*Bringing Out the Dead*, 1999; *Raging Bull*, 1980; *Taxi Driver* 1976). William Dafoe (Jesus), Harvey Keitel (Judas). Music by Peter Gabriel. 163 minutes

### Film History

Personal “obsession” of director Martin Scorsese. Well regarded for gritty, violent dramas, *Mean Streets* (1973), *Raging Bull* (1980). Raised Catholic even thought of becoming priest. Sensuality of Italian American Catholicism. Place of men—as independent thinkers, not as “handmaidens” of institutional (often Irish American) Church. Men standing outside church waiting for their women to come out. Seeing faith as individual, as always questioning. Not as obedient and blindly communal. Film as serious statement on religion: “I’ve always wanted to do a spiritual movie but religion gets in the way.”

Reads novel in 1972 buys rights from Zazantzakis’ widow in 1977. In 1983 announces film in production with Paul Schrader adopting novel into screenplay. Schrader comes from Calvinist, Dutch Reform household. Never saw a movie until he was 17. Sees film as profoundly religious: “. . . God was with me on this film.” Difficulty getting money, eventually gets from Paramount for low-budget—originally \$60 million down to \$7. Controversy makes Paramount back out and so Universal picks up. No movement for three years, but Scorsese gets more famous. Finally finishes shooting in 58 days, all sorts of problems (filmed in Moroccan desert, not Israel as originally planned. S says: “It was like a war.”). Interprets this religiously: “The more suffering, the better.”

Hires Christian marketing firm to help promote film and act as liaison between studio and evangelicals (as would Mel Gibson). Not given screenplay or see “rushes” but pirated script surfaces and it circulates among Evangelicals in April. Marketing firm manager quits, feels he was “set up.” Universal decides to promote film and defend its artistic vision and religious integrity. Film promoted as debate over free speech and religious conservatism. Controversy around world, riots in Greece, policemen in France injured.

Film doesn’t make much money. Nominated for Oscar for best director but doesn’t win.

Scorsese wanting better Jesus than he saw in other biblical pictures, “to tear away all the old Hollywood films. . . and create a Jesus you could talk to and get to know.” He wanted to “engender discussions.” Rise of independent films, Sundance named in 1985 taking over US Film Festival in 1980.

Method acting—highly verbal, realistic, life-like. Extremely word centered film.

## **Social History**

Creation of “culture wars.” Conservative moment. Divided nation not over race or class but over bodies and art. Are there “normal” bodies or not? And if art shows “not normal” bodies? Is it free speech or arrogant blasphemy?

Ronald Reagan elected president in 1981 serves until 1989. Former president of the Screen Actor’s guild. Getting “tough” on communism reflected in “tough” movies of 80s (Rocky, Rambo, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, Clint Eastwood). Contrast heightens confused Jesus. But Rock Hudson dies of AIDS in 1985, first major film star to die and his homosexuality “revealed.” Questions about what’s underneath all the male bravado?

In 1984 Democrats running with VP candidate Geraldine Ferraro (Italian-American Catholic mother of 3). Landslide for Regan. Push to kill the Equal Rights Amendment begins in 1972, “Eagle Forum” founded to Stop ERA in 1975. Flourishing of conservative “Think Tanks” like Heritage Foundation (founded 1973) and American Enterprise Institution. Magazines like *National Review* (edited by William Buckley). Reagan appoints half of entire federal judiciary and three new Supreme Court justices, including Sandra Day O’Connor. Liberalism on the defensive with “Teflon” president.

Controversies over art: Salman Rushdie publishes *Satanic Verses* (1988). Perceived as offensive to Muhammad and Islam. *Fatwa* is issued by Ayatolla Khomeini for his death. Rushdie goes into hiding. Art museums become places of social conflict as conservatives turn attention to taxes going to “obscene” “art.” *Christa* (1984), a crucifix where Jesus is a woman rather than a man, was displayed in Cathedral of St. John and caused uproar until removed. Robert Mapplethorpe, gay photographer and artists, exhibitions taken out of public view in Washington DC (1989) and in Cincinnati, Ohio (1990).

## **Religious History**

Who do you say I am? Who was Jesus? What did do? What is the essence of Christianity? Theology—making sense of God, belief—made in novels and films.

Importance of challenging you to think.

Nikos Kazantzakis was born in Crete in 1883 and studied to be a lawyer. Then went on to study philosophy in Paris and art and literature in Germany and Italy. In 1945 became

the Greek the Minister of Education. He was a “renaissance man”—he wrote treatises on Nietzsche and other modern philosophers, studied Buddhism, translated Homer, Dante, and Goethe into modern Greek, and was a relentless traveler. Famous in America for his novel *Zorba the Greek* (1946) was became a movie in 1964. Scholars on Kazantzakis say he was torn between a life of action, of being in the world of business and families and of the life of the spirit, of meditation and asceticism. Understanding of Christ enriched by intense studies of philosophy, non-Western religions, socialism, of travels throughout the world. Ends up settling in France after WWII and at 65+ finishes eight books in nine years left of life. Controversial in Greece. Influenced by Nietzsche’s understanding of freedom—the struggle for freedom must be fought not only without fear but without hope. Freedom is not the reward for struggle, it is the struggle itself.

In 1953 publishes *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Christian dualism-- the flesh and the spirit. Difficult for Americans and for Mormons to understand. US preference for life of action and involvement—families, work, heroism, movement, consumerism, busy-ness. Traditional Christian value: the religious spirit is easily distracted. Jesus as model—no family, no kids, no job. “Consider the lilies of the field. . .” Long monastic tradition of separation of the sexes. Underlying division—male (mind, spirit) and female (body, mater). Women as sexual tempters. If that’s too unbelievable—try women as linking one to family, friends, emotions, clothing, cars, food, relationships—everything other than God and work; God and art. Direct contact with divine coming only after purifying oneself from distractions, focusing on higher order. Kazantzakis one of those extraordinary people you meet (creative geniuses) who does not have a “normal” life—like Jesus. Key is struggle, seeking.

Thus Jesus, as the prototype of the free man, must be in continual struggle—in temptation. And it has to be a real, not pretend, struggle. Jesus must feel the attractiveness of matter, and at times, succumb. The proximity of sin. Otherwise where is the meaning of his humanness? S: “Jesus is plagued by God.”

Kazantzakis not interested in reinterpreting Christ to make the church, the community of believers, “better.” He wanted to lift Christ out of the Church altogether because organized Christianity was dead. It had no Christ in it. In film, Jesus denies his own role in founding Christianity. He wanted to make Jesus a figure for a new age. Again, the question is—where is God in the modern world?

K and S create a “modern” Jesus who is fully human. Jesus is one of us, if he could overcome temptation then so could we. How would we behave if we had visions? Would we be confused? Uncertain? Would we want a family and sex? Would we want to die?

Excommunicated by the Greek Orthodox church in 1954. Book placed on Catholic “Index” of banned books. Hospitalized in Germany after having been given a smallpox vaccine in China. There he died in 1957, body flown to Athens but archbishop refused to let body lie in state. In Crete given a Christian burial.

Re-assertion of religious groups into “commenting” on movies, especially when movies (mis)represent something of “their” subject matter. Shift back to Protestants from Catholics Controversial before even reaches theaters. Mainstream Protestants remain neutral, protests taken up by conservatives.

Rise of Religious Right: Shift from conservative Protestants ignoring pop culture and politics as evil. Since election of first “Born Again” president, Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). Carter end of “old” evangelicals—like Schrader, live a simple life of quiet Christianity. Carter’s refusal to take up conservative agenda pushes “Christian Right” to Republicans. Politics and profits evidence of godliness, not greed. American Family Association, focus on the Family; Family Radio Corporation, Jerry Falwell’s *Old Time Gospel Hour*. Christians should assert their power and promote their vision of American culture. Direct political agenda to their concerns: family issues (women at home with men in authority), anti-homosexuality, prayer in school, anti-abortion, patriotism. Re-assertion of white male power. New techniques of mass mobilization of support—use of TV and radio.

Demonstrating power of conservatives (Catholics join with Protestants) as defining “authentic” religion. Letter writing campaign organized by key evangelical leaders, 500 a day becoming 5,000 a week. Used street theater, shouting, picketing, boycotts. Burned not Scorsese’s effigy in public but Wasserman, Jewish head of Universal studio.

Ritual demonstration of cultural power—by both right and left. Scorsese’s Jesus is not their Jesus. Set up for Gibson’s *The Passion*.

## **Resources**

Robin Riley, *Film, Faith and Cultural Conflict: The case of Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ*, 2003

## **Questions to think About?**

What is the “Last Temptation” and how does Jesus deal with this?

Why does Judas act the way that he does?

Where are women in the film and what do they do? How do they move the narrative along?

What is “modern” about the film?

Last year a comment was: “If Jesus doubts, why should we have faith in him?” How would you respond to this comment via the film?