Movie Review

*Of Gods and Men (Des hommes et des dieux)*¹

Starring Lambert Wilson, Michael Lonsdale, Farid Larbi, and Jacques Hurlin

Directed by Xavier Beauvois, Running Time 120 minutes, Rated PG

In French and Arabic with English subtitles

This remarkable film, whose French title is more apt since it is primarily about men and their Gods, was the most important movie of 2011, although it would not be surprising if you missed it. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did not recognize it in any category and even where it was shown, it left town quickly. The Baltimore County Public Library, which purchases multiple copies of the violent and profane junk that passes for feature films today, never bought a copy of the DVD even when asked to do so.

The film is based on the true story of nine French Trappists of the Monastery of Our Lady of Atlas, established in 1947 near the Muslim village of Tibhirine in the Atlas mountains about sixty miles from Algiers (Kiser 2002). The eldest, Luc (Michael Lonsdale), is a physician who conducts regular free clinics for the populace. Many come to him for advice including a young girl who has been pledged to marry someone she does not love. He tells her that he had many loves before finding his “true love” sixty years before and that she will find hers. The monks help the illiterate residents with letter writing and getting photos for their required identity papers. The monks work the land and join in happily in a Muslim boy’s coming-of-age party.

The first part of the film is idyllic, reflecting a decade of leadership by Father Christian (Lambert Wilson). The son of a distinguished French military family, he

had been raised in Algeria and had fought in the Algerian war of independence on the French side. After entering the Cistercians, he dedicated his life to establishing a strong relationship with Muslims. Before joining the monastery in Tibhirine, Christian studied with the White Fathers in Rome, an order devoted to both African conversion and Christian–Muslim reconciliation. He often invited their Muslim neighbors to share meals and discuss their religious beliefs at the monastery. A student of the Quran, which is seen prominently on his desk, he noted that devout Muslims identify with the monks because they both had ritual daily prayers. He was often critical of his co-religionists, something that probably had its roots in his familiarity with prejudiced elites in France and Algeria. In addition, his great great aunt had been a member of the order of the Society of Helpers in the 1880s. Serving the sick poor and outcasts especially blacks in New York City and St. Louis, they fought against religious prejudice in the Church at the time (Kiser 2002). By the same token, many of his colleagues thought that he was too “sensitive” and loathe to criticize Muslims or the Quran.

In 1993, the comity is pierced when a radical Islamist stabs a young girl in the heart for not wearing her hijab. This is followed by a manifesto issued by a Muslim terrorist group GIA Commandos or (Armed Islamic Group) stating that: “Foreigners have 30 days to leave the

country; if they do not they are responsible for their own deaths.” It is issued with an emblem picturing the Quran with crossed swords and signed by Abu Mariam (Father of Mary) (Kiser 2002). A fatwa is proclaimed in order to legitimize the killing of unarmed civilians and to lead the perpetrators to paradise rather than to hell where they would otherwise be condemned to drink boiling water and putrid blood (Kiser 2002).

The gang slits the throats of Croatian newcomers who are helping the locals with their farming. Some of the monks are worried that they are on the terrorists’ list to be exterminated. Christian is resolute in the belief that they will survive and rejects an offer of protection from the army as not consistent with their beliefs of openness and of not being aligned with the government. When even the terrorist leader Ali Fayattia (Farid Larbi) warns him that their lives are in danger, Christian stares the leader down and unilaterally makes the decision to stay. However, as the violence escalates, he holds another vote to satisfy those who are in favor of leaving for another place where they can carry out their good works and pray in safety. Christian points out how dependent the villagers are on the monks for their revenue (jams and honey) and medical care. Luc sees as many as one hundred and fifty patients a day. They decide to stay, saying that to do otherwise would violate their Christian ethic, but do put in place some precautions in case of attack, such as locking the gates at night and drawing up escape plans, if needed. When the terrorist leader seeks medical care, Christian decides that Luc should help him over the objections of governmental officials who question the wisdom of saving a wretch who has the blood of innocent people on his hands. This is followed by a temporary respite, and there is a lovely

scene near the end when the regional abbot visits with supplies. However, the day of reckoning finally arrives, and the monastery is emptied, and the monks are taken away to what seems like certain death. Indeed, their bodies were never found, only their severed heads.

The movie poses a number of questions for viewers. Was Christian right in his adamant refusal to leave? According to his older brother, a former director of the French nuclear arsenal, Christian knew well what danger he and the others were in. They were warned not only by the Algerian government and the military but also their Muslim neighbors. What would you do if your life were seriously threatened and you could escape? Would you stand your ground and live your faith no matter what the cost? Would you be like Brother Luc who says that he had met the devil in the Nazis and he does not fear him?

Steven Greydanus, movie reviewer for the *National Catholic Register*, suggests that the film may be seen as a test of the strength of the viewers’ faith (Greydanus 2011), a test which I may have failed. I agree with fellow Catholic physician Dr. John Neff (personal communication) who characterized it as an instance where *belief* (that Christians and Muslims could live beside one another in the Atlas Mountains in peace) and *reality* (that it was not possible at that time) were too far apart. To my mind, prudence dictated that the monks, who had so much to give, should leave since their deaths were inevitable. But that is not the calculus of martyrs, although some monks specifically declared that martyrdom was not their desire.

There are other questions that arise like the perennial one about what to do when a physician is asked to care for an evil person, in this case a terrorist who has killed many and is likely to kill more if he survives. Another very relevant issue is that the

Muslim townspeople pictured in the film are law-abiding and want to live in peace with Christians but they are intimidated into silence. Those who do speak up are killed by the more radical extremists. The killing of the young woman raises the issue of the imposition of Sharia law and its unfairness to women. The film also can be used as a vehicle for discussing how poorly the mainstream media has covered the killing of Christians around the world and their being systematically driven from lands they settled hundreds of years before the birth of Mohammed or of Islam. It is estimated that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries, and the martyrdom of Christians continues unabated in the new millennium (Barron 2011).

See the film, and let us know what you think.

ENDNOTES

1. Originally published in *The Pharos* of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, 75.3 (Summer 2012): 41–43.

REFERENCES

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- Kiser, J.W. 2002. *The Monks of Thibirine: Faith love and terror in Algeria*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

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