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Christianity and Its Global Context

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Term Paper

Throughout the modern century, a few names have plastered the billboards of every movie theatre: Angelina, Brad, Leo, and Meryl. However, there is one star not mentioned whose posthumous acting resume trumps even the greatest actor: that of Jesus Christ, Son of God. Although I state Jesus’ Hollywood repertoire in jest, no star has captivated audiences across America quite like that of Christ. Through symbolic movies, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and seemingly accurate movies, such as *the Passion of the Christ*, Jesus has become a figure of both Christian and secular transfixion. However, the question arises: has the guise of Hollywood rendered the figure of the traditional Jesus Christ unrecognizable in terms of Western Christianity?

Although many artists have idealized Jesus Christ in paintings, literature, and music for centuries, in the 1970’s, the Son of God took a turn for the accessible. In a cover story for Time Magazine entitled, “The Jesus Revolution”, a new side of Christianity began to take shape, one that rejected not only the “material values of conventional America but the prevailing wisdom of American theology” (“New” 2). In essence, the loving embrace of psychedelia reached its capacity in the creation of the brotherly, peace-loving Christ of the early 1970’s. However, this Christ attained staying power when in 1970, the idea of a “groovy” Jesus reached the minds of two young British composers, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber (“Gold” 2). By 1971, their rock opera, entitled, “Jesus Christ Superstar”, had become a best-selling LP (“New” 3). Although the original movement of so called “Jesus People” had originated out of the hippie-strung streets of San Francisco in 1967, Rice and Lloyd Webber’s album allowed for the movement to reach homes across America (“New” 2). Rooted in the soulful, bluesy, and rock sounds of the late 1960’s, the modern approach to a classical figure worked: as noted by the Time Magazine Article, “The Gold Rush to Golgotha”, schoolchildren, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish people were all in attendance at the premiere of the Broadway production in 1971 (1). The director of the production, Tom O’Horgan, managed to spare no expense in matching the grandeur of the music: at one point, Jesus rises from the floor covered in a $20,000 robe (“Gold” 4). Even though the production was nominated for five Tony Awards in 1972, protest groups were abounding, such as the American Jewish Committee who condemned the production for blackening the image of Jews (“Gold” 1). Despite the entire hubbub, however, 1973 brought back both the image of an approachable Jesus and the hysteria of manipulating the image of Christ in the film *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Certainly, after reading up on the history of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, I didn’t expect complete accuracy from the film version. The film focuses on the more human side of all the characters, even including Jesus in this aspect. Furthermore, the film provides an explanation for biblical controversy. One such focus is on Judas, played by actor Carl Anderson. In an interview with Time Magazine, Lloyd Webber and Rice felt pity for Judas, who despite his bad name was ultimately just an “instrument in Jesus’ will” (“Gold”3). Thus, a good portion of the film follows Judas’ discontent with Jesus’ current path. In the song “Heaven on Their Minds”, Judas screams at the top of a dusty mountaintop: “My admiration for you hasn't died but every word you say today gets twisted 'round some other way and they'll hurt you if they think you've lied” (Jewison). Although the optimist in me wishes to see the proclaimed good in Judas, the feat is almost impossible upon reflecting back to the Bible. For instance, in the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible, Matthew 26: 16 reads, “And from that moment (Judas) began to look for an opportunity to betray him” after receiving 30 silver pieces from the high priests. Such a proclamation is far from echoing a betraying Judas who speaks because he is dissatisfied with Jesus’ lack of focus. Similarly, in Matthew 26:25, Judas denies his foretold betrayal of Jesus, However, the film portrays not only Judas owning up to his betrayal, but also the extreme selfishness of the disciples, hoping to write a book in the Bible so someone would forget them when they died as sung in the song, “The Last Supper”(Jewison). The creation of a pitiful Judas does not stand in complete contradiction to the text, however. In the film, driven mad with insane guilt after throwing back the thirty pieces of silver, Judas runs to the top of a mount and takes the rope of his belt to hang himself from a tree. The same image is depicted in Matthew 27: 5, save the rock-medley of course, as Judas threw down the silver, departed, and hung himself. Judas achieves roundness in character through explanation; Jesus attains understanding through questioning.

Despite the turn on the character of Judas, I found Jesus’ character to be the most interesting. Despite my own faith in a rather personal Jesus, the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a removed character, to say the least. After all, Jesus was the Son of Man, thus his own personality has traits mimicked in human nature, and we are personal beings. Judas suggests in the song, “Superstar”, that Jesus’ fate was ultimately in his own control, singing, “I don’t understand why you let the things you did get so out of hand” (Jewison). However, I find it almost painful to identify with a Jesus whose death was caused by his own inability to keep his teachings from spreading, I am a Christian, believing that Jesus’ suffering is the reason for forgiveness for my earthly sins. Essentially, Jesus’ teachings are the means to my eternal salvation; so certainly, Jesus’ earthly blessings cannot stand as a testament for the faults of Christ. In the same way, Mary Magdalene plays a central character in the film, proclaiming her romantic love for Jesus in the song, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” (Jewison). Certainly, there is no reason for Jesus not to be presented as an attractive man. However, the portrayal of Mary Magdalene was entirely different to what I used to: an image of a brotherly-love type Jesus, concerned more with his teachings than relations. To imagine Jesus as man wrapped in sexual interest would be common with such stature, but by no means does his sexual capacity play a central role in the Bible. One of the most unusual omissions from the movie was the lack of Mother Mary. She plays one of the most central roles in Jesus’ life as well as his death. Thus, her absence notes a failure in another type of love: motherly love. Above all, though, I found the most interesting portrayal of Jesus in his prayer on Gethsemane. In the song, “I Only Want To Say (Gethsemane)”, Jesus screams his uncertainty about his certain faith. In one line, Jesus asks God directly, “Why I should die, would I be more noticed than I ever was before?” (Jewison). Not only does this depict a reluctant Jesus, but also Jesus has managed to become somewhat of a diva. By questioning God’s plan, demanding his questions to be answered, Jesus speaks to a larger human capacity than ever. In Matthew 26: 39-44. Jesus prays only for God’s will to be done.

Jesus’ image in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is certainly one of the more human portrayals, but at the same time, what kind of ramifications does taking Genesis 1:27, “So God created humankind in his image…” on the effect of Jesus’ power? I’m not going to deny, I took comfort in seeing a more diverse image of the Christ figure. Throughout my childhood, I never truly believed that Jesus suffered in pain and that somehow; he just transcended all of the hatred and pain. Certainly, the idea that Jesus didn’t suffer at all stands in contradiction to the Christian tradition that Jesus suffered for our sins. However, the Jesus of the film didn’t seem to suffer at all during his trial. The only genuine emotion I received from the character of Jesus was while he was praying at Gethsemane. Even here, the connection was merely from a musical standpoint: the rock of the soundtrack demands that Jesus wail a high D, a feat for any male that is quite impressive to say the least. Although singing range makes Jesus cool and acceptable for nonbelievers, I found it to be more discouraging from the actual tradition of the Christian faith. If one were to expect the same Jesus in church as in the film, he or she would be sorely disappointed. However, what happens at the opposite spectrum, when tight scriptural reference is used in a film to appeal to the masses?

In 2004, Mel Gibson directed a $30 million dollar film intended to capture the exact suffering of Jesus Christ (Corliss). The film, entitled, *the Passion of the Christ*, moved America with its capturing of the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life. What Jesus Christ Superstar had in pizzazz, the Passion doubled in gore. In Josh Sanborn’s “Top 10 Ridiculously Violent Movies” for Time Magazine, Roger Ebert is quoted saying, “The movie is 126 minutes long…at least 100 of those minutes are concerned specifically and graphically with the details of the torture of the death of Jesus” (Sanborn). Such attention to blood didn’t hurt at the box office: the film grossed $370 million in the U.S. alone. However, what does one lose in the attempt to achieve perfection in a story already flawed?

In such a largely explained movie, the biggest loss a viewer experiences is in their own personal interpretation. In general, the movies used to show Christians in Sunday and Bible School are lackluster if even existing. I can remember sitting in confirmation, watching animated video after video to explain Jesus’ resurrection. *The Passion of the Christ*, however, turns the lackluster into the gruesome. A thirty million dollar budget is tremendous for any movie, much less for a Christian film. No expense was spared in blood, guts, or gore. However, because of my somewhat shadowed impression of Jesus’ suffering as mentioned earlier, the tremendous amount of physical suffering was just too much for my Lord. I understand that Jesus died for my transgressions, but by no means did I need to see his skin ripped from his own body after getting a command to get 39 lashes. In a terrible display of both the harshness of the reigning government and yet the humanity behind Pontius Pilates’ orders, suddenly, Jesus’ suffering became all too real to me through the presence of blood alone. Accompanied with the script spoken entirely in Aramaic, the bloody suffering of Jesus Christ no longer allows for individuals to see their own Christ-figure dying; rather, Gibson creates every scene so that a non-believer could easily imagine, “So this is how Christianity came to be…” (Scott). One of the more disturbing, and inaccurate notions is that Gibson uses Satan as the explanation for evil. In almost every scene in which Jesus is suffering, Satan’s androgynous head can be seen mingling with the people: when Jesus is praying Gethsemane, when Judas hangs himself from his own guilt at seeing Jesus’ suffering, when Jesus receives his lashes, and when Jesus is crucified. The devil is used to explain almost every sin; however, the Bible does not indicate this directly, rather, that the sin leading up to Jesus’ death was necessary for his resurrection.

Thus, what one gains in accuracy one loses in interpretation, and what one gains in accessibility one loses in scriptural fact. However, as far as reaching the masses, I believe *Superstar* to have true staying effect. The emotional power of *the Passion of the Christ* is rooted in the knowledge of Jesus dying for our sins, for the nonbeliever, the film simply stands as a gore-fest. On the other hand, *Jesus Christ Superstar* has bridged the generation gap to reach out to Christians and skeptics, Jews and non-believers. *The Passion of the Christ* can show humanity what Christianity is all about, but *Jesus Christ Superstar* encourages humanity to explore Christ for their own.

Both symbolically, in movies like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and literally, in films such as *Passion of the Christ*, Jesus has made a splash in the film industry for the better and for the worst. Although both films have weaknesses, they represent gradual movement in the appreciation of Christ Jesus not only as a study of faith, but also, as a study of film.

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