

Film, Faith and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*

ROBIN RILEY, 2003

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Writing more than 15 years after the *Last Temptation* controversy erupted, there is something quaintly anachronistic about Riley's detailed investigation into the way in which Scorsese's fictionalised biopic about the person of Christ polarised America. The purpose of the book is to disclose exactly how liberal progressives on the one side and religious conservatives on the other "became locked in a struggle for legitimacy, attacking the weakness of the opposition while reaffirming their own institutional legitimacy" (3). While this is in itself a valid enterprise, Riley's concern that religious conservatives fell victim to an unsympathetic and intolerant media and legal system, which ultimately sanctioned the right of Scorsese's film to be released, has been critically undermined by the more recent controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, which – in a delicious twist of irony – was sanctioned by conservative groups and scorned by liberals. It is not Riley's fault that Gibson's *Passion* was released just months after the book's publication, but the book's specific remit only to cover the period of 16 months, from the moment when Universal Studios approved the *Last Temptation* project to its release on video, is unduly narrow. Since it is his contention that the relationship between the two sides has changed for the worse – that they "have evolved into structures, which are increasingly exclusionary of the other" (98) – Riley would have given this book a more substantial scaffolding than is offered at present, had he surveyed the broader

picture and examined whether the situation *has* changed since the late 1980s.

Although Riley does refer to the filmic text itself, the main body of his book is concerned with the ways in which the film was variously perceived and received among different (and irreconcilable) factions of the population, which saw it as comprising everything from a work of blasphemy and sacrilege, which ought to be destroyed, to a challenge, which must be surmounted, to the Constitutional protection of freedom of religious expression. This comes to the fore in Chapter 4, which focuses on the language that was used by both sides in the conflict. Riley examines how, initially, religious conservatives portrayed themselves as victims of blasphemy, while liberal progressives were soon to argue that they were being persecuted as victims of censorship. Ultimately, Riley attests, no side was going to win and both factions resorted to the device of scapegoating their opponents. As a “guilt-releasing mechanism”, he argues, this “allowed each position in the *Last Temptation* controversy a release from culpability and blame by transferring guilt to the appropriate victim” (62). Although Riley is critical of both conservatives and liberals for their “symbolic removal of the objectified other” (98) and is careful to point out that both sides were involved in “self-justifying modes of persecution and blame” (126), there is never any doubt as to which side he is on. Without explicitly whitewashing the conservatives, he is on more than one occasion scathing about the arguments adduced by the liberals in support of the film, particularly when the freedom of religious expression is championed. In response, for example, to Universal’s defence that it is important to stand up for freedom of conscience, even when the view expressed is unpopular – on the grounds that “In the United States, no one sect or coalition has the power to set boundaries around each person’s freedom to explore religious and

philosophical questions whether through speech, books or films” (qtd. on p. 69) – Riley retorts that this is a disingenuous position which calls “for the inclusion of all points of view, on constitutional grounds” (71), yet ritually removes “those voices within its domain that fail to be inclusive” (ibid). Accordingly, the liberal position was often nothing more than a rhetorical strategy aimed at discrediting an opposing view and setting that view up as inimical to free speech and making “the religious conservative sound heretical and extreme” (89). On several occasions, Riley finds sympathy with those who see Scorsese’s film as blasphemous. At one point, he labels Scorsese outright as a “heretic” (11) and claims elsewhere that “Critics that argue for the unfettered right of a film to blaspheme are in effect campaigning for the right to selectively offend the members of those they disagree with, namely religious conservatives, by abusing their religious beliefs” (95).

Ironically, however, it is this kind of candour which is the book’s major strength. Having written at some length myself on this film, it is refreshing to read an academic book which is so upfront and systematic in its understanding of the evangelical position. Riley is utterly conversant with the content of the film, even if many of the conservatives who attacked the *Last Temptation* were not, and he substantiates his claims with a thorough and erudite analysis of the text. I am, however, a little disappointed that he does not stick his neck out and say whether he thinks the film should ever have been allowed to be released. Since he concludes that “As a protected representation of free speech, the *Last Temptation* serves to sanction the persecution and victimization of religious conservatives” (117), I presume that he would be sympathetic to calls for the film to have been banned outright, meaning that no-one – neither conservative opponent nor liberal sympathiser – should be allowed to see it. If this is his position, it is hard to see how his concluding

hope that a renewed commitment to the processes of dialogue and reconciliation, “opening the way for honest and constructive dialogue between competing segments” (127), could be anything other than a pipe-dream. No-one could deny that the removal of scapegoating is a genuinely good thing, but at the cost of freedom of religious expression it is hard to see how the banning of offensive art is going to bring us any closer to the “ideal” of “a more tolerant society” (123).

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