



Brian McClinton

# The Two Faces of Faith

## *Of Gods and Men*

**"Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction" - Blaise Pascal: *Pensées***

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**T**HE setting is the Monastère de l'Atlas in the remote village of Tibhirine on the side of Algeria's Atlas mountains in the mid-1990s. Here a small group of French Cistercian monks live with their Muslim neighbours in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect. Indeed, the monks are very much at the heart of the community. They offer advice and assistance on a wide range of matters from dating tips to obtaining passports for trips to France, attend family celebrations, sell their honey in the village market, and enjoy good relations with the local Muslim leaders. Above all, they provide a free medical service through the asthmatic veteran Frère Luc (Michael Lonsdale) and his even more veteran assistant Frère Amédée (Jacques Herlin).

The monks of Tibhirine make no attempt to proselytise but instead accept the people as they find them. As one monk puts it, their mission is to create relationships with others not based on power. A religious person may view their service to the community as obedience to God – and of course there is also much praying, singing and chanting in the chapel – but a secular perspective would regard their good works as the embodiment of a Christian Humanism in which people find a meaning to life through helping others in a relationship of love and equality.

This haven of peace is shattered by the arrival of Islamist terrorists in the shape of the GIA (Group Islamique Armé). At first, it is reported that a teenage girl in the city of Mostaganem has been stabbed on a bus in broad daylight for not wearing the hijab, causing an imam to observe wryly that while women are being stabbed in Algeria for not wearing the hijab, 'mad' French girls are protesting for their right to wear it.



Jacques Herlin and Michael Lonsdale in *Of Gods and Men*

Then in the area itself a group of Croatian Catholic workers are attacked on a construction site and their throats are slit. A villager laments that the terrorists say they are religious, "but they've never read the *Quran*". The monks are warned by the government that they could be the next target and are offered military protection, but Frère Christian (Lambert Wilson), their elected leader, rejects help because they would appear to be taking sides and anyway there is no place for the army in a monastery. The other monks are initially annoyed that he didn't consult them but eventually, after much debate and soul-searching, they come round to his way of thinking about the situation.

On Christmas Eve, 1995, the terrorists, led by Ali Fayattia (Farid Larbi), storm the abbey and demand that Luc accompany them with medical supplies for three wounded men, but Christian refuses because the villagers' needs must come first. He invokes the *Quran* in support and quotes a passage which says that the Christian faith is 'closest in love' to Islam. Surprisingly, Fayattia is able to complete the quotation, and he then instructs his men to withdraw (he is later murdered by his comrades).

The monks realise that this is only a stay of execution: the terrorists will be back and next time they will show

no mercy. The Ministry of the Interior orders the monks to leave the village but, after much debate, they ignore it and decide to remain out of compassion and duty to the local inhabitants, who themselves greatly fear the terrorists. Who are the monks to forsake their flock when they need them most? And the 'flock' is wide enough to include the terrorists as well, for when Luc is brought a severely wounded jihadist, he tends to him as keenly as he does the locals.

The monks are then joined by a ninth brother who has returned from a trip to France, and they celebrate communion together, after which they sit around a table drinking red wine in a scene that suggests the Last Supper. Luc puts on a cassette which plays the Scène from Act 2 of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. This is the first time we hear secular music in the film and yet it is a sublimely spiritual moment – a kind of aesthetic epiphany – in which the monks lose themselves in an emotion compounded of both joy and sorrow as they contemplate their doom.

The terrorists arrive and ransack the monastery. They take all but two of the monks hostage, demanding the release of members of their group in exchange. After two months, no releases are forthcoming, so the monks are led away to meet their fate in a blizzard. The end title tells us that they were found on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1996, though there is some doubt about how the real monks actually died. Although the GIA claimed to have executed them, more recently it has been suggested that they were actually killed by the Algerian army in a botched rescue attempt, and that the terrorists beheaded them afterwards to make it look like their handiwork.

On the face of it, *Of Gods and Men* sounds like a film for atheists ↗

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to avoid like the plague as ‘offensively holy’. A sombre and reverential film about pious monks martyring themselves is not exactly a non-believer’s cup of tea. But that is a simplistic and reductionist view which does little justice to the film’s subtleties. The work is sufficiently nuanced to allow a secular interpretation, and it

Love moves groups; hatred moves millions. Only when millions demand peace, does it come. Again, Northern Ireland is a classic case in point.

Not all the violence in *Of Gods and Men* emanates from the terrorists. The Algerian government is not absolved, and nor are the divisive

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does address some universal themes which are of concern to Humanists as well as religious believers.

An obvious starting point is the dual nature of religious faith itself. Religion can be an enormous force for good and it can also be an overwhelming destructive power. Faith can ‘move mountains’ and inspire love and care for others. But it can also do enormous harm. Frère Luc quotes from Pascal’s *Pensées* that “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction”. This remark is graphically illustrated in the scene where the Croatian workers are enthusiastically slaughtered by the Islamists, who are bringing ‘death to infidels’.

Yet, this is not a case of ‘good’ Christians versus ‘bad’ Muslims. We might also suggest that the monks themselves are culpable because martyrdom itself creates a bad example to follow. The most destructive killing in the world is done by people who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for a cause. Rigid adherence to a principle at any price is a dangerous philosophy that has brought untold misery to the human race when pragmatic compromise could have saved the day. The peace process in Northern Ireland is a perfect example.

Then there is the question of peace and war, love and hate. The monks embody peace and love, the terrorists hate and war. In universal terms, the conflict between these two generally leads to the defeat of love by hate, peace by war. The monks cannot defeat the terrorists because they eschew violence. They have no weapons and even try to drown out the sound of military helicopters with their music. Why does peace not usually prevail? Heine provides the answer: “What Christian love cannot do is achieved by a common hatred”.

effects of former French rule. Although the monks are not trying to expiate the sins of colonialism, they are committed to healing its wounds, and the implication is that, given the will, Christians and Muslims can work together anywhere, just like the monks and the people of Tibhirine.

If we metaphorically divest the monks of their religious habits, we can see them as the embodiment of essentially progressive and Humanist virtues. They represent love, caring, compassion, duty, equality, tolerance and peace.

*Of Gods and Men* is a beautiful and moving film, marvellously shot and perfectly acted. And once again, as with another French Cannes success, *The Class*, it is not afraid to debate ideas. We need more films of this quality. British moviemakers, please take note.

- *Of Gods and Men*, directed by Xavier Beauvois and winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2010, is now out on DVD (122 minutes)