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**Bruce C.
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**The Culture of Faith and Religion in Contemporary
America**

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The figure of Jesus Christ in the landscape of North American culture stands as both an enigma and an icon. To some, he is a mythic figure. To others, he is life itself. In profound and complex ways, Jesus is set apart from society while at the same time he is a part of society. He exists and functions within the cultural framework of a postmodern society – one that is struggling to redefine and understand itself. According to one scholar, the problem is so pervasive that, “At the moment, the idea of Jesus has been hijacked by people with a series of causes that do not reflect his teaching” (McKibben).

There is little questioning about the considerable effects, both positive and negative, that Jesus and religion have had on persons throughout North America. Recent Gallup Organization Polls reveal that six in 10 Americans say “religion is very important in their personal lives” (Carroll). Of those Americans questioned in May 2005, 80 percent said they were Christian (“Poll Topics & Trends”). Surprisingly, the number of Christians in the United States has remained fairly constant for the past two decades, since 1988, when it was just slightly higher at 83 percent (“Poll Topics & Trends”). No doubt such statistics represent long-held religious beliefs and practices that have been handed down, as a sort of a religious heritage, from one generation to another. In fact, “people who go to church absorb lessons there and make real decisions based on those lessons; increasingly, these lessons inform their politics” (McKibben).

Given the statistics, it is easy to understand why any reference to Jesus, Christianity or Christian values attracts almost immediate attention among millions of Americans. Whether the religious issue at stake is a court case, play, movie, book, television program or proposed government legislation, those who regard themselves as Christians take a keen interest in the matter. They are quick to react whenever they feel that their system of beliefs has been either attacked or affirmed in some way. No where is such reaction seen more clearly than in an examination of one of the most important elements of American society: the cinema. “Television and mass culture have so shaped the American consciousness that many citizens are now intellectually unable to sustain a serious moral conversation” (McKibben). Todd A. Kappelman explains that, “Western society is now defined more strictly by the image, the sound, and the moving picture than by the written word, which defined previous centuries.”

Since its soundless, black-and-white beginnings, film has captivated people throughout North America in a profound manner, so much so that it is seen today as an essential ingredient of the culture and fabric of an entire nation. One can hardly engage in conversation these days without referencing, referring to or echoing phrases from a movie. “Cinema is a powerful, affective medium,” says David John Graham in “The Uses of Film in Theology” (38). “That is, it engages us at the level of the feelings and emotions. And it is much more immediately affective than it is cognitive, engaging our feelings before it does our logic and rationality.”

Another writer adds that film is “one of youngest arts,” yet “one of the most pervasive and powerful” (Browne). It [cinema] “was born out of desire to reproduce images which represent the world in which we live” (Browne). In little more than one century, film has become not only one

of the most effective of all the arts ever created, but certainly a critical influence on the very culture of America. “The film is located within culture and culture within ideology. Film’s determinants are cultural and ideological” (Browne).

There is not sufficient time or space in this paper to examine the underpinnings, evolution and ideology of film. A brief word must be said, however, about the purpose of film. First and foremost, a movie attempts to tell a story of some sort. Filmmakers and dramatists always have used themes, be they religious or otherwise to engage the audience. There must be a compelling story with a beginning, middle and an end; each act and scene needs to be carefully crafted so there is a logical sequence and unity throughout the production. In addition, the overall account must allow the viewer to relate to the message.

For example, during the first half of the 20th Century, films about Jesus were immensely popular, as William Telford points out in “Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema” (Telford 116). “Before Cecil B. DeMille’s ‘The King of Kings’ (1927), there were at least 39 earlier versions of the Christ story.” He adds that there were many top “Bible” films in the 1940s and 1950s. Each movie was popular because of “its esthetic merit, the religious subject matter, the pietistic mentality of American audiences, the sublimated lure of sex, violence and spectacle, the immediate post-war climate, the struggle against communism, the establishment of the state of Israel, etc.” (Telford 116). Historically and contextually, re-enactments involving the life of Jesus Christ and other religious themes are centuries old, dating back to the popular medieval English Cyclic dramas: the York Cycle and the N-Town pageant (Pilkington). In these early representations – also known as Morality Plays, Moral Plays and Miracle Plays – the aim was religious: the teaching of dogma or Christian doctrine. “The subject matter is concerned with Bible narrative, Lives of Saints, the Apocryphal Gospels, and pious legends” (“Moralities”). One of the most popular of these medieval dramas was “The Last Temptation of Christ,” which depicted the “human” temptations of Christ, acted out with precise clarity and exacting dialogue. For more than 500 years, the church has been both the source and subject for drama.

“If we consider religion as a storytelling enterprise,” explains Christine Hoff Kraemer in a recent volume of the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. “The canonized sacred text becomes problematic even as it establishes a stable centre for a tradition. In the case of Christianity, the Gospels provide some of the best-known stories of Western culture, stories that are cherished by believers, but are also an essential part of being culturally literate for non-believers” (Kraemer). Christians throughout the ages have enjoyed and patronized many dramatic re-presentations of religious stories primarily because the performances validate their beliefs and confirm their identity within society.

On the other hand, when dramas involving a religious theme appear to mock or parody orthodox Christian beliefs – even slightly or superficially – the result can be a backlash of criticism and censure throughout society. Contemporary productions such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and *Godspell* (1971) drew the immediate ire and anger of many mainline Christians. The reworking of traditional Christian themes for a newer, post-modern audience did not sit well with established religious leaders or their congregations. By the time Martin Scorsese released *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988, Christian tolerance regarding drama and film was worn thin. Still reeling from the base, almost unholy, plays and musicals of the 1970s, where Jesus seemed to have lost his divinity, Christians reacted violently.

This particular film, explains Ivan Dugic in “Reception of Scorsese’s film ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’ and the State of the Living Myth Today,” “with its peculiar mix of traditional and new elements, all given very realistically and in historical context, provoked a vehement reaction from conservative American Christians, who had tried to save the souls of their brothers and sisters waiting for hours in line for tickets; they tried not only verbal and physical persuasion, but also put bombs in theaters or made bomb threats” (Dugic).

Sixteen years later, however, Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of Christ* was hailed as a masterpiece – perfect except for the violence. To date, it has grossed more than \$611 million worldwide: \$370 million alone in domestic receipts (“The Passion of the Christ”).

Anyone who has seen Scorsese’s movie or read the book by Nikos Kazantzakis (1955) knows why Christians and the Church reacted with such vehemence. The mere suggestion that Jesus could be tempted by sex was too much for most. In the minds and beliefs of many Christians, Scorsese

had crossed the line by focusing on Jesus the Man and not Jesus the Divine. “Scorsese is the first filmmaker to attack the problem of Jesus’ simultaneous divinity and humanity head-on, giving us a saviour who longs for the love of a woman, a family, and the simple, quiet life of an ordinary man” (Kraemer). As Telford notes, Scorsese also follows Marxist director Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1964 *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* in attempting to recover Jesus from the influence of centuries of religious orthodoxy, which both directors perceive as distorting” (qtd. in Kraemer).

Christians would argue, however, that Jesus does not need rescuing – that he is fine the way he is portrayed in the Gospels. “The historical Jesus, the Jesus of Scripture and of the Christian creeds, bears no resemblance to the sinful and cowardly Jesus of Martin Scorsese” (Gudel). The church has always held itself as the sole interpreter and dispenser on the life of Christ. It is a problem in hermeneutics: Scorsese v. The Church. The director tried to defend himself by warning that his attempt was “to make the life of Jesus immediate and accessible to people who haven’t really thought about God in a long time” was being attacked (Kraemer). One cultural historian of the time observed that Scorsese was out of step with the current milieu: “Aware of mounting organized pressure against the film, in 1987, Universal hires a liaison with the Christian community, a born-again Christian himself, and arranges a private advance screening for agitated groups, including Reverend Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association and Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade for Christ. The audience is especially disgusted by a closing image. . . . Some 1,200 Christian radio stations in California denounce the film, and Mastermedia International urges a boycott against parent company MCA. Bill Bright offers to reimburse Universal for its investment in *The Last Temptation of Christ* in exchange for all existing prints, which he vows to destroy” (“Martin Scorsese’s”).

The controversy created by Scorsese’s film is no different than that caused by *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. Gudel, writing in the Christian Research Journal, says, “For many, the Islamic uproar over *The Satanic Verses* is essentially no different from how Christians reacted to ‘*The Last Temptation of Christ*’” (Gudel). In fact, the Time magazine cover story on Salman Rushdie (Feb. 1989) said, “last year’s furor over the . . . *The Last Temptation of Christ* demonstrated that Christians, particularly those who believe in the literal interpretation of Scripture, are similarly sensitive about fictional portrayal of the sacred, though their protest generally takes less violent forms” (Gudel). Few seemed to care what Scorsese was attempting to do. “Film makers often explore the darkness of the human condition. They don’t do it simply to posture or exploit, but to see deeply and lay bare the problems and tensions. But, they also do it to look for answers, even the light of salvation” (Kappelman).

Though there was minor controversy concerning *The Passion of Christ*, (namely, the violence and the suggestion of anti-Semitism) Americans greeted the film with open arms and eager wallets. Many people saw the film not once but several times, making the drama one of the highest grossing movies in history. Filmed in Matera, Italy, Gibson spent \$25 million in production costs and \$30 million in marketing. His investment, both in following a script based upon the Scriptures and using his own money to fund the entire project, paid off well.

Christian leaders everywhere promoted *The Passion* because of its almost clinical adherence to the Gospel stories on the death of Christ. Dr. James Dobson, president and founder of Focus on the Family, said in an open letter to his millions of supporters that, “I had the privilege of viewing a ‘rough cut’ of the movie last summer during a writing trip to California, and again in September. I can say that, in addition to being faithful to the essentials of the biblical account, it is easily the most heart-wrenching, powerful portrayal of Christ’s suffering that I have ever seen. Shirley [his wife] and I were deeply moved by the stark depiction of the brutality and humiliation that Jesus endured on our behalf” (Dobson).

Gibson carefully paved the way for his film by seeking the feedback, and ultimately the approval of, many religious leaders throughout North America. In the summer of 2003, he brought a rough cut to Regent University, where I am currently teaching. Gibson met with a select group of administrators and invited guests, which included Dr. Pat Robertson, the chancellor of the university as well as the founder of evangelical television program “The 700 Club,” and Peter Engel, who was then dean of the School of Communication & the Arts and the producer of the “Saved by the Bell” sitcom series.

No doubt one of the primary reasons for the overwhelming success of *The Passion* is due to its storyline, which mirrors the Gospels as well as the beliefs of generations of Christians with

precise determination. Americans, like most other cultures and societies, tend to judge the unknown by the known. Both *The Passion* and *The Last Temptation* were judged by the same standards, mores and ethos, even though Scorsese sought to deflect criticism by warning viewers at the beginning of the film that, "This film is not based upon The Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict" (*The Last Temptation of Christ*).

Another cause for the success of one film over the other is the fact that, "Westerners tend to dichotomize life into different realms or spheres" (Gudel). Something is either right or wrong; someone is either right or wrong. It is more expedient for the Church, and individual Christians, to condemn *The Last Temptation*. To accept the film, either in whole or in part, might require a partial forgiveness of the sexual sins committed by the fictional Jesus.

A final explanation for the film's popularity is because a "culture uses rituals and artefacts to sustain its coherence," explains McKenzie Wark in "Meanings of Culture." "Culture is something one picks up and internalises. It only exists if people act according to the codes and conventions of it. Yet a culture also passes through a set of things external to the members of the group it defines, as artefacts, rituals, texts." (Wark). In essence, Christians can only be Christians if they adhere to an accepted system of beliefs and principles concerning Jesus. One fundamental teaching of the Church has always been not to question the sovereignty or authority of the Scriptures. They are the holy, inspired word of God. As such, the stories and teachings are much too sacred to think about reworking a story even for more insight and impact. There is no room or allowance for artistic license.

Another dimension of the issue may be that the Church still is trying to find its place in modern society. "The Church has constantly been perplexed concerning its proper relation to culture. . . . In candor, we must admit that the Church has been displaced. Once an authoritative voice in the culture, the Church is often dismissed, and even more often ignored" (Mohler).

So where does all of this leave Jesus, who is at the very center of the issue? No doubt, he will continue to be an outsider on the broader stage of society and the media. Yet, to many of the eight in 10 Americans who call themselves Christians, Jesus is "The Word made flesh" (New International Holy Bible, John 1:1). To the millions of others, he is merely a word, a name, a man. In American culture, the figure of Jesus remains somewhere between believers and non-believers – much like his duality of being both human and divine. How we see and define him remains outside the realm of one, all-encompassing culture of North America. "For better and (probably) for worse, Christianity in America is mediated as much through popular media as through the traditions and institutions of our various churches" (Fredriksen).

The image of Jesus in contemporary America no longer seems to depend exclusively on the Church. "Moral relativism," comments McKibben, "has so shaped the culture that the vast majority of Americans now see themselves as their own moral arbiter. Truth has been internalized, privatized, and subjectivized. Absolute or objective truth is denied outright." But therein lies another paradox: the fact that Christians are willing, at times and for just causes, to put their theological differences aside in favor of the greater good. In addition, whether to support one religious film or to boycott another seems to be driven largely by the evangelical movement. How much influence this effect will have on future cultures remains to be seen. Whatever happens, though, religion in America may forever be fashioned by the new visual images produced by Hollywood rather than the established constructs of the traditional Church.

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