

OF GODS AND MEN:

RADICAL HOSPITALITY AND THE MONKS OF TIBHIRINE

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«Je l'ai dit : Vous êtes des dieux, des fils du Très-Haut, vous tous! Pourtant, vous mourrez comme des hommes, comme les princes, tous vous tomberez !» (Psalm 81).

This biblical quote in French, along with the beautiful hues of the Algerian alpine landscape of the Atlas Mountains, introduces the film, *Des hommes et des dieux*, (*Of Gods and Men*, 2010), directed by Xavier Beauvois, and received with critical acclaim. Beauvois, with tremendous sensitivity, recreates the story of the seven French Trappist Monks of the remote and poor region of Tibhirine, who would eventually be caught up in the Algerian Civil War and lose their lives to it. Though the film will end, sadly, in captivity, it is filled with escapes in the shape of falls into grace, and lit with the simple and life-affirming graces of sunlight, the elements, meals shared, music, prayer and the unconquerable graces of friendship, hospitality and love. The journey, as represented by Beauvois, becomes more poignant than its end in the snow covered climes of Atlas's slopes.¹

Around this region the Algerian civil war had raged for nearly four years.

Foreigners were particularly at risk from Islamist insurgents, and French nationals were a specific target given France's colonial history in Algeria.² For the French monks of Notre Dame de l'Atlas in Tibhirine, the reality of the war came closer in 1996 with news, firstly of the killings nearby of young women refusing the *hijab*, and then of the killing of several foreign workers. Both the monks and the Muslim villagers of Tibhirine feared for their lives. Yet, the focus of the film is not on the gratuitous and inexplicable slaughter of the good. It is a re-creation of the interior, spiritual and communal journey of the brothers through their personal and shared fears and existential crises in the months and weeks prior.

During the period of the civil war, the monks of Tibhirine had a window of opportunity, and the blessing of their order, to restart their mission in nearby Morocco on safer ground. They chose to stay, but not without great soul searching and excruciating doubt. This monastery had served the Muslim people of that region for decades, and especially, given that Tibhirine was poor, the monks

¹ Beauvois was inspired by the book, *The Monks of Tibhirine* (New York: St Martin's, 2003) by John Kiser, which itself was based on research, including personal accounts from the two surviving monks. Etienne Comar, *Of Gods and Men* (France: Mars Distribution, 2010), screenplay, 122 minutes.

² The Algerian war of liberation several decades prior had fought against France's "organised plunder" in the period of French colonisation.

were integral in the day to day life of the community. They served with medical expertise and community presence, and they participated in the life and economy of the village through the production of food from their land. All accounts suggest that they experienced considerable favour and were accorded respect and love due to their devotion, not only to communicating the Christian gospel through word and deed, but by also devoting themselves to knowing their neighbours and their neighbours' language, faith and holy writings, in order to better love the Muslim Other in their midst.³

It is the monks' commitment to a rich expression of life, not death, that is beautifully portrayed in this film. The monks did not have a will to die and did not choose death as a kind of a higher path. Quite the opposite. The brothers felt there was so much more that they could do with life, but only if that life was one centred on the Christ, the law of love, brotherhood, and peace towards all God's creatures.

This was the prophetic life they believed and worked into existence by the Holy Spirit, and that they had devoted themselves towards sustaining from their

outpost in the rugged Atlas Ranges. As poignantly phrased in the film by Brother Luc, the monastery's elderly and infirm doctor, to go and to flee into safety was in fact a worse death. It would mean the death or failure of their realisation of the kingdom of God in Tibhirine. There was a place of peace that they would not give up to violence.

The film portrays divinity at work in the rawest aspects of their human existence: eating, the moments before sleep, the sharing of words, prayer, hoping against hope, wanting to live. Each of the monks was free to go, each sought his own heart and each decided, painfully, to stay. The events that followed were a true song of songs, a rich theology of unexpected grace, as they celebrated life all the more meaningfully, given the proximity of grave danger. Their theology in practice became even more a celebration of the grace of God in all its forms, in the rhythms of the order's spiritual disciplines: prayer, chant, devotional study, but also in music, in beauty, in gratitude, in planting and harvesting, in the earth with all its gifts, in each and every of their many daily labours, the sound of chickens, the pouring rains. They quietly continued to celebrate life by giving gifts of courage, perseverance, gifts of peace, and of loyalty, of recognition and in resistance to death and destruction. They gifted radical hospitality to

³ John Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine* (Kindle edn; New York: St Martin's, 2003).

each other and also to the stranger in their midst. In particular they celebrated communally. One poignant scene in the film shows them sharing prayer, song and food together with a rare glass of red wine. It was as if every supper was the last.

The work of these monks of Tibhirine is now well known, particularly given the success of Beauvois' film, but the better witness is that of the people of the village. After the civil war and after the burial of the seven who died, monks from the order all over the world offered themselves in order to re-establish the monastery in Tibhirine. And when they again resumed their work from the monastery, the people of the region, near and far, crowded in, in memory of de Chergé and his brothers to hear the liturgy and song resume once again. Notre Dame de l'Atlas represented an irresistible celebration of life, and this was life in Christ. This is the legacy of the lives of the seven monks and, in particular, the fruit of the rich theology and praxis of Christian de Chergé, the Prior of the community.

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The theology and praxis of Christian de Chergé was framed by the theme of radical hospitality, and this was defined with language reminiscent of the contemporary philosopher and their countryman, Lévinas. Salenson, writing specifically on de Chergé's theology, finds, as I do, Lévinas' "imprint" on de Chergé's surviving writings and on what is known as his "last testament," his "adieu."⁴ Lévinas was known for his exploration of alterity, in particular his attempts to understand the ethical relation that one has to the Other. It was this rich recognition of, and responsibility to, the Other that undergirded de Chergé's sense of being meaningful in that part of the world and at that time, and which had undergirded de Chergé's twenty-five years of mission in Muslim Tibhirine from the monastery Notre Dame de l'Atlas.

This kind of ethical relation to the Muslim Other practiced by de Chergé was not one shared by the French army in Algeria, and not one always shared by other French clergy, and certainly not by the majority of French colonials. Christian de Chergé had spent years in Algeria, first as a soldier and then as a priest, and was deeply troubled by the injustices perpetrated against the indigenous Muslim population. De Chergé was a disciple of the Archbishop Duval who himself, a philosopher

⁴ Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope* (Trappist, Ky: Liturgical, 2012), 20.

priest, had a reputation for speaking out against the discrimination and worse of French colonial rule in Algeria. Duval protected the monastery from threats of closure in the growing turmoil of civil war because he believed Notre Dame de l'Atlas of Tibhirine to be a step towards his prophetic vision of a loving and hospitable Christian presence in Algeria. For Duval, loving one's neighbour, whether that neighbour be Muslim or Christian, "is the surest and most direct way to loving God."⁵ Thus, a beautiful hospitality was shown by the brothers to each other. The brothers were hosts to each other's fears. No emotion was rejected. Particularly as the violence of those days drew closer, the meaning of community, relationship and brotherhood became vastly more intense. Their shared suffering drew the brothers closer together in prayer. The meaningfulness of the sacrifice of Christ became all the more real.

Some of the most promising recent scholarly thought on the Christian theology of hospitality and the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas has been done by New Zealand theologian, Andrew Shepherd. In his soon to be published book, *The Gift*

of the Other, he explores the intersections between Christian theology and the writings of French philosophers Lévinas and Jacques Derrida.⁶ Naturally there are strong links to Tibhirine theology, which was also influenced by this philosophical thought as it impacts Christian practice, and the particular practice of the Cistercian community. For Shepherd, the driving Christian distinctive is the human response to "the address of the Divine Other,"⁷ so that the hospitality and "genuine mutuality" practiced by de Chergé and the monks of Tibhirine might be understood as a response and participation in that radical hospitality initiated and sustained by God. It is the invitational presence of the Holy Spirit, Father and Son that invites humanity into the possibility of true relation. For Shepherd, this catalyses a reciprocating relation to others and the possibility of respectful giving.

De Chergé and the monks of Tibhirine have been criticised by other Christians for their degree of openness to the Muslim community. Part of their participation in village life was to attend celebrations in the local village, celebrations that were threaded through with Islamic faith and tradition. They

⁵ Kiser, *Monks of Tibhirine*, loc. 429.

⁶ Andrew Shepherd, "The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida and a Theology of Hospitality" (PhD Thesis, University of Otago, 2009; forthcoming, Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick).

⁷ *Ibid*, 380.

also customarily prayed for and with their Muslim brothers on occasions such as funerals and weddings, but also during religious celebrations, often in the Mosque. De Chergé himself spent a great deal of time studying the Koran, discussing it with the religious leaders of the community, speaking to its principles that bridged with Christian doctrine and gospel. On de Chergé's part, it was a pillar of Notre Dame's theology and missiology that the face of God resided in the Other, that "all God's creatures" including the children of Islam, were children of the Holy Spirit. This was a core part of de Chergé's theology as understood from his writings. The guiding sense that he had of his vocation was that he had been called to "pray amongst others who pray."⁸ But this willingness to encounter Islam in the context of openness to the Other, and in respect and with "just peace," was an act of love and solidarity, and it won for Notre Dame the respect and love from the people. This kind of generosity of spirit and hospitality to the Other's ideas and beliefs was highly valued in the local culture. The Muslims of Tibhirine had shown hospitality themselves, embracing the monastery of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas as an honoured guest for almost a century, and the Cistercians (Trappists) since 1938. Likewise, de Chergé and the brothers did not hesitate from embracing the Muslim community as friends and neighbours, finding and establishing a space where the presence of just peace and the hope of Christ could be found even as the civil war began to rage.

This hospitality to the other extended also to the land. In their particular Cistercian practice, which follows the Rule of St Benedict, there is a focus on working the earth, advocating a simple life of prayer and fieldwork, that of symbolic and actual planting and harvesting. Also part of the discipline of manual labour is the careful husbandry of domestic animals and other creatures. Benedictine communities such as the one at Tibhirine, are noted for their skilful crafting of cheese, breads and honey along with other crafts, though they can only sell these goods in order to sustain their community. They cannot, according to the rule, profit from it. Contemplative connection to God through fieldwork and animal husbandry was an enduring aspect of de Chergé's discipline. The constant return to the land became

a kind of solace in the difficult days of early 1996. God's good gifts from creation were appreciated all the more. This appreciation and care for the ecology of their small mission is emphasised in the film, beautifully framed as a site filled with the presence of God, and a testament to God's goodness and care for humanity.

Shepherd is interested in how "welcoming the Other" works on the global stage, saturated as it is, with narratives and discourses that alienate and disconnect. However, the work of the monks of Tibhirine was simply to welcome the Other in their midst, welcome them into participation with the God that Gives. The Other, in their case, was the Muslim Other, but their invitation was open to all. Given the events that followed, their story too was brought onto the global stage, so much so, that the Notre Dame de l'Atlas in Tibhirine has become a house of prayer for many seekers, and the seven crosses, along with the poignant last letter of Christian de Chergé, an

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exhortation and inspiration for continuing the interfaith dialogue between Muslim and Christian with even more grace. The work of hospitality to one's neighbour has effects beyond one's ken. The lesson lived by the monks of Tibhirine is that the face of the neighbour

in my midst signals to me the call of God. While challenging the global stage may seem too large a mountain to move, the practice of welcoming the face of God in the Other, be it one's child, partner, colleague, friend, or the stranger in need is possible, and is a reflexive response to experiencing the gift of eternal life in the here and now. Recognising the "infinite responsibility" each has to the Other, that is, hearing the Other's cry, is a beginning.

It is my belief that response, then, is intuitive and spontaneous, a core and rooted divine love, that expresses itself as a gift of grace, a gift to hear and feel the Other's cry at the moment of that cry, at that moment of the Other's need. Even as rational thought engages, body and spirit reach out without prejudice, without forethought and with an open hand. It seems part of the mystery of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is a spirit of profound love, which transforms, earths and reconnects body, spirit and mind and thus that love for the Other is sensitised. Engendered is a desire to give light and truth and that flows out of abundance, not lack. The

8 Quoted in Salenson, *Christian de Chergé*, 2.

source of its generosity is that of living waters that never run dry.⁹

Shepherd emphasises the importance, in contemporary global politics, of the practice of genuine and respectful relations, particularly between adherents of the Abrahamic faiths. Between Christian, Muslim and Jew, genuine mutuality and hospitality, a virtue in all three faiths, is critical to the future possibility of peace, particularly in the flashpoint that is Israel, but also in relations between Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities everywhere. Shepherd points to the example of Christ on the road to Emmaus: “[h]is journey with others begins first in silence, a simple case of accompanying alongside; progresses to respectful listening, and then only later does he speak.”¹⁰ Shepherd develops this example of encounter and participation as a guiding and productive frame which offers mutuality, dignity and respect to the Other, a space filled with the spirit of God. These kinds of engagements between communities cultivate trust, propagate acts of kindness, and the willingness to open up spaces for dialogue, understanding and transformation.

Shepherd draws on another scriptural example of hospitality, also poignantly engaged by Christian de Chergé in his last letter, his “adieu.” This vignette from Scripture is the scene of the crucifixion as represented by Luke’s Gospel (23:39–47). Here Jesus communes with the two other men hung on crosses. Shepherd describes the scene as “a state of spatial disjunction – three men physically set apart from their executors and detractors, ‘hung up’ as objects, serving as deterring examples to others.”¹¹ Even in this state of vulnerability and distress, the face of divine hospitality is present with the invitational words “today you will be with me in paradise” (23:43). This encounter profoundly affects the Roman soldier and “oppressor” who responds “surely this was a righteous man” (23:47). As Shepherd understands this vignette, the soldier oppressor looks upon Jesus’ face and now sees God in one whom he had formerly only seen a “Jewish terrorist.” Christian de Chergé draws from this vignette in his last testament, seeking to understand his life meaningfully in the

9 John 4:13.

10 Shepherd, “The Gift,” 385.

11 Ibid.

face of the possibility of his death at the hands of Islamists. He invites, even in his contemplation of his possible end, the last face he sees:

And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this “thank you” – and this “adieu” – to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours. And may we find each other, happy “good thieves,” in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both.¹²

Shepherd, in his work on Christian theology of hospitality, engages and critiques Derrida on the notion of gift.¹³ Derrida understands radical hospitality in the same light that he understands “gift,” that is, a gift (a real gift) is something freely given without calculation. For Derrida, by definition, a gift must be free from a transaction that hides within the gesture an expectation of return. This is almost impossible to achieve. Shepherd wants to open

up this possibility of giving genuine gifts, including that of true hospitality, that invite a space for mutual and genuine reciprocation, rather than a vulgar economy. Thus, the theology that was practised at Notre Dame de L’Atlas could not be reduced to an economic-faith transaction

with God, i.e. “I will give love to the people of Tibhirine if you will give love to me and give me eternal life.” De Chergé and his brothers believed they were already participating in eternal life, feasting at the banquet of God, and their mission and life work was a responsive expression of that already and abundant gift of divine love. It is this kind of relation to God that Shepherd describes as “transformative” and that “breaks open” the impossibility of giving selfless gifts and offering true hospitality.

The place of the “unexpected” in the practice of hospitality by the monks of Tibhirine is touched upon in Shepherd’s theology of Christian hospitality. The kind of radical hospitality at Notre Dame resulted in disturbing and discomfoting moments where invitation and hospitality was taken up by

12 From the “Last Testament of Christian de Chergé,” translated into English by the Monks of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey. Original in French. Online: http://www.monastere-tibhirine.org/page_2_5.php. Accessed 21 Feb 2014.

13 I do note that Shepherd goes on to critique Derrida’s notion of gift alongside the work of Milbank, emphasising the positive dynamics of reciprocation in Christ-like hospitality, a reciprocal dynamic that avoids vulgar economics.

those involved in violent insurgency. In one such moment, recreated in Beauvois' film, the monks were disturbed by a group of the Islamist rebels in the middle of the night. It was a tense and frightening moment as they found themselves in a situation where they must resist the Other's discourse of violence, the Other's weapons of war, and to keep safe from harm, but to also, in the same moments, offer the possibility of the open hand of love and hospitality. In this way they provided the possibility for future face to face encounters on the grounds of "just peace," for friendship, responsive even to the face of God in that of these revolutionaries. True gift giving and true hospitality open up the possibility of the strange, the different, and even the monstrous (or that which is perceived to be monstrous). With power and control deprioritised in order to prioritise love (a love freed from vulgar economics), the unexpected then becomes a constant. This does not always lead to challenging situations. De Chergé, and others who practice radical hospitality, enjoyed the unexpected pleasures and graces that come from such a life. The pleasures and graces of knowing and being known were unexpected and became unexpectedly intense. De Chergé and his brothers knew the unexpected blessings of communal moments of care and were surprised again and again by the simple yet immense riches of God, creation and creature revealed to those transformed by the freedom of Christ. This is the gift of the unexpected, experienced by those who escape the captivity of social and interpersonal economies into the bountiful and generous love-lands of divine hospitality.

The radical and cruciform hospitality of the monks of Notre Dame de L'Atlas was a life-affirming expression of the goodness of God. Their work was not based upon an ethic of loss and death, but of life, and life more abundant. While experiencing the limitations of humanity, such as sinfulness and fear, the monks faithfully served their church, which they considered went beyond the walls of the monastery of Notre Dame, to flow through the streets of Muslim Tibhirine as well, encompassing all their Muslim neighbours, believing or no. Walking the Way of the Cross for these seven men was not a walk towards death, but towards life, and, rather than the victims of violence, they were activists against the discourses

of fear and terror that would separate them from their neighbour.

It seems fitting to conclude here with words from Christian de Chergé, in his now famous "Last Testament," an incredible glimpse into his theology of hospitality, all the more potent given these were the final days of his life.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called "the grace of martyrdom," to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience

by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure

knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims – finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother's knee, my very first Church.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Christian de Chergé, "Last Testament."