

“Of Gods and Men” starring Lambert Wilson, Michael Lonsdale and Olivier Rabourdin, 2010, PG-13, 122 minutes

Major themes:

- Devotion
- Brotherhood
- Community
- Contemplative life
- Faith vs. doubt
- Sacrifice
- Conscience
- Freedom
- Culturally-relevant gospel

Major characters:

- Dom Christian [de Chergé]
- Brother Luc (the doctor)
- Father Christophe
- Father Célestin
- Brother Paul
- Brother Michel
- Father Bruno
- Father Amédée
- Father Jean-Pierre

Movie Nights for Thinkers and Seekers

Background info:

- The story is set in 1996 in and near the monastery Notre-Dame de l'Atlas of Tibhirine in Algeria.
- The movie was filmed in Morocco, in a monastery south of Fez, which in the 1960s was used by a Benedictine order as a meeting point between Christians and Muslims.
- *The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance* is a religious order of cloistered contemplative monastics who follow the Rule of St. Benedict. A branch of the Order of Cistercians, they have communities of both monks (Trappists) and nuns (Trappestines). Benedict's insistence on lack of speech has some impact on their way of life, though, contrary to popular belief, they do not take a vow of silence. Trappist monks generally speak only when necessary, so idle talk is strongly discouraged. According to St. Benedict, speech disturbs a disciple's quietude and receptivity, and may tempt one to exercise one's own will instead of the will of God. Speech which leads to unkind amusement or laughter is seen as evil and is banned. A Trappist Sign Language was developed to render speaking unnecessary. Meals are usually taken in contemplative silence as members of the order are supposed to listen to a reading. The 48th chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict states "*for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands.*" Their rule of life can be simply stated as "*pray and work.*" Following this rule, most Trappist monasteries produce goods which are sold to provide income for the monastery. The goods produced range from cheese and clothing to bread and beer.
- Director Xavier Beauvois and his cast were sent to live in an actual monastery to prepare for the difference in the rhythm of monastic life. The producer also asked them to sing together, which the producer said created a community, "*so by the time we actually came to shoot the film, there was a real sense of brotherhood.*"

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- A couple of definitions of words used in the subtitles:
 - *"fecund"* = prolific, fruitful
 - *"filial"* = having the relation of a child to a parent
 - *"inchallah"* = if God wills
- The Armed Islamic Group (*al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah al-Musallaha*) is an Islamist organisation that wants to overthrow the Algerian government and replace it with an Islamic state. This group took responsibility for the terrorism portrayed in this film.
- Several classic devotional works were shown or mentioned, including:
 - *"Pensees"* (Blaise Pascal)
 - *"Little Flowers of St. Francis"* (St. Francis of Assisi)
 - *"The Chosen"* (Chaim Potok)
- Here is the music used in the monastery scenes, as listed in the film credits:
 - *"Seigneur, ouvre mes levres"* = *"O Lord, open my lips"* (Psalm 51:17)
 - *"Puisqu'il est avec nous"* = *"Since he is with us"*
 - *"Voici la nuit"* = *"Here is the night"*
 - *"Nous ne savons pas ton mystère"* = *"We don't know your mystery"*
 - *Cantique de Siméon (sauve nous seigneur)* = *Canticle of Simeon: (save us, Lord)*
 - *Psaume 142* = *Psalm 142*
 - *Père des lumières* = *Father of lights*
 - *Le lac des cygnes* (Tchaikovsky) = *Swan Lake*

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Scriptures:

Jude 22 – 25 (The Message) – *“Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith. Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven. And now to him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in his bright presence, fresh and celebrating—to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes.”*

Psalms 142 (NKJV) – *“I cry out to the Lord with my voice; with my voice to the Lord I make my supplication. I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare before Him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then You knew my path. In the way in which I walk they have secretly set a snare for me. Look on my right hand and see, for there is no one who acknowledges me; refuge has failed me; no one cares for my soul. I cried out to You, O Lord: I said, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living. Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low; deliver me from my persecutors, for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Your name; the righteous shall surround me, for You shall deal bountifully with me.’”*

John 15:9 – 13 (The Message) – *“I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my Father’s commands and made myself at home in his love. I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.”*

2 Peter 1:5 – 8 (NIV) – *“. . . Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

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Discussion points:

1. The monks live in harmony and friendship with their neighbors. Discuss some of the ways they built relational bridges to the people around them.
2. Dom Christian quoted from the Koran when speaking to the terrorists. Discuss how his willingness to *"speak their language"* built a relational bridge even with their enemies.
3. The script writer for this film said, *"We can be absolutely sure that whoever kidnapped them, they did so for political reasons, not for their faith. The problem is never the faith, it is always the politics behind the faith."* Discuss.
4. The monks go about their daily business of praying, singing, healing the sick, and cooking in an unhurried way, even when circumstances around them become tense. How can we follow their example of worshiping God in all that we do, whether we're praying, working, or . . . ?
5. How did the monks demonstrate the practicality of making every effort to add to their *"faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love?"*
6. When a superior reminded Christian that the order needed monks and not martyrs, Christian replied, *"There is no difference."* Discuss how we can give our lives in obedience to Jesus when He said in John 12:25 (NLT), *"Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity."*

Dom Christian de Chergé's letter

In late May, 1996, Christian de Chergé's mother opened a sealed letter and read what he had written three years earlier. Islamic terrorist groups had begun killing foreigners in Algeria. Anticipating his own death, he wrote down his last testament:

When an "A-DIEU" takes on a face.

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the Sole Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me—for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to link this death with the many other deaths which were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case it has not the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have the moment of lucidity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down. I could not desire such a death. It seems important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. To owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, would be too high a price to pay for what will, perhaps, be called, the "grace of martyrdom," especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on Algerians indiscriminately. I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism encourages. It is too easy to salve one's conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists.

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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 from it, finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel, learnt at my mother's knee, my very first Church, already in Algeria itself, in the respect of believing Muslims. My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naïve, or idealistic: "Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!" But these people must realize that my avid curiosity will then be satisfied.

This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, and contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, and filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, playfully delighting in the differences.

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this THANK YOU, which sums up my whole life to this moment, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families, the hundredfold granted as was promised! And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say this THANK YOU and this A-DIEU to you, in whom I see the face of God. And may we find each other, happy good thieves, in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. In sha 'Allah.

Algiers, December 1, 1993 – Tibhirine, January 1, 1994