

Seeing Islam's children as God sees them

Raymond A. Schroth | Feb. 28, 2011



The community of Cistercian monks in Algeria gather at the table in "Of Gods and Men." (© Sony Pictures Classics)

Saul Alinsky, the Chicago radical community organizer who taught creative confrontation and who worked with Catholic activists, told me that a turning point in his life was the realization that he was going to die. Once he accepted the reality of his death, he said, nothing else could hurt him. He had conquered fear.

I thought of him as I sat absorbed watching "Of Gods and Men," a film by Xavier Beauvois, about nine Cistercian monks in Tibhirine, Algeria, seven of whom, on March 26, 1996, were kidnapped and later beheaded by Muslim terrorists, for reasons that are still not clear today.

"Of Gods and Men" is the best film dealing with religion that I have ever encountered.

I say encountered because we do not merely watch the monks go through the motions of their daily order. Every touch, every detail seems so authentic that we experience the narrow, cramped corridors and bedroom cells of the monastery, which, with hardly a Gothic line, resembles a cut-rate motel rather than a soaring medieval monastery. When the monks chop wood and dig and plant the garden that will feed their neighbors and themselves, so do we.

For months, directed by a Parisian choirmaster, the actors portraying the monks practiced four hours a day, learning to chant the Psalms, which, as one observed, "is to breathe together, to share the breath of life." As the story progresses, the songs, sung in choir by seven of the eight monks permanently stationed at this post, illuminate the story, open their souls to our inspection.

The enemy persecutes my soul
He has smitten my life to the ground
He has made me dwell in darkness
With those long dead
My spirit grows faint within me
My heart within me, dismayed (Psalm 142)

Each of these men has chosen to live in this Muslim culture. They study and quote the Quran as well as the Gospels. They may not seek converts, but they serve their neighbors, all poor Arabs, with their infirmary, with monastic hospitality, by sheer presence in friendship and counseling. The citizens threw out the French colonizers long before, but the scent of colonization inevitably lingers over Europeans. The poor revere the monks, and the terrorists, to a degree, hold back.

Algeria is in turmoil. The National Liberation Front, which overthrew the French, was defeated by the Islamic Salvation Front in 1991. In 1993 the Armed Islamic Group ordered all foreigners to leave the country within 30 days. Arab factions were fighting among themselves. Several priests and nuns were killed. As the film opens, a band of Islamic fundamentalists slays a crew of foreign workers. For their own safety, local authorities urge the monks to leave.

Faced with the probability of being slain, the brothers who have dedicated their lives to serving these people must decide together to return to France and live -- live to serve other people in another place -- or stay and die. On Christmas Eve, terrorists raid the monastery and demand that Brother Luc (age 82), the infirmarian, hand over their medical supplies and go off with them. Luc (Michael Lonsdale) refuses. The religious superior, Brother Christian (Lambert Wilson), himself a French army veteran, defies the terrorist leader and quotes the Quran. Taken aback by Christian's courage, the leader withdraws his men.

At a community meeting, the shaken monks criticize Christian for committing them to stay without consulting the group. "I didn't join the Carthusians to have my throat slit," says one. In a straw vote they split -- three go, three stay, two can't decide. Later the militants return with a wounded comrade, whom Luc treats and heals. But the military, angry that the monks have saved a terrorist's life, trap the rebel leader and kill him.

In March 1996, as Easter approached, in an event not included in the film, Christian preached a retreat to 40 people at the diocesan house. We stay, he said, because of the Incarnation. Because by the Incarnation the Son of God united himself with all men, he must work with the hands of men and love with the hearts of men. Above all, we must learn to forgive. So the terrorists are "our brothers on the mountains" and the military are "our brothers on the plains."

By Easter, all the monks have decided to stay. In a silent supper, a recording of "Swan Lake" on the phonograph, they pass around a bottle of wine and drink lovingly to one another. The camera lingers on each face -- plain and homely, some old, bearded and wrinkled -- and we see them all as beautiful, with each tear, each smile of contentment, each ready to tell their Muslim neighbors they love them enough to die for them.

After their abduction (two left behind) they are held as "hostages" for the release of other terrorists. But one day they are led into the woods in a snowstorm and killed.

Their bodies are recovered or dug up in stages -- first the heads, then the rest -- as their brothers try to demand the facts of what happened. Foreseeing his end, Christian left a letter that was widely published. Thousands of Muslims responded to their deaths with letters of condolence and shame. He concludes: "At last I will be able -- if God pleases -- to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's passion and of the Spirit."

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