

Three Danish Encounters with a Spiritual Reality: The Miracle of Faith in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Ordet* (1954), & *Babette's Feast* (1988)

The Global Saint—A Working Model

William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* compared typical figures from around the world considered saintly figures and concluded that they shared the following in common. While I think there are good reasons to hold James's conclusions rather tentatively, they do help us begin a conversation about what people expect when they call someone "a saint."

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power. In Christian saintliness this power is always personified as God; but abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner visions of holiness or right may also be felt as the true lords and enlargers of our life, in ways which I described in the lecture on the Reality of the Unseen.
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards "yes, yes," and away from "no," where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.

These fundamental inner conditions have characteristic practical consequences, as follows:-

- a. *Asceticism*. -- The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into self-immolation. It may then so overrule the ordinary inhibitions of the flesh that the saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism, measuring and expressing as they do the degree of his loyalty to the higher power.
- b. *Strength of Soul*. -- The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!
- c. *Purity*. -- The shifting of the emotional centre brings with it, first, increase of purity. The sensitiveness to spiritual discords is enhanced, and the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements becomes imperative. Occasions of contact with such elements are avoided: the saintly life must deepen its spiritual consistency and keep unspotted from the world. In some temperaments this need of purity of spirit takes an ascetic turn, and weaknesses of the flesh are treated with relentless severity.

d. *Charity*. -- The shifting of the emotional centre brings, secondly, increase of charity, tenderness for fellow-creatures. The ordinary motives to antipathy, which usually set such close bounds to tenderness among human beings, are inhibited. The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his brothers.

Global Questions

- Do you find James' model helpful for considering saintliness? Why and/or why not?
- Do saints have to perform miracles? Serve the poor? Lead ascetic lives?
- Can these characteristics be found in Joan? In Johannes, or Babette? In other characters in the films?

***The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)*—Carl Theodor Dreyer [110 min]**

“When other people sit in the streetcar and look out of the window, I sit and look at faces—old ladies and red-nosed men. I believe the human face can be enormously interesting and is seldom without interest. I feel that throughout all time it is the human face which has fascinated men the most—to see what goes on in the face of another person. When someone, completely without words, wants to express what is stirring a person, it is through the facial expressions that one can see the feelings laid bare. To make a face disclose what is taking place within, that is exhilarating.”—Carl Th. Dreyer



1. Do you agree with the opening: do we discover “the real Joan”?
2. Is Joan a saint? Is she mentally ill? Is she deceived?
3. What do the faces/close-ups and the rhythms that Dreyer achieves with them tell us about the meaning of the film?
4. What is the meaning of the gaze in the film?

5. What do we learn about Joan's personality in the film?
6. How much is Joan's suffering caused by the masculine-feminine divide? By church authority?
7. How do the priests abuse the offer of the Eucharist?
8. What is the meaning of the torture chamber sequence?
9. What is the meaning of other objects in the film?
10. Why do they shear her hair? Why is this particularly horrible?
11. What is the meaning of her death? Is it a martyrdom?
12. To what kind of film style would you compare the riot at the end of the film?

***Ordet* (1954), Carl Theodor Dreyer [126 min]**

The film builds on the 1932 play by Danish pastor and martyr Kaj Munk (killed by the gestapo in WWII for speaking out against Nazi occupation, he became a Danish hero), giving us a variety of positions to struggle with—the more fundamentalist (Peter the Tailor) and the more liberal forms (Morten Borgen) of Danish Lutheranism, the agnosticism of Mikkel, the scientific skepticism of the doctor, the rational religion of the pastor, the serene trust of Inger, the “madness” of Johannes.

- What is the film suggesting about the various roles of faith and doubt in the world?
- While Munk was a Lutheran, Dreyer was not conventionally religious. Does Dreyer preserve Munk's Christianity?



1. What role does humor serve in this film?
2. What does the film ask of our emotions?
3. Is Johannes mad? Does he have faith? Is he a saint?
4. How does his condition affect this family?

5. How much does Johannes foreshadow Inger's state? How much does he understand? Does he actually see the Lord of Death?
6. How alike are Morten and Peter the Tailor?
7. Why do various characters respond the way they do to the death of the child?
8. Is the "faith" of Morten and Anders real when they believe that Inger has survived?
9. Is the doctor correct about Johannes' psychic shock?
10. What is a miracle? Is the age of miracles past? Is the miracle in the film believable? Why and/or why not?

***Babette's Feast* (1988), Gabriel Axel [102 min]**



1. How does a light, comic touch contribute to this film? How would you compare the humor to its presence in *Ordet*?
2. What is the importance of the scriptural motif: "Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss each other"?
3. What roles do sight, sound, and taste play in the film?
4. Many Christians have called this film deeply sacramental, even though Axel himself is not a religious person. Are they justified in doing so? Why and/or why not?
5. Others have argued that the film shows the encounter between Catholic spirituality and Protestant spirituality? Is this a fair interpretation?
6. What role do Martine and Philippa's courtiers, Achille and Lorens, play in the overall movie?
7. How does Lorens function as a foil for the elderly sect at the feast? How does he function as voice for them?
8. How important is Babette's self-analysis as an artist?
9. How is this a film about ambition and its limitations?
10. What does Babette's feast give to the sisters and their followers?

Emotional Movie-going & Films of Faith

Carl Plantinga in his book, *Moving Viewers*, explores how films shape and depend on our emotional responses. Audiences find pleasure for the following reasons:

1. *Cognitive play*: Movie watching is not purely sensual or driven by physical desires. It is also cognitive. Viewers enjoy dramatic and intellectual puzzles, narratives, and seeing and discovering.
2. *Visceral experience*: Movies, especially on the big screen, but also with home theatre systems, can have bodily, physical affects, sometimes even of an aggressive nature. Action films count on these kinds of visceral responses. [Direct emotions]
3. *Sympathy, antipathy, and parasocial engagement*: Movie characters draw on our sympathies, our antipathies, and our overall social engagement with people. We can experience vicarious desires, such as revenge, sorrow, or joy that are not equivalent to the same emotions in real life, but they are nonetheless parallel. At times, we may respond emotionally because the narratives recall similar experiences in our own lives. [Sympathetic/antipathetic emotions]
4. *Narrative scenarios and emotional satisfactions*: Our emotions occur in time with structured situations and responses. The narratives of films are designed with our own temporal emotional changes in mind. [Fiction emotions]
5. *Reflexive and social pleasures*: We also respond to cinema with meta-responses that judge the quality of movie-making technique, quality acting, special effects, and so on. We can take pleasure in the aesthetic of a film that we otherwise disagree with. [Artifact emotions]

What kinds of emotions and pleasures did you experience when watching the three films for this week?