

A STUDY GUIDE FOR
Xavier Beauvois'

“OF GODS AND MEN”

by Christopher Page (*April 2011*)

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Plot Summary

The film “Of Gods and Men” is based on historical events. The characters in the film are real people. Some of the episodes and dialogue have been created to fill out the story.

Our Lady of Atlas is a tiny Cistercian monastery in the Atlas mountains near Tibhirine in Algeria. In the late 1990’s seven Trappist monks live in the monastery supporting themselves by gardening and harvesting honey and selling it in the market. They live in close relationship with the local Muslim villagers to whom they offer medical care and assist in various practical ways.

But Algeria has been caught in a vicious civil war since 1992 between Islamist extremist rebels (“the brothers of the mountain”) and the Algerian government (“the brothers of the plain”). As many as 200,000 people are believed to have died in this conflict.

The villagers around the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas live near the monks with deep respect and love. Both the villagers and the monks are caught between the government militia and the terrorists.

On Christmas Eve 1993 one of the armed Islamist groups invades the monastery demanding medical care and supplies which are refused.

The monks know the terrorists will return. They know the villagers are in equal danger. They must decide whether they should exercise the privilege of their position as foreigners which and flee or stay and risk suffering the consequences.

After great struggle and much discussion and prayer, the monks agree to stay in their monastery.

On March 27, 1996, seven of the monks of Tibhirine are kidnapped. On May 21 they are executed. There are two survivors who were over-looked in the round up at the monastery.

Br. Jean-Pierre (age 87), one of the two survivors has said of the film – “It touched me very deeply. I was excited to review the things that we lived together. But I especially felt a kind of fullness, no sadness. I found the film very beautiful because its message is so true, even if the details are not always perfectly accurate compared to what happened. But it is not important. Essentially, this is the message. And this film is an icon. An icon says much more than what you see. It is a bit like Gregorian chant. When it is well composed, the author has developed a message, and one who sings is even more so, because the spirit works in him. In this sense, this film is an icon. It is a real success, a masterpiece.”

Chronology of Algeria & Monks of Tibhirine

Early history of Colonization and Revolution in Algeria

1830 (July 5) – French conquer Algeria

1843 – *Trappists begin construction of first Algerian monastery at Staoueli, near Algiers*

1865 – French citizenship granted Algerians who give up adherence to Islam

1938 – Ferhat Abbas founds the Algerian Popular Union, a movement working for independence based on Algeria's Arabic heritage

- 12 French Trappists establish Notre-Dame de l'Atlas monastery in the Atlas mountains near Tibhirine south west of Algiers in northern Algeria

1943 – French government refuses to recognize independent and sovereign Algerian state

1954 (Nov. 1) – National Liberation Front (FLN) starts war against French

1959 – *while on national service in Algeria, Br. Christian's life is saved by Mohammed, a devout Muslim Algerian policeman, father of 10. The next day Mohammed is assassinated in reprisal.*

1962 (July 5) – proclamation of Algerian independence.

(Sept. 8) – Ahmed Ben Bella of the FLN elected country's first president. New constitution recognizes Christian holidays with full pay

1965 (June 19) – Ben Bella deposed by a *coup d'etat*. A revolutionary council takes over headed by Colonel Bumedien who is later elected president

Notre-Dame de l'Atlas, Tibhirine

1971 – *Christian de Charge arrives at Tibhirine*

1976 (June 27) – Algerian National Charter promulgated stating Algeria is a socialist country that follows the Islamic religion and whose official language is Arabic

1978 (Dec. 27) – President Houari Boumediene dies

1979 (Jan. 31) – congress of the FLN elects Chadli Benjedid president

1984 (March) – *Christian de Charge elected prior of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas*

1985-87 – Oil prices collapse, reducing government spending for social programs

1988 (Oct, 4) – students riot in Algiers, government initiates reforms

1989 (Feb. 5) – New constitution permits free elections, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly

(Sept. 14) – Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) legally recognized as political party

1990 (March) – *Christian de Charge reelected prior of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas*

(June) – FIS candidates win first free multiparty municipal elections

1991 (Jan.) – Gulf War begins

(May 25) – Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) wins majority in elections

(Dec) – Algerian government cancels elections fearing fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) will win. FIS forms a guerrilla group that is outlawed. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an even more radical military Islamist group is formed.

1992 (Jan. 11) – State of emergency declared. President Chadli Bendejedid forced to resign, beginning of Algerian Civil War in which as many as 200,000 Algerians die.

(Jan. 12) – Creation of High Committee of State with Mohammed Boudiaf as president

(June 29) – Assassination of President Boudiaf

1993 (Oct. 30) – (GIA) begins aggressive action against foreigners in Algeria – 3 French Consulate officials kidnapped then freed with a message that all foreigners must leave Algeria within a month. At the end of the month 4 foreigners are assassinated.

(Nov. 19) – *Br. Christian is summoned to the Cabinet of the Wilaya (administrative division of Algerian territory under authority of a wali, who corresponds to a French prefect) who suggests the monks accept a police guard. Br. Christian refuses agreeing only to keep the gates locked at night.*

(Dec. 14) – 12 Catholic Croatian workers from hydraulic plant at Tamesquida (2 ½ miles from monastery) are killed by the GIA . They were well known to the monks and used to attend midnight Mass.

(Dec. 19) – *Br. Christian is again summoned to the Wilaya and encouraged to relocate to France or at least move to a protected hotel. He refuses.*

(Dec. 24) – *GIA emir Ali Fayattia visits monastery with fighters looking for financial aid, medical assistance, and material supplies*

(Dec. 26) – *majority of brothers favour immediate departure*

(Dec. 28) – *brothers agree on gradual departure*

(Dec. 29) – *Br. Christian summed to the Wilaya and confronted with the demand that he accept security measures and disclaiming any responsibility for any future tragedy*

(Dec. 31) – *community votes again for gradual withdrawal*

1994 (Jan. 1) – *Br. Christian completes his testament and sends it to his nephew in France to be opened upon his death*

(May 8) – first official representatives of Catholic Church in Algeria killed: Henri Verges, a Marist Brother and Sr. Paul-Helene Saint-Raymond, a Little Sister of the Assumption

(Aug. 23) – Caridad Maria Alvarez and Esther Alonso, Augustinian Sisters are killed

(Sept.) – Jamel Zitouni becomes supreme emir of the GIA

(Oct.) – Augustinians Caridad Maria Alvarez and Esther Alonso assassinated

(Dec. 27) – four White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa) killed in Tizi Ouzou

(Sept. 4) – Srs. Vivian and Angela killed

1995 (Nov. 20) – Sr. Odette Prevost, Little Sister of the Sacred Heart killed

1996 (March 27) – *7 monks at Tibhirine kidnapped*

(May 21) – *death of monks announced in communiqué 44*

(July) – GIA emir, Djamel Zitouni, killed in ambush

(Aug.) – Archbishop of Oran, Pierre Claverie assassinated

Major Figures in the Story

The Brothers

Dom Christian de Cherge (b. Jan. 18, 1937) – elected Prior of Atlas 1984, d. age 59

Br. Luc Dochier (b. Jan. 30, 1914) – ran monastery's dispensary and was community cook, d. age 82

Br. Christophe Lebreton (b. Oct. 11, 1950) – responsible for garden and planning liturgy, acted as master of novices, d. age 45

Br. Michel Fleury (b. May 21, 1944) – assistant cook and gardener, d. age 52 on his birthday

Fr. Bruno Lemarchand (b. March 1, 1930) – superior of Atlas' annex house in Morocco, was visiting Atlas in March 1996 to take part in the election of a new prior, d. age 66

Fr. Celestin Ringiard (b. July 27, 1933) – cantor, d. age 62

Br. Paul Favre-Miville (b. April 17, 1939) – hotelier and mechanic, d. age 57

Surviving Brothers

Fr. Amedee Noto (b. Oct. 17, 1920) – close to local villagers

Br. Jean-Pierre (b. Feb. 14, 1924)

Islamist Terrorist

Sayah Attia – emir (commander) of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)

Selected Excerpts from Screenplay

Brother Luc and village girl in conversation

Girl – Ever been in love?

Br. Luc – Yes, several times. And then I encountered another love, even greater. And I answered that love. It's been a while now. Over 60 years.

Reading at Meal (34:22)

Accepting our powerlessness and our extreme poverty is an invitation,
an urgent appeal to create with others relationships not based on power.
Recognizing my weaknesses, I accept those of others.
I can bear them, make them mine in imitation of Christ.
Such an attitude transforms us for our mission.
Weakness in itself is not a virtue,
but the expression of a fundamental reality
which must constantly be refashioned by faith, hope and love.
The apostles' weakness is like Christ's,
rooted in the mystery of Easter and the strength of the spirit.
It is neither passivity nor resignation.
It requires great courage and incites one to defend justice and truth
and to denounce the temptation of force and power.

End of Article.

New Article – By Carlo Carretto, “The God Who is Coming”

Often throughout my life I've wondered how God could act so strangely.
Why does he stay silent so long?
Why is faith so bitter?

Christmas Eve Invasion (36:30)

Ali Fayattia (leader of the Armed Islamic Group) – violent Muslim extremist.

December 24, 1993 he and his armed men burst into Our Lady of the Atlas Monastery in Tibhirine, Algeria calling for the leader of the monastery.

When Dom Christian appears, he is the first to speak asking Fayattia,

What do you want? This is a house of prayer.

Fayattia – Are you a Christian?

Christian – Yes. No Weapons allowed here. If you wish to speak, you must leave them outside.... Please.

F. – I never part with mine.

C. – Follow me. We'll talk outside.

F. - I need the doc. He has to come with us.

C. – Impossible.

F. – I have 3 men wounded an hour away.

C. – He can't leave here. He's sick. He's old and asthmatic. Br. Luc sees patients at the clinic. He tends to everyone who needs his help. Their identity is not an issue and never will be. That's all.

F. – So you can give us medecine.

C. – We're short on supplies. We see 100 villagers a day.

F. – Enough! You have no choice.

C. – Yes I do. We can't give what we don't have. Ask your brothers in the village. We live modestly. With products we grow. You know the Koran? “Those nearest in love to the believers are those who say, ‘We are Christians.’ Among them are priests and monks...”

F. – “...priest and monks and they were not proud.”

C. – That's why we're close to our neighbors.

F. – Come on let's go.

C. – Tonight is different from other nights.

F. – Why?

C. – It's Christmas. We celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.

F. – The Prince of Peace?

C. – *Sidna Aissa*

F. – Jesus.

C. – Yes.

F. – I'm sorry then. I didn't know. (extends hand, Christian shakes his hand)

Conversation between brothers and villagers (55:52)

Amedee – We may be leaving.

Villager – Why are you leaving?

Celestin – We're like birds on a branch. We don't know if we'll leave.

Woman Villagers – We're the birds. You're the branch. If you go, we lose our footing.

Conversation between Br. Luc and Br. Christian in Christian's office (70:25)

Br. Luc – I'm not scared of terrorists, even less of the army.
And I'm not scared of death. I'm a free man.

Conversation between Br. Christian and Br. Christophe (74:42)

Br. Christian – Remember. You've already given your life. You gave it by following Christ. When you decided to leave everything. Your life, your family, your country. The family you could have raised.

Br. Christophe – I don't know if it's true any more. I don't get it. Why be martyrs? For God? To be heroes? To prove we're the best?

Br. Christian – We're martyrs of love, out of fidelity. If death... overtakes us, despite ourselves, because up to the end, up to the end we'll try to avoid it, our mission here is to be brothers to all. Remember that love... is eternal hope. Love endures everything.

Br. Christophe alone in his cell (81:35)

You.
You envelope me, hold me, surround me.
You embrace me.
And I love you.

Br. Luc writing a letter (84:26)

I recently read this *pensee* of Pascal's: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

Here it is mayhem and violence. We are in a high-risk situation, but we persist in our faith and our confidence in God. It is through poverty, failure and death that we advance towards him.

Heavy devastating downpours have put no damper on the spread of violence. Two opponents, one clutching onto power, the other out to seize it. They'll fight to the bitter end. I don't know when or how it will end. In the meantime, I do my duty. Caring for the poor and the sick, awaiting the day I close my eyes.

Dear friend, pray for me, that my leaving this world will be in the peace and joy of Jesus.

Br. Christian speaking to the other brothers about the Christmas Eve invasion

I've often thought of that time. That time when Ali Fayattia and his men left. Once they were gone, all we had left to do was to live. And the first thing we did was... two hours later. We celebrated the Christmas Vigil and Mass.

It's what we had to do. It's what we did. And we sang the Mass. We welcomed that Child who was born for us absolutely helpless and... and already so threatened.

Afterwards, we found salvation in undertaking our daily tasks. The kitchen, the garden, the prayers, the bells. Day after day. We had to resist the violence. And day after day, I... I think each of us discovered that to which Jesus Christ beckons us. It's ... to be born. Our identities as men go from one birth to another.

And from birth to birth, we'll each end up
bringing to the world the child of God that we are.

The Incarnation, for us, is to allow the filial reality of Jesus
to embody itself in our humanity.
The mystery of Incarnation remains what we are going to live.
In this way what we've already lived here
takes root as well as...
what we're going to live in the future.

Scripture reading in chapel before kidnapping (Luke 17:33-39)

Whoever tries to save his life shall lose it,
and whoever shall lose it, preserves it.
I tell you, on that night, two people shall be in bed.
One shall be taken, the other left.
Two women shall be grinding grain together.
One shall be taken, the other left.

The disciples asked him:
“Where, Lord?”

He answered: “Where there is a body,
there too the vultures shall gather.”

Sacred Texts chanted in the movie

Psalm 82:6,7 (Title text) – I said, you are gods,
sons of the Most High.
But you shall die like men
and fall like princes.

Arabic chant during Jamel's Khtana (circumcision) ceremony

Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not those against whom Thou are wrathful, nor those who are astray. Amen.

The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord,
and the believers: each one believes in God,
His angels, His Books and His Messengers.
We make no division between any of His Messengers.

They say: "We hear and obey."

"Lord, grant us Thy forgiveness.
Unto Thee is the homecoming.
God charges no soul – save to its capacity.
It will be rewarded for good it has done,
and punished for evil it has done.

Lord, take us not to task
if we forget or make mistake.
Lord, charge us not with a load
such as Thou didst lay upon those before us.

Lord, do not burden us
beyond what we have the strength to bear.
And pardon us, and forgive us
and have mercy on us.

Thou art our Protector.
And help us against the people of the unbelievers.

Chapel – Salve Regina

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve;
to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us;
and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

After murder of Croatians and visit of Wali

Because he is with us in this time of violence,
let us not dream that he is everywhere other than where we die.
Let us make haste.
Let us draw patience from him.
Let us turn to the Man of Sorrows
who beckons us from the cross.
Because he is with us as on Easter morn,
let us not forgo the blood he shed.
Let us break the bread.
Let us drink from the chalice of passage.
Let us greet the one who sacrifices himself
by loving us until the end.

Christmas Eve Procession

This is the night, the immense night of origins,
and nothing exists except love,
except love which now begins.
By separating sand from water,
God has prepared the earth like a cradle
For his coming from above.
This is the night,
the happy night of Palestine,
and nothing exists except the Child,
except the Child of life divine.
By taking flesh of our flesh,
God our desert did refresh
and made a land of boundless spring.
This is the night,
the long night in which we grope,
and nothing exists except this place,
except this place of ruined hope.
By stopping in our abode God,
as with the bush, does forebode
the world on which fire would fall.

Christian's solitary walk

We do not know your mystery, Infinite Love,
but you do have a heart,
for you seek the prodigal son
and hold against your breast this troublesome child
which is the world of mortals.
We do not see your face, Infinite Love,
but you do have eyes
for you weep through the oppressed
and look upon us with a shining gaze
that reveals your forgiveness.

After Br. Luc has treaded a wounded terrorist

Save us Lord whilst we watch.
Keep us, Lord, whilst we sleep.
And we shall watch with Christ.
And we shall rest in peace.

After conversation between Br. Christian and Br. Christopher

Like parched earth, I stand before you Lord.
O Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy.
In your faithfulness, answer me.
Enter not into judgment with your servant.
For no man living is righteous before you.

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.
Answer me quickly, O Lord.
My spirit fails.
Do not hide your face from me,
lest I be like them who fall into the pit.

In chapel, helicopter hovering overhead

O Father of light,
eternal light and source of all light,
you illuminate us,
at the threshold of night,
with the radiance of your face.

The shadows, for you, are not shadows.
For you, night is as clear as day.
May our prayers before you rise like incense
and our hands like the evening offering.

The Testament of Dom Christian de Cherge, OCSO

This testament was written by Dom Christian de Cherge, OCSO in Algiers, December 1, 1993 and entrusted to his family to be opened in the event of his death at the hands of Islamic extremists.

The testament was read in public on Pentecost Sunday, two days after his death in 1996.

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When we face an “A-Dieu” ...

Should it ever befall me -and it could happen today- that I become a victim of the terrorism that seems now to want to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life could not be a stranger to this brutal departure.

I ask them to pray for me – for how should I be found worthy of such an offering?

I ask them to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones that have been allowed to fall into the indifference of anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other.
Nor any less value.

In any case, it lacks the innocence of childhood.

I have lived long enough to know my complicity in the evil that seems, alas, to prevail over the world, even in the evil which might blindly strike me down.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity which would enable 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 strikes me down. I cannot wish such a death. It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were to be indiscriminately accused of my murder. It is too high a price to pay for what will perhaps be called the "grace of martyrdom" to owe this to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes Islam to be. I am aware of the contempt in which the Algerians as a whole can be held.

I know too the caricatures of Islam, encouraged by a certain Islamism. It is too easy to soothe one's conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideology of its extremists.

For me, Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I think. 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, precisely in Algeria and already in the reverence of Muslim believers.

Clearly, my death will appear to justify those who would quickly dismiss me as naive, or as an idealist, "Let him tell us now what he thinks of them!" But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set satisfied.

For, God willing, I will be able to immerse my gaze in that of the Father in order to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to restore the likeness while playfully delighting in the differences.

I give thanks to God who seems to have wanted this lost life, completely mine and completely theirs, for the sake of that heavenly JOY, in everything and despite 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, at the side of my mother and my father, of my sisters and my brothers and their families - the hundredfold given as he had promised!

And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not be aware of what you are doing: Yes, I want to THANK YOU and this A-DIEU to be for you too, in whom I see the face of God.

May we be allowed to meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God the Father of us both. AMEN! In H' Allah!

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Christian-Marie de Cherge, OCSO
Algiers, December 1, 1993 – Tibhirine, January 1, 1994.

QUESTIONS for reflection

What is the relationship of the monks of Our Lady of Atlas to the villagers living near the monastery?

How does the film use the image of the sheep and the shepherd?

What appears to be the problem in Algeria as portrayed in this film?

What is the relationship between France and Algeria?

What role does worship and particularly the chanting of the Psalms play in the monks' lives?

What is the film's vision of freedom? Do you find this convincing?

What sustains the monks?

What does it mean to be a monk in this movie?

What were the reasons to stay? What reasons might you suggest for leaving? Which reasons do you find most convincing?

What is the relationship between religion and violence? Why do these two realities seem to be so often bound up with one another?

How do the monks resist the violence?

Where does real power reside?

What might it mean to be a peacemaker in the environment in which the monks find themselves?