

TWENTIETH CENTURY FICTIONAL CHARACTERIZATIONS OF CHRIST ACROSS CULTURES

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in

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

by

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To

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CERTIFICATE

Date: 19-8-30

This is to certify that I, **Binu Zachariah**, have carried out the research embodied in the present dissertation for the full period prescribed under Ph.D. ordinances of the University.

I declare to the best of my knowledge that no part of this dissertation was earlier submitted for the award of any research degree of any University.



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INTRODUCTION

This chapter may be seen as a brief survey of my M.Phil dissertation aimed at discussing the various findings I came across during the course of my research work during that period. I believe it is important for me to state here that it was these findings that spurred me on to study the portrayals of Christ—especially those that may seem to be in conflict with the representation of Christ in the Gospels—in other literatures and cultures in the twentieth century.

My M.Phil dissertation titled, "Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*¹ and the Representation of Christ in Contemporary Malayalam Literature" looks at the depiction of Christ in select Malayalam texts juxtaposed against one of the most controversial of all time works featuring Christ as a character—*The Last Temptation of Christ* written by the Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis. One of the Malayalam works taken for study was *The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ*², loosely based on *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This play was embroiled in a lot of controversy, with the advocates of Christianity even taking to the streets to get the play banned. There were lengthy debates for and against the play, fought on the pages of literary magazines and journals. The matter reached the Kerala High Court, which eventually ruled in favour of banning the play.

The M.Phil dissertation as such is divided into three chapters, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. The Preface raises questions like how does a religious

community respond to a non-conventional representation of something that its religious consciousness is deeply rooted in? In the conflict arising from the community's reluctance to disallow the existence of such non-conventional representations, is it possible to brand one position as right and the other as wrong? Should there be an attempt to restrict either communitarian sentiments or freedom of artistic expression? Or is it possible for these two entities to co-exist? The Preface, by raising such questions, sets the tone for an inspection of the character of Christ from different literary points of view, enclosed within the point of view of a believer. It in a sense, highlights the major reasons for my taking up such a project—to examine the differing ways in which Christ is picturised in literary texts and works of art, to understand why such works become problematic from a believer's point of view and to find out why these kinds of portrayals are at times condemned as being blasphemous in nature. This examination is done mainly by looking at the differences between the mystified Christ in the Bible and the de-mystified Christ in literary works, both from the viewpoint of a believer and also from the viewpoint of a research student.

The Introduction gives a summarized description of the history of Christianity in Kerala. This is based on materials collected from P.J.Thomas' *Malayala Sahityavum Kristhianikalum*³, Scaria Zachariah's *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599*⁴, Paremakal Governador's *Varthamanapustakam*⁵, and Susan Vishwanathan's *The Christians of Kerala*.⁶ Through this description, the chapter attempts to emphasize that there already existed in Kerala a strong Christian tradition much before the arrival of Western traders and missionaries, starting with the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama in

1498. It was the Portuguese who brought Roman Catholicism to Kerala. Later on, with the advent of the East Indian Company in the 18th century, Protestant missionaries established themselves in a big way all over Kerala.

The Portuguese were contemptuous of the practices and rites of the native Christians, simply because these did not conform to their own Catholic ways of religious thinking. They convened the Synod of Diamper in 1599, which called for the abolishing of the rituals of the native Christians. They also converted several native Christians to Roman Catholicism. So this may be said to be one of the earliest of splits that occurred among the native Christians of Kerala due to foreign intervention. But there were others like the 'Puthencoors' who took the 'Coonan Kurisu' oath in 1653 to remain outside the Catholic fold. Although it is true that the British missionaries, coming much after the Portuguese, played a substantial role in initiating literacy, their reluctance, like the Portuguese, to accept the practices of the Puthenchoor Christians, led to several schismatic divisions among these, between some of whom litigations continue even to this day.

Through the entry of foreign brands of Christianity and via literacy came westernization too:

And this influence affected not just the Hindus and Muslims, but also the native Christians. If Western Christianity smothered the nativised literary and educational tradition, it also helped a lot in spreading literacy through its educational modes and served to give linguistic and literary access to people belonging to the lower strata of life. If the introduction of several schools, colleges and hospitals by the missionaries improved the social life of the colonised, their reluctance to accept or even tolerate the ideological religious particularities of the native Christian Church in Kerala, paved the way for the split of the Kerala Christians into various fragments.⁷

The play *The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ* which caused a lot of controversy in Kerala is cloned from *The Last Temptation of Christ* and hence a direct result of the influence of westernization.

The first chapter titled 'The Kazantzakian Christ' is a study of the Christ character found in Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The chapter looks at the differences between the Christ story as found in the Bible and as sketched by Kazantzakis. The Kazantzakian Christ is forced by the claw like grip of God's spirit to leave behind the life of an ordinary man in order to become the Messiah. But the protagonist tries his best to resist this force:

What did you say? ... The kingdom of heaven? ... I don't care about the kingdom of heaven. I like the earth. I want to marry, I tell you I want Magdalene, even if she is a prostitute. It is my fault that she became one, my fault and I shall save her. Her! Not the earth, not the kingdom of this world ... it is Magdalene I want to save. That's enough for me ... I want you to detest me, to go and find someone else: I want to be rid of you ... and I shall make crosses all my life, so that the Messiahs you choose can be crucified. [KZ.28]

But he finally gives in and goes to the monastery in the desert. On his return he chooses his disciples, among whom Judas overshadows all the rest. Although Jesus is quite soft spoken earlier on, his preachings become more forceful and radical later. But this Jesus is frightened of his own powers. The Kazantzakian Christ is purely a man. And one major way through which the author attempts to negate the divinity of Christ is by leaving out several of the miracles, which Jesus had performed as per the Bible. Only the raising of Lazarus, which is not described directly, but reported, and the healing of the paralysed

daughter of a Roman centurion, is mentioned in detail. But it is Jesus more than anyone else, who is unnerved by his abilities to perform miracles:

Throughout the novel, Jesus is nothing less than the 'universal' human being in whose embodiment lie the passions, fears, and desires of any youth. He feels attracted to women, loneliness frightens him and temptations forever surround him, tearing his flesh and spirit. If initially he attempts to renounce his flesh in order to attain complete divinity, later he is apprehensive whether he is the real Messiah after all. Even the raising of Lazarus does not completely convince him. He is disgusted to see Lazarus' corpse walking: "I wanted to run away but was too ashamed. I just stayed there and trembled"[KZ.395]. Kazantzakis brings in this miracle in order to subvert the divinity of Christ from within the divine aura of the miracle of raising a dead man. By making his Christ feel ashamed of the corpse walking, Kazantzakis may have succeeded in his attempt of subversion. But we must note that Kazantzakis does not show a Christ who fails in his effort to raise Lazarus. He could very well have depicted this to prove Christ's humanness. Instead he portrays Christ as being frightened of his divine power. Here too, Kazantzakis fails to completely subvert Christ's divinity, which would have been in keeping tune with his attempt to humanise Christ.⁸

The Kazantzakian Christ forces Judas to betray him because he feels that unless someone does so, he cannot die as the Messiah so as to wash away the sins of the world. The last temptation comes to him when he is crucified, in the form of a little green angel who takes him away from the cross to Magdalene and they engage in carnal pleasures. And Jesus feels that he had been wrong about salvation after all:

I went astray because I sought a way outside the flesh; I wanted to go by way of the clouds, great thoughts and death. Woman, precious fellow-worker of God, forgive me. I bow and worship you, mother of God.
[KZ.450]

But his disciples feel vexed and cheated when they discover that their rabbi has been living a comfortable domestic life, while they had to suffer a lot of hostilities trying to

spread his Word. They are stunned when they realise that he did not suffer or die on the cross, but instead found solace in the arms of women, and in the pleasures of family life: "One by one they shouted. 'Coward ! Traitor ! Deserter !'—and vanished"[KZ.495] Suddenly Jesus realises that he has been duped by yet another temptation and that his guardian angel was no one else but the devil. He feels glad that he has not succumbed to this last temptation and dies with the cry: " It is accomplished!" [KZ.496]

We thus see the Kazantzakian Christ overcoming the last temptation on the cross before eventually dying. So in a way, by not yielding to temptations, this Christ is also like the Christ found in the Gospels. But the problem a believer has with respect to the Kazantzakian Christ is that here, carnal/sexual thoughts and feelings are important aspects of Christ's temptations. I concluded this chapter by stating that it is important to see the Kazantzakian Christ as someone whom the author wanted to identify with:

The whole text maybe seen, as a reflection of the author's self, an attempt by Kazantzakis to find for himself, a Saviour, a god whom he can identify with. We may look at the 'Kazantzakian' Christ, his confusions, his doubts and his various struggles as embodying the confusions of modern man. The human beings of the twentieth century find it difficult to accept anything, even religion, as a given notion. We cannot believe in anything unless we are rationally sure! The 'Kazantzakian' Christ must thus be viewed as a product of the twentieth century. He does not accept religion, faith, divinity, or belief as given concepts. He constantly questions them. His temptations and visions are ample proofs for this. He even goes to the extent of questioning his own conferred divine status. Therefore this Christ may be understood as a representative of the modern man who cannot believe and accept anything that does not satisfy his rationality.⁹

But Kazantzakis' attempts to portray a Christ in the manner he understood him created a controversy. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was denounced by the religiously oriented.

Kazantzakis was excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church and his novel found for itself a place in the Roman Catholic *Index of Forbidden Books*.¹⁰

The second chapter of my dissertation looks at the controversy created by a stage performance called *The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ* based very much, though not entirely on *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This chapter, as its title 'Artistic Freedom of Expression versus Communitarian Sentiments', clearly indicates, looks at the complexities that arise when an artist's freedom to express himself or herself comes into conflict with the religious feelings of a community. And to gain an in-depth understanding of these complexities, the responses of several individuals supporting either of these concepts were studied, so as to comprehend the artist's freedom of expression and the reverberations this freedom created as far as one community was concerned.

The play was ultimately banned by the Kerala High Court. And the chapter studies the court proceedings that recommended this ban. In this chapter I also look at another play, *The Celestial Tree at Calvary*¹¹ by Kainikara Padmanabhapillai, mainly to argue that it is not a work of art in its totality, but instead the subverted portrayals of certain character/s who are considered to be of prime importance to the consciousness of a community, that often become a thorny issue.

The plot of the banned play is based on *The Last Temptation of Christ*, except that here it ends with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Though the text of the play, which I

had obtained from the Kerala Sahitya Academy ends with this betrayal scene, the analysis of the responses of literary personalities and theologians seemed to show that the play ends with the crucifixion of Christ. This may be true because though the play was staged first in 1986, the text that I got hold of was published in 1988. So the text may have been different from the play itself. Anyway, there is no last temptation as such here. In an interview to a Malayalam journal, the playwright P.M. Antony maintains that his work only has a 'distant conformity' to Kazantzakis' text, as he was more concerned with the freedom struggle of the people of Israel:

As far as I am concerned, it is the people of Israel who are important. The Christ in this expressive context created quite a few doubts. Why did Christ's message of love fail in Israel? And why does it fail even today? Is it possible to liberate an oppressed people through the concept of universal love? These are some of the questions that I search for with regard to Christ. This is different from Kazantzakis' exposition. That is why I said that this play has only a 'distant conformity' with Kazantzakis' text...¹²

It's a different matter that this freedom struggle was clearly overshadowed by the Christ character, as it was the characterization of Christ that became the flashpoint for the controversy. And it is to argue that it was the unbiblical portrayal of the Christ character more than anything else that caused problems, that I juxtaposed Antony's play against Kainikara Padmanabhapillai's. *The Celestial Tree of Calvary*. The main feature that may be said to be unbiblical here is the character of Judith, the sister of Judas who persuades her brother to betray Christ. No one had problems with this play. Though it pictures an imaginative perspective as far as Christ's betrayal is concerned, the character of Christ remains very much the same as found in the Gospels.

As far as Antony's play is concerned, it was from the introductory note of the play's leaflets, "The Jesus who is not the Son of God! The Judas who is not a betrayer! The Barabbas who is not a criminal! The Mary of Magdalene who is not a sinner!"¹³ that problems arose. Days before the actual staging of the play, police raided the rehearsal camp and seized the leaflets that caused offence to the authorities. Though Antony appealed to the High Court and obtained permission to stage the play, further problems cropped up when the Bishop of the Trissur diocese led a mass protest rally urging the Government to ban the play. When the matter reached the Kerala High Court, the Court decided:

... to set up a panel consisting of persons from different shades of opinion to read the script and see the performance of the drama and submit the report... on the need, desirability and justification in imposing and continuing the prohibition against the performance of the drama.¹⁴

The main aim of this panel was:

... to view the performance of the drama and to express their reasoned opinion as to whether the performance is profane, sacrilegious or blasphemous, and depicts Jesus Christ as a charlatan easily succumbing to worldly temptations or He is depicted as a noble soul who outlives all such temptations.¹⁵

While nine of the members of the panel felt that the play should be banned, six, including a bishop disagreed with their fellow-panelists. The play was banned as the judges felt:

... The portrayal of Jesus in the drama does not have the support of any of the Gospels. The life of Jesus is portrayed in the four Gospels of the Bible. If any one creates a story of Jesus repudiating what is given in the Gospels, that itself will outrage the religious beliefs and feelings of Christians...¹⁶

The main thrust of argument of the learned counsel for the appellant was that the ban order has impinged upon the freedom of speech and

expression guaranteed under Article 19 (a) of the Constitution. Freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution is subject to reasonable restriction in the interest of decency or morality. The powers conferred on the Government under the provisions of the Kerala Dramatic Performances Act 1961 are in the general interest of the public and they do not impose any unreasonable restrictions.¹⁷

The chapter concludes by stating that the Indian Constitution decisively supports:

... the collective consciousness of a community as opposed to the concept of freedom of expression, according to which "the law imposes reasonable restriction on the exercise of the right (to freedom of expression)"¹⁸

This is true as Article 19 of the Constitution, while detailing the fundamental rights of a citizen, states that:

19. (1) All citizens have the right—
(a) to freedom of speech and expression;

(2) Nothing in sub clause (a) of clause (1) shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the state from making any law, in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred by the said sub clause in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.¹⁹

The Court obviously felt that the play had to be banned because whatever it is that its creator was trying to express, had to be restricted in the interest of decency and morality.

The third chapter 'In Search of His Christ' looks at the works of another writer, who like Kazantzakis, felt that his Christ character is a study of Christ as he understands him:

Religion was imposed on me in the name of Christ, and so I should know who this Christ is! It is a search for my own self, my personality—who I am!²⁰

Two short stories, *Till You Face the Mirror*²¹ and *Who Knows!*²² and one novelette, *What News, Pilate?*²³ by the contemporary Malayalam writer Paul Zachariah are taken for study here. While the first short story revolves around the fears and apprehensions of Christ to behold himself before a mirror, the massacre of innocent children by King Herod during the time of Christ's birth, forms the locale of the second story. Zachariah here wonders whether:

the birth of the Saviour of mankind who shed his blood in order to cleanse the sins of all humanity for all times, had to be at the cost of the most tender and most innocent of all human blood.²⁴

The novelette *What News Pilate?* is told from the viewpoint of Pilate as well as his scrivener, Ruth. While Pilate feels that Christ brought his crucifixion upon himself despite Pilate's attempts to save him, Ruth wonders why Christ never gave importance to his female followers, and through her, Zachariah seems to be criticizing the patriarchy-centred Church:

Though in interviews and conversation, the author denies that he was consciously presenting a feminist point of view, Zachariah's women characters negate this by questioning the prejudiced nature of the man they admire and respect the most.²⁵

In the novelette, Christ is an object of sexual attraction:

In a de-mystified portrayal of Christ, it is the depiction of Christ's sexuality that worries the Church, because although the Church does talk about the humanness of Christ, he is more God and less man in the picture painted by the Church, taught by it, and learnt and absorbed by the

followers. So the depictions of his inclinations towards women would infuriate the Christian religious leaders as well as other ordinary believers. Zachariah only talks about a woman being sexually attracted towards Christ. Although he says that 'I am not sure whether Christ was sexually attracted towards women,'³ in the novel he does not mention anything about Christ reciprocating these feelings. In fact, Christ's biased nature towards his disciples, privileging them over his women followers may be read as his deliberate attempt to stay away from the coils of female sexuality.²⁶

Zachariah's works did not generate much controversy as Antony's did. Though his Christ is also human and not divine, the sexuality of Christ is not given much importance, at least not explicitly. The concept of resurrection is also trivialized here. The chapter concludes by assuming:

Perhaps in a patriarchal literary microcosm, embedded in a macrocosmic patriarchal society, no one would probably have protested strongly against the patriarchal set up of the Church. Issues such as this are implicitly present within the Church itself. A controversy, as the one witnessed with respect to *The Sixth Holy Wound of Christ* may have helped in creating a feminist awareness in the Church especially with regard to Christianity. However things are to a certain extent made easier for the Church, by Zachariah himself, who emphasizes only female sexuality in his work, while conveniently avoiding the aspect of Christ's sexuality, an issue which would have perhaps initiated serious repercussions.²⁷

The Conclusion looks at why believers find it difficult to accept Christ when he is presented in literary works as embodying purely human characteristics and not divinity. In all the works chosen for study in the M.Phil dissertation, the Son of God figure of Christ that is found in the Bible is negated by highlighting essentially human traits like sexuality, temptations, doubt, rebellion, fear, etc. The divinity of Christ is decentralized by exclusively streamlining Christ's human persona. All this is completely antithetical to the Christ found in the Bible, whom believers view as God. It is

inconceivable for a believer to think of Christ as being sexually inclined towards women. This may be because sexuality and other aspects associated with it have always been viewed in Christianity as sin.

But the question that arises is, "Should works of art that concentrate on the presentation of an unbiblical Christ be banned?"

The dissertation concludes by stating that if the intentions of those who favour banning works of art are to prevent such works from affecting the faith of believers, then their attempts are really ludicrous, as there is no point in trying to protect the mild, namesake faith of someone who maybe easily influenced by differing portrayals of Christ.

Freedom of expression is important because only then will we have differing points of view. And even if one does not encourage or approve views that may be blasphemous to oneself, it is important to see that one does not silence views that do not conform to one's own beliefs and ways of thinking. At the same time it is important to add here that freedom of expression should not be invoked solely to endorse and promote one's own personal ideologies and creeds without having a foresight of the implications of this freedom. But then can we really dictate terms to a writer with regard to what s/he should or should not write? Do writers have a responsibility to the world at large? Is it really possible to have a co-existence as far as freedom of expression and communitarian sentiments are concerned? Or are we being too idealistic by demanding such a co-existence? My M.Phil dissertation raises these questions.

The PhD thesis is an attempt to look at some such questions as also examine the cultural backgrounds of similar works produced in twentieth century Europe and America, where Christ figures as a central character. The Christ character in the works taken for study here are examined by looking at how unbiblical these are with respect to the story of Christ as depicted in the Bible. An attempt is also made to examine how these nonconformist portrayals of Christ from various literatures were received in their respective cultures. Did unbiblical characterizations of Christ create controversies in communities that are predominantly Christian? Were there attempts to stifle voices that dared to differ from the recognized Gospel version of Christ? What were the creators of these non-conventional representations of Christ aiming at through such portrayals? Were they like Kazantzakis, trying to create a Christ whom they could identify with? Or were they like Zachariah trying to come to terms with Christ so as to explore their own identities?

The thesis tries to focus on these questions by highlighting the differences between the biblical Christ and the unbiblical portrayals of Christ in literature/art vis-a-vis three novels—Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*²⁸ from Portuguese literature, Robert Graves' *King Jesus*²⁹ from Irish literature, Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*³⁰ from American literature, a short story—*The Man Who Died*³¹ by D.H.Lawrence from English literature, and two movies—*Jesus Christ, Superstar*³² and *The Last Temptation of Christ*³³ from Hollywood. The initial three chapters explore the differences between the Christ in the Bible and the ones in fictional representations through a thematic study based on the birth and early life of Christ, his sexuality and

finally his crucifixion and martyrdom. All the works used in this thesis give maximum importance to the humanity of Christ, not his divinity. The first chapter 'A New Beginning' looks at the different notions of Christ's nativity and early life as found in two of the works taken for study that focus on this theme. The use of new historical tenets and the cultural backgrounds of the two texts that come under scrutiny in this chapter so as to understand these as products shaped by their respective cultural milieus, are also discussed here. The second chapter titled 'Sexuality' goes into the life of Christ as described in these works, focusing mainly on the one major issue that often becomes the seed of controversy as far as portrayals of Christ in art are concerned. This chapter scans sexuality in general terms and briefly probes the social evolution of this concept. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*³⁴ is used in this regard as the basic text for secondary reference. The chapter also examines how the notion of sexuality is viewed by the Church and the concept of celibacy here comes to the forefront. The cultural backgrounds of some of the other texts are also discussed in this chapter, while that of the remaining lexis are discussed in subsequent chapters. The third chapter 'Martyrdom' considers how Christ attains martyrdom according to the different versions of the authors taken for study. This is one theme that is uniformly found in all the works taken for study in this thesis. The idea of martyrdom as understood and discussed in Christianity is also given thought to. The fourth chapter titled 'Reception' analyses the controversies generated by fictional representations of Christ, by using three of the works used in this thesis as case studies. The chapter reviews how these works were received within their various socio-cultural complexities, the general response to these texts and the authors' reactions to the controversies their works gave rise to. The 'Conclusion' summarizes the findings of the

previous chapters and attempts to examine and understand the reason/s behind various authors' efforts to create a Christ who is more human than divine, so much so that the fictional Christ-characters studied here are a complete anti-thesis of the biblical Christ. Concepts like blasphemy and heresy are also discussed in this light.

NOTES

- ¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, New York, Touchstone, 1960. All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'KZ'.
- ² Translated from P.M.Antony's *Kristhuvinte Aaram Thirumurivu*, New Delhi, Indian Atheist Publication, 1988.
- ³ P.J.Thomas, *Malayala Sahityavum Kristhianikalum*. Kottayam, D.C.Books, 1989.
- ⁴ Scaria Zachariah, *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod Of Diamper 1599*, Edamattom. Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994, 7-59.
- ⁵ Paremakal Governador, *Varthamanapusthakam*, Vadavathoor, Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1994.
- ⁶ Susan Vishwanathan, *The Christians of Kerala*, Madras, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- ⁷ Binu Zachariah, *Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ and the Representation of Christ in Contemporary Malayalam Literature*, diss.. (University of Hyderabad, 2000) 8.
- ⁸ Ibid. 23-24.
- ⁹ Ibid. 44.
- ¹⁰ Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance*, Columbus, Ohio Stale University, 1980, 12.
- ¹¹ Kainikara, Padhmanabha Pillai, foreword, *Kalvariye Kalpapadakam*, Kottayam, National Books, 1984.
- ¹² P.M. Antony, interview, *Kalakoumudi* 579 (1986): 19.
- ¹³ K.K. Kochu, "Oru Nadakam Kurishil" *Kalakoumudi* 579(1986): 15.
- ¹⁴ Based on Court documents. 1988(1) K.L.T. 54. T.Parameshwaran versus District Collector, Ernakulam and others, p.56.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. 66-67.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 70.

¹⁸ Durgadas Basu, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, New Delhi, Prentice Hall of India, 1988,96.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Paul Zachariah, Personal Interview, 6 January, 2000.

²¹ Translated from Paul Zachariah's *Kannadi Kaanmolavum*, Kottayam, D.C.Books, 1997.

²² Translated from Paul Zachariah's "Aarkariyam", ed. Naushad, *Thiruvezhuthukal*, Kozhikode, Mulberry Publications, 1996.

²³ Translated from Paul Zachariah's *Enthundu Vishesham Peelathose?*, Kottayam, D.C.Books, 1996.

²⁴ Binu Zachariah, *Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ and the Representation of Christ in Contemporary Malayalam Literature*, diss., (University of Hyderabad, 2000) 99.

²⁵ Ibid. 90.

²⁶ Ibid. 95.

²⁷ Ibid. 101

²⁸ Jose Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Trans. Giovanni Pontiero, London, Harvill, 1993.
All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'GJC'.

²⁹ Robert Graves, *King Jesus*, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000.
All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'KJ'.

³⁰ Gore Vidal, *Live From Golgotha*, New York, Penguin, 1992.
All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'LFG'.

³¹ D.H.Lawrence, "The Man Who Died" in Douglas A. Hughes, ed. *Studies in Short Fiction*, New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1974, pp.213-248.
All textual quotations from this novel will begin with the abbreviations 'MD'.

³² Norman Jewison, dir, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, Universal Pictures, 1973.

³³ Martin Scorsese, dir, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Universal Pictures, 1988.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin, 1984.

CHAPTER I

A NEW BEGINNING

This chapter looks at the different versions of the birth of Jesus and his adolescent days as found in two of the texts taken for study—*The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *King Jesus*. The other four works do not mention Jesus' birth. An attempt will be made here to analyse these differing versions of the birth of Jesus and his early years and compare it with the depiction of Jesus' birth as found in the Bible, which is considered as the standard norm. The theory of New Historicism as how it is going to be used in this thesis is outlined here. And in this regard, the cultural backgrounds of the two works studied in this chapter would also be looked into.

Whenever an author pens the Christ-story, one always tends to think about how new or how different this is going to be from the Gospel narrative of Christ. Saramago's novel answers this question in an interesting way, where other than the Christ-Magdalene relationship, the author projects God as someone who rejects the Devil's plea to forgive him for His own selfish purposes:

I neither accept nor pardon you, I much prefer you as you are and were it possible, I'd much prefer you to become even worse than you are ... Because the Good that I represent cannot exist without the Evil you represent... for me to be Goodness, it is essential that you should continue to be evil. [GJC.299,300]

As the above lines indicate, the novel attempts to view the story of Christ and in turn Christianity, by keeping the concepts of good and evil in a reciprocal relationship. This is

done through the picturisation of a concerned and reasonable Devil as opposed to a power hungry and dictatorial God, for whom his Son pleads: "Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done." [GJC. 341] The 'good-evil' role reversal is one of the most important aspects of this novel that traces the life of Christ right from his very conception till his crucifixion. The novelist himself defines his work as follows, "My Gospel tries to fill the blank spaces between the various episodes of Jesus' life as narrated in other gospels—with some interpretations of my own."¹

Saramago's 'interpretations of his own' include the above mentioned good-evil role reversal, Christ's introduction to carnal pleasures via Magdalene and lengthy 'business' discussions between God, Christ and the Devil with regard to future matters, especially the rise of Christianity as a major religious power. The novel begins, however, with Jesus' birth being announced not by an angel of peace as seen in the Bible, but by the Prince of Darkness. Saramago not only adds his own interpretations, but also modifies Christ's life story substantially. And the novelist sets out to do this not from the birth of Jesus, but from his very conception.

The Devil's entry is not at all dramatic. A beggar knocks at Joseph's door requesting for food. Mary offers him food, and after having eaten it, the beggar puts sand into the bowl that Mary had given him and says:

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, nothing begins without coming to an end, every beginning comes from some ending... Good woman, you have a child in your womb and that is man's only destiny, to begin and to end, and to end and begin... Who are you who knows so much without hearing it from my own lips, I am an angel, but tell no one. [GJC. 16]

The beggar disappears as Joseph approaches. But the earth in the bowl begins to glow. This, as also the fact that the beggar had predicted Mary's condition upsets Joseph and he confides in the elders of the Synagogue about the mysterious beggar. They come to his house and question Mary, because no one else in the neighbourhood seemed to have seen this beggar. They then bury the bowl containing the glowing soil. But Man' more than anyone else feels that there is some explainable link between the beggar who called himself an angel and her pregnancy. And indeed the beggar appears again, this time as a shepherd.

As in the Bible, there are no wise men in Saramago's gospel. Instead, three shepherds come to visit Mary and her child and offer humble gifts like milk and cheese:

...the third shepherd, whose massive frame seemed to fill the cave, stepped forward and, without so much as glancing at the new-born infant's parents, said, I have kneaded this bread with my own hands and baked it in the fire that burns beneath the earth. No sooner had he spoken than Mary recognized him. [GJC. 55]

He was none other than the beggar who had brought good tidings to Mary. The Bible does talk about shepherds coming to visit Jesus when they see the heavens open and angels singing his praises. But there is no beggar who predicts Mary's pregnant condition.

As far as the biblical narration of Christ's birth is concerned, it is the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that describes this in detail. The Gospel of Matthew talks about Mary,

a virgin, being with child by the Holy Spirit, while she was engaged to Joseph, who when he comes to know that Mary is with child, secretly decides to break off his engagement with her. But an angel appears to him in a dream and discourages him from doing so. [Matthew 1:20-24] It is also stated in the book of Matthew that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary, at least till Jesus was born: "And he knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son; and he called his name Jesus." [Matthew 1:25]

In Saramago's Gospel, Mary is not a virgin. She is as found in the Bible married to Joseph, a carpenter in Nazareth. And like any other married couple, sex is a part and parcel of their lives. Saramago describes one such scene on the day Jesus was supposed to have been conceived:

Joseph went into the house and shut the door behind him...Wide awake, Mary lay on her back, listening and staring into space as if waiting. Joseph furtively approached and slowly drew back the sheet. She averted her eyes, began tugging at the hem of her tunic and no sooner had she pulled it up as far as her navel than he was on top of her. his tunic hitched up to the waist. Meanwhile Mary had opened her legs, or they had opened by themselves as she had dreamed, and remained open, perhaps because of this sudden lassitude or the mere premonition of a married woman who knows her duty. God, Who is omnipresent, was there, but pure spirit that He is, was unable to see how Joseph's skin came into contact with that of Mary, how his penetrated hers as had been ordained, and perhaps He was not even there when the holy seed of Joseph spilled into the precious womb of Mary, both sacrosanct, being the fount and chalice of life. For in truth, there are things God Himself does not understand, even though He created them. Out in the yard God could neither hear the anguished gasp, which escaped Joseph's lips as he experienced an orgasm nor the gentle moan Mary was unable to repress. [GJC. 11]

This is in complete contrast to the conception of Jesus as depicted in the Bible. In the Gospels, it is the angel Gabriel who appears to Mary and tells her that she is with child by

the Holy Spirit and that the child will be the Messiah. [Luke 1:26-38] In the novel though, it is the angel of darkness, the Devil himself who appears in the guise of a beggar and tells Mary that she is pregnant, a fact that Mary herself knew and was planning to tell her husband that same day.

We thus see that there is a marked departure here from the birth and early years of Christ as seen in the Bible and that there is a lot of subversion taking place here. First and foremost, Saramago outrightly rejects the universal Christian belief that Mary is a virgin. This belief is founded on verses from the Bible [Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 1:26-38], which clearly state the fact that Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit and that this child would be "the Son of the Most High God."

Saramago wants his 'Christ' to be a normal human being and not the Son of God. The entry of the Devil to announce Mary's pregnancy seems to confirm this. For he merely tells her that she is with child. He does not, like the angel of peace in the Bible, Gabriel, tell her that she is to give birth to the Messiah. On the way to Bethlehem, Joseph is questioned by Simeon, a patriarch of another traveller's group, about the very purpose of Jesus' birth. This Simeon is so different from the Simeon in the Bible, who was promised by God that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. [Luke 2:25-35] Through these two incidents what is Saramago doing if not emphatically stating that the Christ of his gospel is a human Christ. And he also seems to be saying that this human Christ is an ordinary child, when it is not three wise men with expensive gifts, who come to visit the future king of Israel, but three shepherds with modest offerings like cheese

and milk, who come to see the baby. And one of these shepherds is the Devil himself. But then, Saramago is forced to introduce the concept of the kingly Messiah in order to depict the massacre of the children at Bethlehem. In the Bible, it is through the three wise men that King Herod hears of the birth of the Messiah, the King of Jews and orders the massacre of all infants in Bethlehem in the hope that the Saviour also would get killed. But here Herod dreams of prophet Micah telling him: "It was from you, Bethlehem, so insignificant among the families of Judah that the future ruler of Israel has come." [GJC. 70] He conforms this message from the Book of Micah and then decides that all male infants in Bethlehem have to die.

In the Bible, an angel appears to Joseph, warns him of Herod's order and tells him to flee to Egypt. [Matthew 2:13-15] But in the novel, Joseph overhears soldiers speaking of Herod's madness and rushes back to his wife and child. Unlike in the Bible, he does not take his wife and child and go to Egypt. Instead they remain in the cave hoping that the soldiers would miss searching the hillside. They wait till everything is over and then stealthily return to Nazareth. Joseph who comes to know of Herod's intentions, thinks only about his child. He does not do anything to warn other parents. If he had done anything like that it would perhaps have put the safety of his child at risk. By introducing a Joseph who does not warn anyone about the oncoming massacre, Saramago seems to be hinting that the biblical Joseph, who was informed well in advance about the massacre that was going to take place, could have revealed this to the other parents of Bethlehem, who then perhaps could have done something to save their children. And here, there is a similarity with Zachariah in *Aarkariyam*, who wonders why the birth of the Messiah, the

Saviour of mankind, who shed his blood in order to cleanse the sins of all humanity for all times, had to be at the cost of the most tender and most innocent of all human blood.²

And from then onwards, Saramago's Joseph is plagued by guilt and nightmares where he sees himself as a soldier coming to slay his own child. The Devil too informs Mary that her husband committed a grave sin by not trying to prevent the massacre. Joseph however, I feel, does what any man would probably have done. His prime duty was to protect his child and that he does by wisely deciding to remain in the cave and not escape from there. For had he done so, he could have led his wife and child right onto the oncoming soldiers. Saramago obviously feels strongly about the massacre of the infants, otherwise he would not have introduced feelings of guilt in his Joseph. But it is important to note that this guilty feeling does not come naturally to Joseph. It is through his nightmares that he is constantly reminded that he has done something wrong. And Saramago also seems to be holding the biblical Jesus responsible for the massacre, which is why perhaps Jesus feels guilty about his father's inaction. But here too it is through nightmares that Jesus comes to know about his father's wrongdoing. Saramago's Jesus holds his father responsible for the murder of the children at Bethlehem and leaves home because of this. He also wonders why he has to suffer the miseries of something that his father did. But even the scribes in the Temple cannot explain to him why the guilt of the parents has to be borne by their children. And it is interesting to note that at this juncture in Saramago's Jesus' life, when his mind is so disturbed, he should find solace not in his own house or anywhere else, but in the company of none other than the Devil himself.

There is no mention in the Bible about the period in Christ's life from his first visit to the Temple at Jerusalem at the age of twelve, up to his baptism by John during the fifteenth year of the rule of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. [Luke3:1] Saramago describes this period in a most interesting manner.

Saramago's boy-Christ lives with Pastor, the Devil, tending his flock of sheep. The author seems to be bringing in the imagery of Christ as the 'good shepherd'. (Is 40:11) But it is Pastor here who is the real shepherd. Jesus is only his helpmeet. Initially Jesus finds it difficult to adjust with Pastor, especially because of Pastor's irreverence to God:

Certainly, if God exists He must be only one Lord, but it would be preferable if he were two, then there would be a god for the wolf and one for the sheep, one for the victim and one for the assassin, a god for the condemned man and one for the executioner... I wouldn't like to be a god who guides the hand of the assassin clutching the dagger while presenting the throat that is about to be cut. [GJC. 174]

Pastor also shocks and offends Jesus by his blunt comments on sexuality:

You must choose a sheep... because you'll need it, unless you really are a Eunuch. When these words sank in, the boy felt stunned... Covering his face with both hands, he said in a hoarse voice, This is the word of the Lord, If a man should copulate with an animal he will be punished with death...Cursed is the man who sins with an animal whatever its species, Did your Lord say all these things, Yes, and now leave me alone, abominable creature, For you are not God's creature but belong to the Devil... Pastor raised his arms and called out in a commanding voice to his flock, Listen, listen my Sheep... God has forbidden that anyone should copulate with you, so worry not, but as for shearing you, neglecting you, slaughtering you, and eating you, all these things are permitted, because for this you were created by God's law and are sustained by His Providence [GJC. 177-178]

Gradually though, Jesus learns to take Pastor's provocations in his stride and ignores these completely. He grows so fond of his sheep that when he has to go to attend the Passover festival in Jerusalem, he decides not to choose a sacrificial lamb from Pastor's flock. A generous Pharisee offers him a lamb in Jerusalem. But Jesus begins to wonder why in the first place did lambs have to be sacrificed to God.

Jesus pressed his lamb to his breast unable to fathom why God cannot be appeased with a shellful of milk being poured over His altar, that sap of existence which passes from one being to another, or with a handful of wheat, the basic substance of immortal bread. [GJC. 187]

This may be said to be the first instance in the novel, where Jesus questions, vaguely at least, the authority of God. He decides against sacrificing his lamb. He meets his mother at Jerusalem. As he describes the man with whom he has been living, she realizes that it is the same beggar who had earlier come to her. She warns Jesus that Pastor is a demon and also rebukes him for not sacrificing his lamb. Jesus however takes the lamb back to Pastor, who clips off a part of its ear as a mark of identification that this is Jesus' lamb.

Jesus is eighteen years old when this lamb, which is now a sheep, gets lost in the desert one day. He goes to the desert looking for his sheep and there he meets God in the form of a spiraling cloud. God asks Jesus to be prepared to offer Him his life, in exchange for which he will obtain power and glory. God makes Jesus sacrifice the very sheep, which he had rescued from the sacrificial altar, in order to seal His covenant with him: "from now on you are tied to Me in flesh and blood. ... My signs will accompany you henceforth." [GJC. 198]

Pastor is infuriated when he learns that Jesus sacrificed the sheep and drives him away: "You've learnt nothing, be gone with you." [GJC. 199] Thus ends Jesus' four years in the company of Pastor.

This, in brief is Jose Saramago's retelling of the nativity and early years of Christ, so very different from the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible. The most interesting aspect of this retelling is the presence of the Devil. He seems to be a part and parcel of Jesus' life right from the time he was in his mother's womb. The Devil seems to be a catalyst for every turning point in Jesus' early life. He announces Jesus' birth. He visits Jesus when he is born. He informs Mary of her husband's wrongdoing. He accepts Jesus when he leaves home. And later drives Jesus away for listening to God's word and killing a sheep from his flock. Saramago's Jesus is undoubtedly human and not divine. But his Devil seems to be more practical than most human beings as can be seen in his comments on Jesus' religious beliefs:

And which god do you serve, Like my sheep, I have no god, but sheep, atleast, produce lambs for the altars of the Lord, And I can assure you that their mothers would howl like wolves if they were to know... when you adore your God, you don't raise your feet to Him, but your hands, even though you could raise other parts of your body, even what's between your legs, unless you happen to be a eunuch. Overcome with shame and horror, Jesus turned the colour of beetroot. Do not offend the God Whom you do not know, he told him severely on recovering his composure, but Pastor insisted, Who created your body, It was God of course...And did the Devil play any part in creating your body, None whatsoever...Can God disown what you have between your legs as something not of His making,... No, he can't, Why not, Because the Lord cannot undo what He previously willed...In other words, your God is the only warder of a prison where the only captive is your God. [GJC. 174, 176]

The presence of the Devil, the ultimate negative character, is used here to question the positive spiritual element represented by the Jewish scriptures within the text and by the Gospel recordings of Jesus' birth outside of it. The character of the Devil here, is a tool used by Saramago to undermine the prevalent notion as represented by the established version of Christ's birth. Later in the novel, Saramago's God explains to Jesus why he had to spend his teen years with the Devil, "You had to live with someone, it couldn't be with Me, and you didn't wish to be with your family, so that left only the Devil. [GJC. 281]

We thus see Saramago using characters of the other world like God and the Devil, to de-create notions of divinity. The subversion of the birth of Christ is a stepping-stone to this process of de-creation. The Irish writer Robert Graves however, does not employ any such characters to subvert the birth of Christ.

As a fictionalizing biography of Christ, Robert Graves' *King Jesus* is interspersed with a lot of references to Greco-Roman and West Asian mythology, arguments for and against the position of women in Jewish-Christian religious traditions, reinterpretations of several Christian doctrines and a proclamation of Jesus as literally being an earthly king born of true royal lineage. The novel therefore appears to be more complex in nature than other novels of the kind like Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. The focal point here is the subversion of Jesus' birth. But the story actually begins with a precursor to this subversion—the subversion of Jesus' mother, Mary's birth.

Mary's parents Joachim and Hannah were childless for a long time. During a festival season in Jerusalem, Hannah is taken to a house there by her servant Judith, where she meets a man who gives her wine as well as a 'seed of lotus.' This makes her unconscious and when she wakes up, she finds herself back in her relatives' house, with Judith pretending that they had never left the house at all. Hannah feels that perhaps she had a dream where the lotus seed was given by an angel of the Lord. In her happiness, Hannah decides to reward her servant, but Judith refuses saying that "I am well recompensed for any service that I may have done you." [KJ. 31] And indeed Judith had already received her reward from Anna, the guardian mother to the holy virgins at the Temple, who had in fact prophesied to Hannah's husband Joachim that their prayers for an offspring were answered by the Lord and that his wife would deliver a baby. Joachim's belief in this prophecy was further strengthened by a young man of the Kenite tribe, whose song also prophesied the birth of a child by Hannah. The prophecy as we have seen, came true through the man whose 'lotus seed' was given to Hannah. And the major players in this prophetic conspiracy were all suitably rewarded—Judith, by Anna and Kenah, the leader of the Kenite tribe by Joachim, who had earlier on hearing his tribesman's song promised Kenah the 'Well of the Jawbone' and ninety two sheep. Kenah, meanwhile on his part, "sent a woman to Anna, the guardian mother of the Temple virgins, to give her a set of carved Egyptian jewels for the casting of lots and for divination..." [KJ.34] The birth of Mary is therefore shown as being arranged by human beings in the name of God.

During this period, the Jews were ruled by Herod. Herod's high priest Simon tells Antipater that he would become the rightful ruler of all Jews only if he marries someone belonging to the lineage of the House of Eli:

...he confided to Antipater a most unorthodox historical theory: that in Israel every ancient chieftan or king had ruled by woman-right: namely by marriage with the hereditary owner of the soil. Adam by marriage with Eve: Abraham by marriage with Sarah ... Caleb by marriage with Ephrath ... David by marriage with Abigail of Carmel and Michal of Hebron ... and every subsequent king of the line of David by marriage with a matrilineal descendant of Michal. He also told Antipater that at the extinction of the monarchy, the female line of Michal was engrossed by the House of Eli, the senior line of priests descended from Aaron, who were on that account styled the Heirs of David or the Royal Heirs ... no king has a true title to rule in Israel unless he is not only a Calebite but also married to the Heiress of Michal. [KJ.56]

For this purpose Antipater has to marry Miriam, the daughter of Joachim and Hannah who is descended from Michal and the marriage has to be kept a secret till Herod's death. According to Simon, this can be done if Miriam passes of as another man's wife until Antipater can acknowledge her as his wife. Simon also reckons that Jerusalem is the center of the Universe—centrally located, lying midway between several nations and that they are at present two years away from the 4th millennium, which is supposed to "close with the appearance of a King who combines the qualities of his predecessors: true-born like Adam, sinless like Enoch, faithful like Abraham, wise like Solomon." [KJ64]

We thus see that the birth of the Messiah depended very much on the concepts of Time and Space and that Jesus' destiny is not made by his heavenly Father as seen in the Bible, but by Herod's High Priest Simon, who orchestrates the secret marriage between Antipater and Miriam, keeping in tune with all the details and prophecies written about

the Messiah. The narrator thus implies that the Messiah's birth was a well-planned and carefully chalked out affair, right from the time of the Messiah's mother's birth.

Nevertheless, though Antipater was in the good books of his father Herod, he soon found himself being accused of parricide by his father, thus facing definite execution. Herod had Antipater imprisoned, but could not prove his accusations against him. Herod's other sons, Archaelus, Philip and Antipas also hoped for Antipater's execution, as this would give them a right to the throne. Herod, though, did not live long to see the death of Antipater, who was eventually killed by the men of a prison warder who owed allegiance to Archaelus. However Antipater had already secretly married Miriam and impregnated her before he was imprisoned by his father.

In the Bible though, as mentioned earlier, Mary is a virgin, who becomes pregnant through divine intervention, and she is informed of all this by the angel Gabriel:

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto the city of Galilee, named Nazareth. To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, that Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in

her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. [Luke1: 26-38]

In the novel too it is Gabriel who gives similar information to Mary, but unlike in the Bible, here he is a richly dressed messenger who tells Mary:

Fear not, Lady, for you have found favour with a glorious King, and if the Lord be willing, you shall conceive and bear a son to him, who shall be the great one, the promised one, the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall bestow on him the throne of David... You are Miriam, the youngest daughter of the line of Michal, and the holy Power of Michal has therefore descended upon you and you shall be joined in love with the glorious one whose paranymph I am; and the holy thing that is born of you shall be called the child of God. Then Simon the High Priest came out from behind the door, where he was hidden and he said: 'Child, this is a messenger of truth. You must believe his words.' So I answered: ' I am your hand-maid. Let it be as you say.'¹ [KJ.130, 131]

The above two quotes may be treated as examples that clearly accentuate the differences between similar occurrences in fiction and in the Bible. And because the messenger in the novel says that the child has to be born in Bethlehem, Mary persuades Joseph to take her there when the time is right, "under colour of visiting the home of your (Joseph's) ancestor David." Later after the child is born, Herod's son Archaleus tells him about this child whose birth was prophesised. He further says that the midwife who attended to the birth had testified that the mother's maidenhead was intact and that therefore the prophecy of Isaiah that "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son" was undoubtedly about this child. [KJ. 139] It also seems that about noon that day the shepherds experienced a suspension of Time. "Every action is frozen for a while—the flight of a heron, dining shepherds, and the shepherds who were watering their flock; life is restored with music

sounded from the grove on the hilltop and a voice announces that the virgin has brought forth and the Light is waking." [KJ. 140] Later three Damascene Jews arrive at Herod's palace for they feel that the King of the Jews would be Herod's son or grandson. Thus Graves asserts his theory that Jesus was indeed, though born in a manger, a true king belonging to the lineage of Herod.

Graves devotes a lot of attention to Herod and his family, especially with regard to Antipater. The Gospels don't talk much about Herod, except in connection with the massacre of the infants at Bethlehem. In the novel, Joseph and Mary are warned by Kenah about Herod's evil designs. They thus escape with the child to Egypt. In the Bible too, it is to Egypt that Joseph and Mary go, but the warning and the instruction to do so comes through an angel. [Matthew 2:13] The Gospels don't talk about their lives in Egypt, except that after Herod is dead, Joseph gets yet another instruction to return to Israel. [Matthew 2:19-21]

The only notable event that the Gospels mention about young Jesus is his first visit to the Temple at Jerusalem at the age of twelve. He stays back in the Temple without informing his parents, listening to and arguing with the authorities and teachers about scriptural matters. And it is on this occasion that Jesus reveals for the first time that he is the Son of God. [Luke 2:41-52]

But in the novel, Jesus' arguments and counter arguments with Jewish teachers, lead him to the revelation that Joseph is not his real father. Whereas the biblical Christ

knows that he is not the son of Joseph, but the Son of God, the fictional Jesus is thoroughly shattered when he realizes that he is a bastard. And he keeps this matter close to his heart, until Mary reveals to him that he is the son of Antipater and the true ruler of Israel. Young Jesus however, rather than wanting to become a political king, wishes to be a ruler who would lead his people towards love and forgiveness.

The various characters in the novel, found at the time of Jesus' birth, are found in the Gospels too, albeit in a different persona. For example, the guardian of the virgins of the Temple, Anna, is also found in the Gospels. In the novel, she is the one who 'arranges' the birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Nothing is said about the birth of Mary in the Bible. In the Gospels, Anna is an old widowed prophetess who on seeing baby Jesus, gives thanks to God and says that God would free Jerusalem through this child. [Luke 2:36-38] Likewise Simon, who in the novel, is depicted as the High Priest of Herod, is shown in the Gospels as someone who has been promised by God that he would not die before he has seen the Messiah. [Luke 2:27-35] In the novel, Simon oversees the union of Miriam and Antipater, to enable the prophecy of the Messiah to be fulfilled. And much is said about the Messiah in this novel. According to the narrator:

The word Messiah signifies "the Christ" or the "Anointed One", and is therefore applicable only to an anointed king, not to a commoner however greatly distinguished by spiritual gifts or military achievements. [KJ. 162]

The narrator distinguishes five separate Messiahs—the Son of David, the Son of Joseph, the Son of Man, the Great Priest and the Suffering Servant. Of these, the Suffering

Servant alone is not a warrior Messiah like the Son of David or Son of Joseph, but instead:

...a marred, uncomely, despised man, the scape-goat of the people, reckoned as a sinner, sentenced to dishonourable death, dumb before his accusers and hurried by them to the grave; yet somehow after death to be rewarded with the spoils of victory. [KJ. 164]

There are various prophecies in the Bible regarding the Messiah, especially in the books of the Old Testament. These may be classified into two—those proclaiming a Suffering Messiah and those proclaiming a Kingly Messiah.

There are verses in the Psalms that talk about both kinds of the above-mentioned prophecies. Psalms (2:6-8) talk about the kingly savior, while in Psalms (22:1), we hear the anguished cry of suffering: " My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me and from the words of my roaring?" Jesus exclaims similar words when he is crucified: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? Which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [Mark 15:34] Psalms (22:18) prophesize the soldiers drawing lots for Jesus' tunic at the time of his crucifixion, which is mentioned thus in Mark (15:24): "And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take."

The Book of Daniel also talks about both kinds of prophecies. Daniel (2:44) talks about God establishing a kingdom that will completely destroy all its enemies and last forever. Daniel however says that before this would happen, God's chosen leader would

be killed unjustly. [Daniel 19: 26] The book of Jeremiah talks about the kingly Messiah. [Jeremiah 23:5,6] While the prophecy about the Messiah coming from Bethlehem is found in the Book of Micah, where God promises a ruler for Israel who will be from Bethlehem. [Micah 5:2] The Book of Malachi talks not just about Jesus but also about John the Baptist. [Malachi 3:1]

However, it is the book of Isaiah that talks at length both about the Kingly Messiah as well as the Suffering Messiah. Isaiah talks not just about the birth of the Messiah, but also what kind of a person this Messiah would be:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. [Isaiah 9:6] Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him; he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench; he shall bring forth unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law. [Isaiah 42:1-4]

But Isaiah also talks about the Messiah as having to undergo much sufferings [Isaiah 53:3, 7-9] and describes how Jesus would be treated by those who hate him: " As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred than any man and his form more than the sons of men." [Isaiah 52:14] Graves' concept of the Suffering Servant is based on this prophecy. God also explains about His Chosen One through Isaiah:

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief; when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his

knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. [Isaiah 53:10,11]

All the above biblical verses mainly talk about the Messiah as being promised full authority and majesty but before which he has to undergo a lot of pain and hardships. These are the two main Messianic concepts found in the Bible. However the other Messianic concepts mentioned by Graves are also found in the Bible. For example, the concept of the Messiah as the Son of David is found in the Book of Isaiah [Isaiah 9:7].

And this prophecy is found as being fulfilled through Jesus in the Book of Matthew [Matthew 1:1,16] It is to make Jesus the Son of David that the concept of the Son of Joseph is introduced by Graves. But nothing is said in the Bible about the Messiah being required to be the Son of Joseph. The Messiah is also like a priest, as shown in Psalms (110:4), where it is said, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." And this is repeated in the New Testament in the Book of Hebrews (6:20) But it is on Daniel's vision that Graves' concept of the Messiah as the Son of Man is based and this too is found in the Bible. [Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14] So all the Messianic concepts that Graves describes are found in the Bible. But he does not say anything at all about the Messiah being the Son of God, which is the central concept of Christianity. However by keeping this concept out of his list, Graves does stay true to his intention of portraying Jesus as an anointed royal king.

This is the main premise of Graves' novel—Jesus is not the Son of God, but the son of a king, by virtue of which he is the rightful king of the Jews. Graves further

elaborates on this aspect in the remaining part of the novel. But the foundation of this premise is laid in the initial part of the novel when Graves discusses the birth of Christ. As we have already seen, he does draw upon various prophecies from the Bible. But the major subversion he introduces is that of Jesus being the Son of Antipater, in effect the grandson of Herod.

The basic aim of the writers taken for study here, is to portray a Christ who is human, has human feelings, acts according to these and sometimes even succumbs to these feelings. Saramago and Graves set out on this task by negating any divine element that may be associated with the birth of Christ. Saramago's Mary is impregnated by her husband Joseph, while in Graves' novel she is impregnated by King Herod's son Antipater. Neither is Mary a virgin in either of these novels, nor is Jesus the Son of God. Graves' Jesus may be a Messiah but he's projected as a human, kingly Messiah. And the early years of Saramago's Jesus is guided by the Devil himself. So both Saramago and Graves, with their varying reinterpretations of the birth of Christ, set the tone for de-linking divine aspects from the persona of Christ by drawing attention to his human side.

Both these writers, as also the others taken for study in this thesis may be seen as being involved in a re-writing of the life of Christ in a manner so different from the one found in the biblical gospels. It's important at this point to look at why these kinds of re-writings, where prominence is given to the humanness of Christ, often at the expense of his divinity, originate. Understanding the cultural backgrounds that produced these specific texts will go a long way in aiding one to be perceptive towards such re-writings;

and in this regard, new historical tenets may best help in approaching the entire issue of re-writing. New historicism basically deals with texts as not being autonomous but as a part of their cultural contexts, where social, religious and political ideologies as well as occurrences would have played prominent roles in shaping them. The term 'new historicism' in itself was first coined by Stephen Greenblatt to refer to such a kind of study.³ New historicists argue that:

literary texts should not be detached from the wider network of texts and other cultural activities or institutions from which they are generated; typically a new historicist reading of a literary text will involve reference to non-literary texts (legal documents, sermons, travelogue) demonstrating the presence of a similar governing discourse.⁴

All the works used in this thesis may be better understood when they're analysed by using new historicism as a critical tool. We may begin with Jose Saramago's text. Saramago clearly states on the back cover of his novel, that he's got interpretations of his own with regard to the life of Christ. However, in a country like Portugal, where Roman Catholicism has a strong influence in socio-political matters, it is not surprising that these so called 'interpretations' of Saramago's were frowned upon. To a very large extent, Saramago's book can be better appreciated if it is placed within the socio-political locale of Portugal.

Portugal's tryst with democracy did not begin until the latter quarter of this century. Till then it was by and large an autocrat governed nation. Before the 20th century, when the Church and the Crown were often united, Christianity or rather Roman Catholicism was a major power block. Prior to Portugal becoming a republic in 1910, Roman Catholicism was the religion of the State. This power may have diminished a bit

in the present century, especially after the rise of Antonio Salazar after 1926. Under Salazar's reign, Portugal became an:

'Estrada Nova' (New State), a subdued Catholic version of a fascist regime ... In a changing world, the Portuguese dictatorship stood out in its grim and eerie immobility. Backed, cowed into submission, a European country was ruled by senile generals and admirals, by a swarm of spies and by a band of faceless bureaucrats all under the rod of a terrible old man. The social landscape seemed unalterable. Religion and official ideology were presented as immutable factors with obedience as the highest virtue.⁵

Even after the fall of Salazar, Roman Catholicism has enjoyed being the premier religion in a state that is considered to be secular in nature. Two important documents relating to religious freedom, the 1971 Law on Religious Freedom and the 1940 Concordat between Portugal and the Holy See, grants several privileges to the Roman Catholic Church that are not enjoyed by other religions. An example of this is the exemption of tax for the Roman Catholic Church from the country's value added tax, whereas other religions can be exempted only from those expenditures directly related to religion. It was only in 1999 that a new law on religious freedom was drafted and introduced in the National Assembly, which would enable minority religions to enjoy more of the privileges that were earlier the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church. All these factors seem to give an indication of the presence of Christianity/Roman Catholicism in matters of the State.

By and large, the centrality of the Church remains unquestioned even with regard to the Portugal of today. A United States government report on international religious freedom with reference to Portugal, states:

The Catholic Church has exclusive control over the naming of military, prison, and hospital chaplains ... Public secondary school curriculums include an optional course called "religion and morals". This course functions as a survey of world religions and is taught by a lay person. It can be used to give Catholic religious instruction. The Catholic Church must approve all teachers for this course.⁶

We therefore see that there is an attempt by the Catholic Church in Portugal to shape the general Portuguese attitude and way of life according to its own dogmas and principles.

Born in 1922 in such a religiously oriented country, Saramago was involved in publishing and translation activities for a long time. His first novel *Country of Sin* was published in 1947. His next work came well after the toppling of the Salazar regime. This was *Manuel de Pintura E Caligrapha* published in 1977. That he was against the dictatorial rule of Salazar is evident from his joining the Communist Party of Portugal (which secretly opposed Salazar) in 1969. But the power of the Church is evident here too, when Sarmago, on criticising the Under Secretary of State for attempting to censure his work for the European Literature contest, was reminded by his colleagues in the Communist Party that censorship was an accepted fact in the Soviet Union and other Communist nations. But it is to be noted that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is not the first book where Saramago criticizes the Christian establishment. In *Baltazar and Blimunda*, Saramago depicts the harsh and cruel reality of the Inquisition set in the Lisbon of 1711. Saramago makes a point about the Inquisition in this novel too. He describes it as the "Tribunal of the Holy Office." In the novel, we find God telling Jesus that the Inquisition is a necessary evil:

The Inquisition is a police force, a tribunal, and will, therefore, pursue, judge and sentence its enemies ... to prison, exile, the stake ...thousands upon thousands of men and women will be burnt at the stake. They will be burnt alive because they have believed in you, others because they will doubt you. [GJC.298]

Such statements by God, the depiction of the love making scene between Jesus and Magdalene, and God being shown as a tyrant, lusting for power, blood and martyrdom so as to further strengthen His omnipotence, may make any believer flinch. But a close reading of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, without looking at the various contextual factors surrounding it may induce one to out rightly judge the novel as being blasphemous in tone and nature. And Saramago's work may be better understood when we study it from the perspective of the influence of the Church on the general Portugese culture. This is quite implicit by the fact that the 'gap' in Jesus' life that Saramago attempted to fill, was not taken kindly to by the Church.

King Jesus too offers a fresh perspective when it's placed within the socio-cultural background of Ireland and Robert Graves' beliefs and ideologies. Graves was brought up in an upper class, patriotic and strict family and he viewed his father as an oppressor. Graves modern views were often in conflict with those of his family's. He joined the First World War to escape the confines of his home. But war was a disturbing experience for him. He married twice, but was also involved in relationships with other women.

Graves' most popular works are *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. These books based on the Roman Emperor of the 1st century A.D. were later serialized by the B.B.C.

Other important works include *The White Goddess*, *The Greek Myths*, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, *King Jesus*, etc. We have already seen how Graves has subverted concepts considered to be of great importance to Christians. But this was not an exceptional case as far as Graves is concerned. He has also made similar subversions with regard to Greek, Roman, Arab and Jewish mythology. "*The Greek Myths* in particular set Graves afoul of classics departments in England and America ... Indeed in his career there was little that Graves did not touch upon and few 'experts' whom he did not offend by venturing into their fields."⁷ Seven years after the publication of *King Jesus*, he co-authored *The Nazarene Gospels* with Joshua Podro. Here he tries to correct what he felt were 'anachronisms' and inaccuracies introduced by Christian scribes to the Gospels. He makes a similar attempt in *The Hebrew Myths*.

Graves' rewritings of Christian and Jewish beliefs and concepts, especially his notion of the 'royal king' may be linked to his Celtic descent. The early Celts were a powerful race, aristocratic in nature with a social order comprising of Kings, warriors, freemen, farmers and slaves. They also had a highly evolved religion with the Druids as priests forming a powerful class by themselves. "Almost fanatical in their religious fervour, the pagan Celts were dominated by powerful, highly aristocratic priests, the Druids who often continued the rite of king with their priesthood."⁹ But the rise of the Roman Empire saw the decline of this Celtic power. However, Celtic traditions continued to thrive in Ireland and also Scotland, which remained untouched by Roman domination:

It was there that the old Celtic traditions and way of life survived and were written down by the scribes of a Celtic Church, of the Fifth Century AD and deeply sympathetic to the heritage of its people... Ireland fell in the

Fifth century, not to disciplined Roman soldiers, but to the equally disciplined Roman church. All the Celtic fervour for religion was now transferred to Christianity—a very Celtic type of Christianity, noted for its austere devotions and the selfless dedication of its clerics. The detailed and sophisticated laws were now transformed for Christian purposes; the glorious art once used to adorn the pagan warriors and their shrines and honour the gods now served to praise God in the form of superbly illuminated manuscripts, the old pagan symbolism of spirals and circles, taking on a new meaning.¹⁰

So we see that though the Celts became Christians, they were still loyal to their pagan traditions of earlier times. The inclusion of pagan elements in *King Jesus*, though related to Jewish traditions may be seen in the light of Robert Graves' Celtic background. These may be better understood when we identify Graves as belonging to the Celtic race and being influenced by Celtic culture and traditions, and this is especially true when we look at how the concept of king is described in Irish narrative literature:

The sacral kingship was both the pivot and the foundation of the social order, and the king was its personification; if his conduct or even his person were blemished in any way, this blemish would be visited on his kingdom, diminishing its integrity and prosperity. As the instrument of justice, the king must be fair and flawless in his decisions... The welfare of the King and his people depended on his justice or 'fir flathemon' (truth or righteousness of a prince.)¹¹

The Christ character's relentless insistence in *King Jesus* to uphold a particular image of himself as the righteous King of the Jews, who does everything according to the book, may be seen as being symbolic to the norms adhered to by Celtic kings. The relationship between Jesus and Simon, the high priest, may also be understood as being rooted in Celtic tradition. "In primitive Irish and Celtic society, the twin guardians of social order were the king and the druid or hieratic poet."¹² This is the case in the novel too, where Simon is the one who guides Jesus towards fulfilling his mission as the King

of the Jews. All these factors show how *King Jesus* the novel and especially the Christ-character are very much linked to the author's socio-cultural and religious background. Similar is the case with Saramago's Christ too, as also both writers' attempt to neutralize the divinity of their Christ-characters. And after concentrating on the birth of Christ, this is done in a very direct and at times blunt manner by underscoring the sexuality of Christ, which becomes the area of contention in the next chapter.

NOTES

¹ Jose Saramago, blurb, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Trans. Giovanni Pontiero, London, Harvill, 1993.

² Paul Zachariah, "Aarkariyam" in Naushad ed. *Thiruvezhuthukal*, Kozhikode, Mulberry, 1996,69.

³ M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Bangalore, Prism Books, 1993,252.

⁴ Chris Baldick, *Criticism and Literary Theory: 1890 to the Present*, New York and London, Longman, 1996, 187.

⁵ Michael Harsgor, *The Washington Papers: Portugal in Revolution*, Beverly Hills and London, Sage Publications, 1976, 5.

⁶ "U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Portug *The Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, 9 Sept, 1999.

⁷ <<http://www.robertgraves.org/bio.php>>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James Mitchell, ed, *The Mitchell Beazley Encyclopedia: History and Culture*, Vol. 1, London, Mitchell Beazley Publishers Ltd., 1976,140.

¹⁰ Ibid, 87, 140.

¹¹ "Celtic Religion", *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.3,162.

¹² Ibid, 162.

CHAPTER II

SEXUALITY

This chapter looks at the sexuality of Christ, a controversial factor found in fictional depictions of Christ that do not conform to the biblical version of Christ's life. With the exception of Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*, the other five works used in this thesis—Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Graves' *King Jesus*, Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* and the two films, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*—focus on the theme of Christ's sexuality in one way or the other. The term sexuality, in general, may be defined, as being used:

To emphasize the entailment of a wider configuration—a configuration that includes values, feelings and human relationships as well as biological drives...sexuality involves the ways in which persons define themselves, the definitions they make of others and the personal and cultural meanings that are attached to their inter-personal relationships.¹

This may be said to be a social interpretation of the term sexuality. This chapter while talking about the sexuality of Christ is more inclined towards the definition of sexuality as a biological drive. After going into how various writers deal with this theme, which is not at all mentioned with regard to Christ in the Bible, the chapter will look at how sexuality in general is defined in Christianity, and more importantly why it is so defined, as this will help in understanding why in the re-writings, this theme tends to rake up a lot of controversy. Michel Foucault's seminal work on sexuality, *The History of Sexuality*² will be used as a basic text in this context. But first, the chapter will analyse the theme of

sexuality through Mary Magdalene, a character **who** is **common** in all the above works, especially with regard to the picturisation of Christ's sexuality and who is often used as an instrument for highlighting this theme. Works that have generated more controversy will be taken up first, followed by others, where the character of Magdalene is not directly linked to the sexuality of Christ. The biblical depiction of Magdalene will also be looked into, so as to observe how different this emerges in the hands of various writers/directors.

One of the most controversial works of art dealing with the depiction of Christ in recent times has been Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* the cinematic version of Kazantzakis' novel. The book itself, when it was published in the late 1950's, attracted much controversy. The publication of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, not only led to the decision of the Roman Catholic Church to place the novel on its *Index of Forbidden Books*, but also to Kazantzakis' excommunication from the Greek Orthodox Church.³ Scorsese stays true to the story in the novel, without straying at all from Kazantzakis' depiction of Christ and makes it a point to mention that his scriptwriter Paul Schrader had quite effectively reduced the big novel into a 90-page script.⁴

To say that the movie was controversial would be an understatement. In fact Paramount, the studio house that undertook the project, shelved it midway through, not just because of spiraling costs, but also because of vehement protests from Christian groups.⁵ Later the budget of the film was slashed and the production was taken over by Universal Pictures, under whose banner it was finally released in 1988.⁶ And then, it was

not as though hell broke loose. But for the liberal, westernized society that modern America stands for, the protests against this film were vehement. The controversy basically centered around the crucified Jesus having a 'temptation-like fantasy' of being married to Magdalene, having sex with her and later fathering the children of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. The picturisation of a very human Christ is what Scorsese aims at by introducing and turning the spotlight on such scenes. The film opens with Kazantzakis' words from the preface of the novel and clearly states that it will stick to this premise:

The dual substance of Christ—the yearning so human, so superhuman of man to attain God has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. My principle anguish and source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.

This film is not based on the Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict.⁷

The clash between the spirit and the flesh that was the central theme of Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* and which Scorsese aims to portray in the film may in general terms, be defined as the 'calling' of Christ and his refusal to heed to it. It is to give top billing to this clash that Kazantzakis' novel and in effect Scorsese's film, strays from the Gospel depiction of Christ's life. Jesus here, is a man tormented by God to accept his calling. He is forced to go to the monastery in the desert to find out what is causing him so much pain, though he seems to know that it's God:

You're sure it's God? You're sure it's not the Devil? I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything. Because if it's the Devil then the Devil can be cast out. But what if it's God? You can't cast out God, can you?

The Jesus of the Bible has no doubt whatsoever about his identity. In fact even as a boy, he knew very well where he belonged. [Luke 2:49] He does not have to go to a monastery to find out who or what he is. But by having such a scene, the film is able to show that Jesus is someone special and also more importantly, it is able to bring out his worries of donning the role of this special individual:

Can't you see what's inside of me, all my sins? I'm a liar, a hypocrite. I don't ever tell the truth; I don't have the courage. When I see a woman, I blush and look away. I want her, but I don't take her; for God. And it makes me proud, and my pride wants Magdalene. I don't steal, I don't fight, I don't kill; not because I don't want to but because I'm afraid. You want to know who my mother and father are? You want to know who my God is? Fear! You look inside me and that's all you'll find...Lucifer is inside me. He says to me, "You're not the son of king David. You're not a man; you're the Son of Man and more, the Son of God and even more, God!!!"

So this Christ, initially at least, like any other ordinary human being, is more concerned about his own sins than the sins of humanity. The biblical Christ however, is sinless and his primary concern is about the sins of others [Luke 5:24; 19:10, 2nd Corinthians 5:21]. In fact, the Pharisees in the Gospels criticize Jesus for his proximity to sinners and people of ill repute [Mark 2:16; Luke 15:2]. There are such people in the film too who are used to focus attention on the humanness of Jesus. Mary Magdalene, a prostitute, is one such character. She is used to bring out the sexuality of Jesus by virtue of which his humaneness is emphasized. Magdalene's first appearance in the film is when she publicly spits at Jesus for being the only Jew to make crosses for the Romans. When he visits her brothel, she accuses him of ruining her life. But later she becomes his follower after he rescues her from a mob that was about to stone her. She's with him almost always after

this and even shares the last supper with his other disciples. She's at the crucifixion and is an important element of Jesus' temptation fantasy.

Magdalene is the character through whom the question of sexuality is raised. Had Jesus not been forced to accept the will of God, he would have preferred Magdalene to be his wife. But he has to forsake her because of God. Magdalene is presented as someone who does not take this lying down, which is perhaps why she publicly spits at him. It was as though she was waiting for an opportunity to get even with him. She gets another opportunity when enroute to the monastery, Jesus goes to her brothel and waits there along with her other customers. He sees them having sex with her. After everyone leaves, he begs her to forgive him, but she blames him for making her a prostitute for he was all she ever wanted. Jesus too admits that he had wanted nothing better, but that he has to follow God's path. She accuses both him and God for making her life miserable, but Jesus tells her that everything is his fault, not God's. On his return from the monastery, Jesus finds Magdalene about to be stoned for adultery by a mob. He deters them by asking anyone among them without sin to cast the first stone at her. And when Zebedee steps forward saying he has nothing to hide, Jesus lists out a few sins and wrong doings of Zebedee's. From that day, Magdalene, Zebedee's sons—James and John and others like Peter, Nathaniel etc., become Jesus' followers. He talks to people about love, performs miracles and cures people; but is still unsure of who he is or what exactly it is that God wants from him. Judas is the one who is closest to Jesus and he advises Jesus to meet John the Baptist, in the hope that the Baptist may be able to tell who Jesus is. The Baptist, on seeing Jesus, senses that he's special and asks him whether he's the Messiah. This

only adds on to Jesus self-doubts. The Baptist tells Jesus that it is not the soft message of love alone that will make people turn to God. He asks Jesus to be more action-oriented and speak about the axe that will cut down the evildoers and the fire that will burn them. He asks Jesus to go to the desert if he really wants to know what God wants him to do. But he warns him, "God is not alone out there in the desert."

Jesus spends several days in the desert and there temptation in various shapes and sizes visits him. First, it's a black cobra with anklets ringing and a female voice, which tells him that he should save himself and not the world, that he should start a family. And then it just explodes, leaving Jesus sobbing. Next, a lion comes claiming to be Jesus' own heart that desires power. "You said, God, God! Make me God." But Jesus is more confident against the lion, "Liar! Come inside my circle so that I can pull out your tongue." Finally it's Satan himself in the form of fire who comes and tells Jesus that he is the Son of God and asks Jesus to join hands with him. The fire departs telling Jesus that they would meet again. Jesus looked quite vulnerable against the black cobra, "Look into my eyes, my breasts, you know me." It's as though he saw Magdalene in the cobra. Why does he cry when the snake explodes? Surely it's not because the snake perishes! One can't help feeling that Jesus cries because he almost believes in the snake. This is his first temptation and he almost stumbles; which is perhaps why a temptation based on 'woman' comes once again, this time on the very threshold of death, when Jesus is crucified—the last temptation of Christ.

Winds sweep dust across Golgotha, where Jesus is crucified. But as things become calm, Jesus realizes that some kind of a change has taken place. He does not hear any noise around. His pain also seems to have vanished. He sees a little girl at the foot of the cross, who claims to be his guardian angel, sent by God to rescue him. She explains to him, "The God of Israel is a God of mercy, not a God of punishment." She says that he does not have to sacrifice himself, for he's not the Messiah. God was only testing him, just like how he had tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. The angel removes all the nails on Jesus' hands and feet and brings him down from the cross. She takes him to Magdalene, whom Jesus marries. They make love and she becomes pregnant. But then Magdalene dies and Jesus is infuriated at this. But the angel comforts him saying, "there is only one woman in the world...with different faces. When one Mary Magdalene dies, another Mary, Lazarus' sister rises." Jesus then goes to Bethany, where he fathers the children of both Mary and Martha. Then one day in the village square, he sees Saul the Zealot, now known as Paul, preaching about Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Jesus confronts Paul and asks him to stop preaching lies about him having resurrected, or he'd expose him. Paul tells Jesus to go ahead and do it. He tells him that he's doing all this to ease the sufferings of the people and to bring them happiness.

Jesus grows old. He hears the destruction of Jerusalem. On his deathbed, Peter, John and Nathaniel visit him. The guardian angel tries to stop them, but Peter brushes her aside. All of them speak to him with reverence, but then Judas enters and calls Jesus a traitor. Jesus explains to Judas that it was God Himself who sent his guardian angel to rescue him. Judas asks Jesus to take a good look at his guardian angel. To his horror,

Jesus sees the same blaze of fire that came to tempt him in the desert. It was Satan, "I'd told you that we'd meet again." Jesus realises that he's been tricked. He painfully drags himself from his bed, goes outside and pleads to God:

Father! Will You listen to me? Are You still there? Will You listen to a selfish and unfaithful son? I fought You when You called. I resisted. I thought I knew more. I didn't want to be Your son. Can You forgive me? I didn't fight hard enough. Father, give me Your hand. I want to bring salvation. Father, take me back. Make a feast. Welcome me home. I want to be Your son. I want to pay the price. I want to be crucified and rise again. I want to be the Messiah!!!

Suddenly he finds himself back on the cross, with all the people jeering and the two men crucified on both his sides writhing in pain. He is so relieved to be back on the cross that he joyfully exclaims: "It is accomplished." And thus ends the film.

The last temptation shows that Magdalene is only an instrument to lay bare the sexuality within Jesus. It's Magdalene alone who is used as the prime source of Christ's temptation, and not Mary or Martha or any other woman. For it is Magdalene alone, who occupies an important place in Jesus' heart. In fact he does not seem to be much concerned about other women until his so-called 'guardian angel' tells him that all women are the same. The Devil is quite clever here. After using Magdalene as bait to lure Jesus into temptation, it further pushes him down this mire, by telling him "there is only one woman in the world...one woman with different faces." So in a way Jesus' sexuality gets reemphasized to the full. More than anything else it was this emphasis on the sexuality of Christ that made the movie problematic for many Christians.

If in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus' relationship with Magdalene and in effect his sexuality itself is founded on fantasy, then in Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, it is based on reality. We have already seen in the previous chapter, the Devil-Pastor provoking Jesus with his blunt comments on sexuality.

Pastor asking Jesus to choose a sheep to satisfy his carnal desires is the first instance in Saramago's novel where the novelist introduces the element of sexuality with regard to his Christ-character; though he had in the opening pages itself depicted a sexual scene between Joseph and Mary. But it is after he is sent away from Pastor that Jesus becomes aware of his sexuality:

(Jesus is sitting on the bank of the river Jordan, listening to) the mournful song of a woman, who cannot be seen from here...the woman who is singing, naked, lying on her back in the water, firm breasts arising out of the surface, dark pubic hairs ruffled by the breeze... Jesus body gave a signal, something between his legs began to swell and as with all human beings and animals, the blood rushed to the same spot...Lord this body has such strength, but Jesus made no attempt to go in search of the woman, and his hands resisted the violent temptations of the flesh. No sign of anyone coming along the road, Jesus looks around him, sighs, looks for somewhere to hide and heads there, but he comes to a halt, remembering in time that the Lord had punished Onan with death for having spilt his seed on the ground... (He also remembers that God) had some firm plans for his future which were yet to be revealed, he would have found it neither feasible nor logical to forget the promises made and risk losing everything just because an uncontrolled hand had dared to stray where it should not... (All these) distracted him from what was on his mind and confused him so much that he soon lost the desire to yield to wicked temptations. [GJC. 203,04]

We find here that it is verses from the scriptures that first come to his mind as though to guard him against doing something wrong. He learns more about sexual matters from the prostitute Magdalene. After being banished from the presence of Pastor, Jesus decides to

go back home. The blisters and sores on his feet (which he had contracted while searching for his sheep in the desert) make travelling difficult. He stops by Lake Gennasaret and joins the fishermen in catching fish. He performs his first miracle here. God's words that His signs will accompany Jesus are manifested here, when the fishermen Simon and Andrew, who had till then caught not even a single fish that day, draw a net full of fish on listening to Jesus' advice. Although the two fishermen persuade Jesus to stay with them, he felt that he should leave the place, as he "had no desire to find himself as a decoy by other crews." [GJC.207] On his way home, one of the sores on his feet open up exactly in front of the house of a prostitute called Mary Magdalene. She takes care of his sores as well as his carnal desires. She teaches him the lessons of lovemaking. He stays with her for almost a week and during that period they become very intimate. It is interesting to note that Jesus does not resist Magdalene, though verses of warning come to his mind:

Stay away from loose women lest you fall into their snares, Have nothing to do with female dancers lest you succumb to their charms, and finally, Do not fall into the hands of prostitutes lest you lose your soul and all your possessions. [GJC.210]

In fact as he sees her naked, it is the verses of Solomon's love poems that come to his mind:

At that moment he understood the real meaning of king Solomon's words, The joints of your thighs are like jewels, your navel is like a round goblet filled with scented wine, your belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies, your breasts are like two young roes that are the twins of a gazelle [GJC.212]

Saramago here describes Jesus as having a live-in relationship with Magdalene who abandons her profession after meeting Jesus and becomes his partner. Several things that Saramago has written in this book like Mary not being a virgin and the subversion of Christ's birth and early years may be said to be blasphemous. But it is the sexuality of Christ depicted by Saramago as follows that hits a believer the hardest:

Mary lay down beside him and taking his hand into hers drew them to her and guided them slowly over her entire body, her hair, face, neck, shoulders, breasts which he gently squeezed, her belly, navel...then the curve of her smooth thighs and as she moved his hands, she kept repeating in a low voice, Come, discover my body. Jesus looked at his hands clasped in Mary's, wishing he could have them free to explore every part of her body, Jesus was breathing fast, but for one moment he thought he was going to suffocate when her hands, the left one on his forehead, the right one on his ankles began caressing him slowly until they met in the middle where they paused for a second before slowly repeating the same movement all over again...she said it again, but in another way by changing one word, Discover your body, and there it was, tense, taut, roused, and Mary Magdalene, naked and magnificent was on top of him and saying, Relax, there is nothing to worry about, don't move, leave this to me, then he felt a part of his body, this organ here, vanishing inside her body, a ring of fire encircling him, coming and going, a tremor passed through him... it was him, yes, it was Jesus himself who was crying out at the same time as Mary slumped over his body with a moan and absorbed his cry with her lips, with an eager and anxious kiss which sent a second, interminable shudder through his body. [GJC. 212,13]

It is without doubt scenes like these that make books like Saramago's problematic. It must be mentioned though that it is not just the depiction of Christ's sexuality that makes Saramago's novel radically different. His portrayal of God is equally disturbing. But what is interesting to note is that Saramago's 'God' does not seem to mind at all Jesus' relationship with Magdalene. This is obvious when after Jesus tells Him that his mother never showed that she knew who Jesus really was, God replies, "You know what women are like, after all you live with one, they have their little susceptibilities and scruples."

God here, is not worried about Jesus' relationship with Magdalene, who though she was a prostitute before meeting Jesus, abandons her profession after this. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are two different people. In Saramago's novel, they are one and the same; Magdalene is Lazarus' sister. But the sister forbids Jesus from raising her dead brother: "No one has committed so many sins in life that they deserve to die twice." [GJC.328J]

Magdalene in the novel is portrayed as a woman who loves Jesus (though they do not marry) travel and live with him. In fact Jesus' love for her is so great that he feels that he has an obligation to her and her sister Martha to remain with them after their brother has died, at the expense of forsaking his disciples and followers. He is confused between these conflicting obligations that he becomes very depressed. Even in this state of depression, it is Magdalene alone who offers him consolation.

You need me now more than ever before but I cannot reach you if you lock yourself behind a door beyond human strength, and Jesus...begged Mary, Even when you cannot enter, do not abandon me, stretch your hand even though you may not see me, otherwise I shall forget life or it will forget me... I'll look at your shadow if you don't wish me to look at you, she told him, and he replied, I wish to be wherever my shadow may be if that is where your eyes are. [GJC.330, 331]

What we clearly see here is two people who are deeply in love. The depiction of their lovemaking is as that of any lovers'. The only problem is that one of these individuals is someone whom Christians recognize as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who forget having an affair with a woman, does not even seem to have an inherent trait of sexuality as found in any ordinary human being. And this is absolute and irrevocable as far as the Bible is

concerned. Perhaps this is why Robert Graves, who introduces a lot of subversions in his novel to make Jesus the King of the Jews, does not deal directly with the sexuality of Christ.

In *King Jesus*, Jesus is baptized and anointed 'King of all Israel' by John. It seemed that when a king had to be crowned as 'King of the Jews', he had to have his face 'marred and buffeted' by the priests. But Jesus had to endure much more at the hands of 'the seven notables of Tabor'; a ritual:

performed again after more than a 1000 years in fulfillment of the prophecy. [They pelted] him with stones and sticks and filth until his face was wounded and disfigured ... They wrestled with him ... Jesus left thigh was put out of joint ... so that hereafter he limped with what is called the sacred lameness. The eighth sign of royalty had been added ...[KJ.264]

He is then married to his Queen, Mary of Bethany, but refrains from any physical encounter with her, as he firmly believed that physical intercourse was "the act of darkness, the act of death." We thus see that as per the requirements of a king to have a queen, Jesus marries Mary of Bethany. But they share a platonic relationship, much to Mary's displeasure, because Jesus adamantly refuses to sleep with her. He even goes to the extent of calling her, 'Sister!' But she questions him on his views. His answers do not convince her and she continues to question him, so much so that:

He sighed, and looking away from her unveiled face said: "Jose the son of Jochanan of Jerusalem wisely ordered: 'Do not prolong converse with a woman'; and this is interpreted by the Sages as meaning: 'not even with your wife.' Hence they have said: Each time a man disobeys the order, he does evil to himself, desists from the Law and at last inherits Hell.'" "How so?" asked Mary. "Are women all evil? Why then did you marry me?" "Women are not all evil, for our God created woman to be man's helpmeet. Yet it is well said: 'Man is to woman as reason is to the bodily

senses, as upper to the lower, as right to the left, as the Divine to the human.'" [KJ.310]

Jesus even suspects that the message regarding Lazarus illness is only a ploy by Mary to get him to come to her:

He was resolved not to see Mary, suspecting that the summons was an excuse to bring him to her house. He confided to Judas of Kerioth: "The hand of the female is in this. " "How so?" "She strikes at a man through his loved ones." "Who is the witch? Is it Mary the Hairdresser?" "All women are daughters of the Female; and the female is the mother of all witches." [KJ.336]

Mary the Hairdresser is Magdalene, who is not only a prostitute but also a witch in this novel, whom Jesus cures. This is one text where she is not used to project Jesus' sexuality. But she is one of his closest followers. But Magdalene's role and in effect the role of women in the novel is to a very large extent, ambiguous. We often wonder whether the novelist is arguing for or against women. Woman is considered as the chief antagonist of all that is divine and spiritual and Jesus himself considers that his main task lies in the destruction of the Female. This patriarchal view of Jesus is evident in several passages in the text, an example of which is given below, when he tells John the Baptist:

She is the threefold demoness who is Mother, Bride and Layer-Out to fallen man. On the first day of the five she spins the thread of his life; on the second she flatters him with hope of fame; on the third she corrupts him with her whoredoms; on the fourth she lulls him to deathly sleep; on the fifth she bewails his corpse. The Greeks worship her in trinity as the Three Fates—namely, the Spinner, the Distributor, the Cutter-off."...He (the Son of Man) shall appear to all men on the day that the female is defeated at last. [KJ.215-216]

Jesus believes that death will be a continuing factor "as long as women continue to bear children...The Female is Lust, the First Eve, who delays the hour of perfection. (She) has two daughters: the Womb and the Grave." [225] When Jesus, the central character of the novel himself comments like this that the female is the mother of all witches, one can't help getting the feeling that 'woman' is the other extreme of all that is spiritual and divine. But the narrator also talks about the insignificant role that Judaeo-Christian traditions have accorded women. He contends that this could be because both Judaism and Christianity are founded on a monotheistic faith that is based on a male-centred Jehovah. The narrator also makes a distinction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians not only reject the Eucharist (which the Gentile Christians greatly exalt) as idolatrous but also the view that Jesus is the Son of God. "A begotten God, the Jews say, must logically have a mother; and they deny that Jehovah has ever had any truck with either nymphs or goddesses" [KJ.4]

According to the narrator, Jehovah was the son of the Great Goddess and later formed a Trinity with two of the Goddess's three persons, namely Anatha of the Lions and Ashma of the Doves. But unlike other gods like Zeus and Jove, Jehovah abandoned the other two goddesses and ruled over both men and women, while in other religious traditions, the goddesses were in charge of women's affairs. The practitioners of Judaism continued the patriarchal tradition initiated by Jehovah:

Women, they said, have an unsettling effect on religious life: they introduce the sexual element, which inevitably tends to confuse mystical ecstasy with eroticism ... the only hope of survival for the nation, which was settled at the cross-roads of the world, lay in its keeping strictly to itself and avoiding the foreign entanglements in which amorous and

luxury-loving queens and priestesses invariably involve their subjects.
[KJ.6]

This tradition was maintained in Christianity where "as the Second Adam, Jesus' self-imposed task was to undo the evil which, according to the patriarchal legend, the First Adam had caused by sinfully listening to the seductive plan of his wife Eve." [KJ.6] However the alliance between Mary and Antipater, based on the fact that "...in Israel, every ancient chieftain or king had ruled by woman-right..." seems to show that women were given importance once upon a time. Jesus spoke in favour of prostitutes too. He included them in the list of the poor and the outcasts. And after his resurrection, during his ascension into heaven, three women accompany him—his wife Mary of Bethany, his mother and another veiled woman who could be Magdalene. So though Jesus' sexuality is not directly touched upon by Graves, he uses Jesus¹ position as king to delve deep into what kind of importance Jesus gave to women and in effect what status women have or are supposed to have in Judaeo-Christian traditions. Although the novelist takes a stance with regard to the sexuality of Christ, which is on par with the biblical presentation of it, or lack of it, he does not offer a clear picture about the status of women. We may argue that though Jesus says that the female is the mother of all witches and that he has come to destroy the works of the female, his eventual ascension into heaven with three women seem to signify that women are important to him, albeit in an asexual manner.

The Jesus in Norman Jewison's film based on Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar* is also asexual in the sense that he does not reciprocate Magdalene's feelings, at least not in a sexual manner. In *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, one of

his followers who is quite close to Jesus, is Magdalene. In fact Jesus feels that she is the only one who understands his needs to a very large extent. When Magdalene massages his neck and face, he says, "She alone has tried to give me, what I need right here and now." But on seeing this, Judas exclaims:

It seems to me a strange thing, mystifying,
That a man like you, can waste his time.
On women of her kind.
Yes I can understand that, she amuses.
But to let her kiss you and stroke your hair
Is hardly in our line.

Judas clarifies that his criticism is based on the fact that someone like Magdalene doesn't fit in their group according to Jesus' teachings. And Judas is also worried that the authorities might use Jesus' proximity with Magdalene as a reason "to put us all away."

But Jesus vehemently rebukes Judas:

Leave her, leave her, let her be now,
Leave her leave her, she's with me now.
If your slate is clean, then you can throw stones,
If your slate is not, then leave her alone!

Jesus expresses his anguish by declaring, "There is not a man among you who cares to know if I come or go." But Judas is still uneasy about Magdalene. He criticizes her for anointing Jesus' hair and feet with expensive oil. He suggests that the oil could have been sold and the money used for charity. "People who are hungry, people who are starving matter more than your feet and hair." In spite of Judas' apprehensions of Magdalene being part of Jesus' group, Jesus does not alter his approach towards her. And what exactly are his feelings is not explicitly mentioned either by him or by anyone else in the

film. So much so that Magdalene herself is baffled about her feelings towards him. She admits that she does not know how to love him. He means a lot to her, but as what, she does not know. Her confusion is so great that she does not know what she would do if Jesus were to tell her that he loves her. There is no attempt in the film to portray the sexuality of Christ. He does enjoy Magdalene massaging him, but the film does not try to bring in an erotic or sexual element to this, at least as far as Jesus is concerned. The film only tries to project that Magdalene was perhaps sexually attracted to Jesus. As for Jesus it's only a platonic matter. She is important to him or else he would not have strongly rebuked Judas, his 'right hand man' for criticizing her. Jesus merely sees Magdalene as somebody who understood his needs.

That Magdalene is someone very close to Jesus is something that all the works studied here agree upon. And this is true even in works like *King Jesus* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, where neither is there an attempt to link Jesus and Magdalene in a sexual manner, nor is Jesus' sexuality explored. But D.H. Lawrence in his short story, *The Man Who Died*, looks at the sexuality of Christ without bringing Magdalene into the picture. Even here, there is no doubt that of all Jesus' followers, it is Magdalene who strongly believes in him. It is she alone who has real faith in him, for she repeatedly goes to his tomb, believing that he may have risen. Finally when she finds him, she pleads with him to go with her. But the risen Jesus is a different man. He refuses to go with Magdalene, for he now feels that he had nothing more to say, or do for the people, 'the multitudes':

I have outlived my mission, and know no more of it. It is my triumph. I have survived the day and the death of my interference, and am still a man. I am young still, Madeleine, not even come to middle age. I am glad

all that is over... The teacher and the saviour are dead in me; now I can go about my business, into my own single life... Now I can wait on life, and say nothing, and have no one to betray me. I wanted to be greater than the limits of my hands and feet, so I brought betrayal on myself. And I know I wronged Judas, ... I gave more than I took, and that also is woe and vanity. So Pilate and the high priests saved me from my own excessive salvation... I have not risen from the dead in order to seek death again. [MD.221,222]

He takes some money from Madeleine, for he knew that the peasant and his wife, with whom he was staying after his resurrection, were poor. He meets Madeleine once more, who had this time come with Jesus' mother and another woman. But he only takes some more money from Madeleine and declined to go with them saying that he had to ascend to the Father. But as he left them he found himself saying:

Now I belong to no one and have no connection, and mission or gospel is gone from me. Lo! I cannot make even my own life, and what have I to save... I can learn to be alone... I tried to compel them to live, so they compelled me to die. It is always so, with compulsion. The recoil kills the advance. Now is my time to be alone. [MD.225]

And he seemed to be enjoying his present state:

How good it is to have fulfilled my mission, and to be beyond it. Now I can be alone, and leave all things to themselves, and the fig-tree may be barren if it will, and the rich may be rich. My way is my way alone. [MD.225]

The Man Who Died is yet another Christ-story where pagan symbols, though not found in abundance as in *King Jesus*, are instrumental in enabling Jesus to attain redemption. Lawrence depicts a Jesus who yearns for salvation despite conquering death. Finally, he finds it in 'woman', the priestess of Isis. Jesus here, is someone who feels that the significance of earthly life is greater than all else. And it is erotic love that makes him

emphatically declare, "I am Risen." Before moving on to the story itself, it will only be appropriate if I include a brief extract of D.H.Lawrence's essay 'The Risen Lord', where he outlines his perception of how the resurrected Christ should be:

If Jesus rose as a full man, in full flesh and soul, then He rose to take a woman to Himself, to live with her, and to know the tenderness and blossoming of the twoness with her; He who had been hitherto so limited to His oneness, or His universality, which is the same thing. If Jesus rose in the full flesh, He rose to know the tenderness of a woman, and the great pleasure of her, and to have children by her... If Jesus rose a full man in the flesh, He rose to continue His fight with the hard-boiled conventionalists like Roman judges and Jewish priests and money-makers of every sort. But this time, it would no longer be the fight of self-sacrifice that would end in crucifixion... This time, if Satan attempted temptation in the wilderness, the Risen Lord would answer: Satan, your silly temptations no longer tempt me... Men have risen from the dead and learned not to be so greedy and self-important... Men have not died and risen again for nothing... And the poor women, they have been shoved about manless and meaningless long enough... The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and, I the Risen Lord am here to take possession. For now I am fully a man, and free above all from my self-importance. I want life, and the pure contact with life.⁸

It is this Jesus we find in *The Man Who Died*. He wakes up in his tomb almost at the same time as an energetic and aggressive cock crows. On going out into the open, he meets a peasant chasing this cock. He goes with the peasant to his hut and stays there for a few days. He is fascinated by the cock, which for him symbolized the crest of a 'sharp wave of life':

...when his favourite hen came strolling unconcernedly near him, emitting the lure, he pounced on her with all his feather vibrating. And the man who died watched the unsteady, rocking vibration of the bent bird, and it was not the bird he saw, but one wave-tip of life overlapping for a minute another, in the tide of the swaying ocean of life. And the destiny of life seemed more fierce and compulsive to him even than the destiny of death. The doom of death was a shadow compared to the raging destiny of life, the determined surge of life. [MD.219-220]

Jesus thus feels that it was perhaps wrong for him to have tried to conquer death. He realizes that none can 'save the earth from tillage.' This story in fact, was initially titled *'The Escaped Cock'* thus giving due emphasis to the new zest for life, which for Jesus, the cock signified. It seems the origin of this story was closely bound up with Lawrence's visit, together with Earl Brewster, to the Etruscan tombs in April 1927. The later title, *The Man Who Died*, derives from the Etruscan symbol of the egg, which Lawrence interprets thus:

It seems as if they too are saluting the mysterious egg held up by the man at the end; who is, no doubt, the man who has died, and whose feast is being celebrated... He holds up the egg of resurrection, within which the germ sleeps as the soul sleeps in the tomb, before it breaks the shell and emerges again ... On the last day of the expedition, in Volterra, Brewster tells us: We passed a little shop, in the window of which was a toy rooster escaping from an egg. I remarked that it suggested the title—"The Escaped Cock—a story of the Resurrection". Lawrence replied that he had been thinking about writing a story of the Resurrection.⁹

It is important to note that not even once in the story does Lawrence mention or use the name 'Jesus.' Perhaps he did not want his character in the story to be identified as/ with the Jesus of the Bible:

Thus the appearance of the person is the same; he has the same personality; his past and the events leading up to his present situation are the same. Yet it is a different man.¹⁰

While analyzing Tolstoy's Resurrection, Lawrence criticizes Tolstoy's view that, "Christ would go on being crucified everlastingly."¹¹ Lawrence argues that Christ may have been crucified once:

As man puts off his clothes when he dies, so the Cross is put off, like a garment. But the Son of Man will not be crucified twice. That, never again. He is risen...Put away the cross; it is obsolete. Stare no more after the stigmata. They are more than healed up. The Lord is risen and ascended unto the Father. There is a new Body and a new Law.¹²

The Christ found in Lawrence's story may be seen as an embodiment of this. And for this new, risen man, who is so different from the resurrected Christ of the Bible, the needs of the flesh are important and it makes him leave the peasant's hut, taking along with him the cock. He did not however intend to keep it:

I must toss this bird into the seethe of phenomena, for he must ride his wave. How hot he is with life! Soon, in some place, I shall leave him among the hens. And perhaps one evening, I shall meet a woman who can lure my risen body, yet leave me my aloneness. [MD.227]

We thus see Jesus anticipating or desiring to meet a woman soon. On his way he meets a couple of his disciples who don't recognize him. But when they do, he gives them the slip. He leaves his cock at an inn after it kills the cock of the inn. He goes past Lebanon towards Egypt. There he meets the priestess of Isis, who herself was waiting for the reborn man:

Rare women wait for the re-born man...the lotus... will not answer to the bright heat of the sun... till... one of these rare, invisible suns that have been killed and shine no more, rises... To these the lotus stirs as to a caress, and rises upwards through the flood, and lifts up her bent head, and opens with an expansion such as no other flower knows, and spreads her sharp rays of bliss, and offers her soft, gold depths such as no other flower possesses, to the penetration of the flooding, violet-dark sun that has died and risen and makes no show. [MD.232]

She understands that Jesus is such a man, for she sees the scars on his hands and feet. He stays there at her request and even praises Isis: "Great is Isis!" he said. "In her search she

is greater than death. Wonderful is such walking in a woman, wonderful the goal. All men praise thee, Isis, thou greater than the mother unto man." [MD.236]

The priestess applies oil and ointment to his wounds. While she does this, he suddenly recollects all the past and the injustice that he had suffered. But as she continues, a certain kind of warmth replaces the cold terror that he had initially felt:

He stooped beside her and caressed her softly, blindly, murmuring inarticulate things. And his death and his passion for sacrifice were all as nothing to him now, he knew only the crouching fullness of the woman there, the soft white rock of life...."On this rock I built my life." The deep-folded, penetrable rock of the living woman... He crouched to her, and he felt the blaze of his manhood and his power rise up in his loins, magnificent. "I am risen!" Magnificent, blazing indomitable in the depths of his loins, his own sun dawned, and sent its fire running along its limbs, so that his face shone unconsciously. He untied the string on the linen tunic, and slipped the garment down, till he saw the white glow of her white-gold breasts. And he touched them, and he felt his life go molten. "Father!" he said, "why did you hide this from me?" And he touched her with the poignancy of wonder, and the marvelous piercing transcendence of desire. "Lo!" he said, "this is beyond prayer." It was the deep, interfolded warmth, warmth living and penetrable, the woman, the heart of the rose! ... "My hour is upon me, I am taken unawares" so he knew her, and was one with her. [MD. 245]

We see earlier in the story that Jesus did not allow anyone to touch him, saying that he was yet to ascend to the Father. But he allows the priestess of Isis to touch him, initially to heal, but later the touch becomes a mode of sexual expression. The Father to whom he was waiting to ascend may perhaps be this sexual expression to which he arose:

For the first time in his life he is alive in the flesh, and the Phallic thrust is literally a rising to the Father... Imperceptibly Christ has become Osiris. The corpse of Christianity has been resurrected as a young fertility god.¹³

Jesus makes the priestess's place his dwelling though he knows that her mother does not approve of him. The priestess discovers that she is with child, and he knows of it even before she tells so. But her mother too knows. And Jesus is sure that the Priestess's mother would let the slaves after him. He feels that it is time for him to leave. Much against her wishes, he bids the priestess farewell and leaves the 'place' satisfied:

I have sowed the seed of my life and my resurrection, and put my touch forever upon the choice woman of this day, and I carry her perfume in my flesh like essence of roses. She is dear to me in the middle of my being. But the gold and flowing serpent is coiling up again, to sleep at the root of my tree ... So let the boat carry me. To-morrow is another day. [MD.248]

Thus we see a Jesus who is glad that he left all his lofty ideals and self-important proclamations and returned to the natural fold of humankind. He finds salvation in his oneness with the priestess. And though he is forced to depart from her, he is nevertheless pleased that his seed is growing within her.

Lawrence's Jesus finds freedom and redemption in erotic love. He is upset that his Heavenly Father hid this from him. And he feels that he has risen from the dead to live a real life like any other real man. The subversion of the Christ story here is based on Jesus' discovery of sex. Lawrence does not seem to be interested in Jesus' birth or his various teachings or principles. The story itself begins with his resurrection. But resurrection itself as a notion of redemption in Christianity is undermined by Jesus' inclination towards an earthly life and more importantly towards 'woman' as an object of sexual desire. To a certain extent, even others like Saramago and Scorsese are doing something similar. The major differences lie in the fact that they don't mention anything

about the resurrection and also that they use Magdalene as the link between Christ and his sexuality. As far as the character of Magdalene is concerned, this is more of an unbiblical nature in works like *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *King Jesus* than in *The Man Who Died* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

Chronologically speaking, Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the Bible, by name in the Book of Luke (8:2) as one of the women who accompanied Jesus, from whom seven demons had been cast out. All other references to her have been as someone who was present at Jesus' crucifixion [Matthew 27:56, 61; Mark 15:47; John 19:25] and also as one of the first who went to his tomb on the third day and actually met the resurrected Jesus [Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 9; John 20:1-2, 11-28]. Contrary to popular belief, it is not Magdalene who anoints Jesus with oil/perfume. There are different versions of this episode in the Bible. The Book of Matthew (26:6-13) and the Book of Mark (14:3-9) describe an unnamed woman anointing Jesus at the house of a person called Simeon who had suffered from a dreaded skin disease. The Book of Luke (7:37-50) also mentions a woman who had led a 'sinful life' who anoints Jesus at the house of a Pharisee called Simon, to whom Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." However the Book of John (12: 1-8) describes Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus at her home. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* depicts Magdalene as the woman who anoints Jesus. Magdalene is also depicted as a prostitute in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and *King Jesus*. This seems to be another common misconception. The Book of John (8:3-11) does talk about the 'woman caught in adultery' whom the

Pharisees bring before Jesus and to whom Jesus says, "Go, and sin no more." In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Magdalene is portrayed as this prostitute whom Jesus saves from a mob, that was about to stone her. But the Bible does not name this woman as Magdalene. Therefore it is a little surprising why Magdalene is chosen as the one who highlights the sexual element in Christ. Perhaps it is because after Jesus' mother Mary, Magdalene is the one woman in the Gospels about whom one can find a lot of references, even if these

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are mainly found in connection with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The various writers perchance conceive a level of intimacy between Christ and Magdalene because she is the common character who's depicted as going to Christ's tomb in all the four Gospels.

Nevertheless, what happens as a result of the introduction of a character like Magdalene or as in Lawrence's case, the priestess of Isis, is that a trait—sexuality—that is commonly found in human beings, but not in Jesus Christ as per the Bible, is given a lot of importance. But as mentioned earlier the sexuality of Christ is not talked about in the Bible. However, the notion of celibacy is something to which Christianity attaches a lot of importance.

Celibacy refers to the deliberate abstinence from sexual activity and as far as Christianity is concerned, it was St. Paul who first introduced the notion that celibacy occupied a higher realm than marriage. The basis for this may be found in the New Testament [1st Corinthians 7: 1-40] where Paul voices his support for marriage only as an instrument for prevention of fornication, and emphasizes that the unmarried state is

preferable. He was followed by other leading early Christian thinkers like Jerome and Augustine who endorsed his view and devalued sexuality further. Reay Tannahill emphasizes this in *Sex in History*:

It was Augustine who epitomized a general feeling among the Church Fathers that the act of intercourse was fundamentally disgusting. Arnobius called it filthy and degrading, Methodius unseemly, Jerome unclean, Tertullian shameful, Ambrose a defilement.¹⁴

Augustine argued that feelings of lust and other sexual impulses became manifest in Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God and sinned. In fact the Bible says that as soon as they ate the 'Forbidden Fruit', they became aware of their nakedness. Augustine argues that their sin is in this way linked to their genitals and that this has become a part of humanity, which can be explained by:

...the perversity and independence of the sexual organs, the intractable nature of the carnal impulse, and the shame generally aroused by the act of coitus. Lust and sex were integral to the doctrine of Original sin, and every act of coitus performed by humanity subsequent to the Fall was necessarily evil, just as every child born of it was born into sin.¹⁵

Thus it was argued that the original sin committed by Adam and Eve converted the "blameless physical instinct" that God had created for the human race into something shameful. According to this, one had to abstain from sex, in order not to inherit the sin associated with it, thereby leading to the belief that a celibate led a better life than others. However for those who found it difficult to abstain, Augustine prescribed:

...the original blameless physical instinct of god's purpose, to use sex without passion to beget the next generation of Christians... if it was sinful to find enjoyment in sex, then the great majority of ordinary people were sinners.

It was only after the arguments of Augustine and other like-minded early Christian thinkers became absolute that the concept of clerical celibacy got established. However it was not easy to impose this, as earlier, ordained priests had the right to marry. It was only after the eleventh century that celibacy became a norm and it is still so as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the priest "as an administrator of divine office...is seen to function within the holy mother church and should reflect her virginal purity."¹⁷ This is true even with regard to Oriental Churches. But here, "though married men are allowed to become priests, they are not allowed to rise to the highest Episcopal office and once a man has become a priest, he may not take a wife."¹⁸ Generally speaking, "the ability to devote all of one's efforts to spiritual matters without the burden of family obligations is a very frequently voiced justification for celibacy..."¹⁹

There was a lot of confusion in the early church with regard to the question of celibacy for priests and bishops. "In the Ecumenical Council at Nicea...a motion to impose conjugal abstinence on bishops was vetoed."²⁰ Later the Trullan Council allowed conjugal rights to priests, but they had to be married before being ordained as priests. The Oriental Churches follow this and here "bishops are always celibates, being chosen from the monks."²¹ The Roman Catholic Church however does not follow this. Their teachings on celibacy are based on the creeds of the Council of Trent, which "elevated the rule of celibacy into a dogma." This council:

asserted the Church's right to establish impediments to marriage, its right to enjoin marital avoidance, the invalidation by the vow of chastity of the right to contract marriage and the superiority of virginity or celibacy to the

married state. Anathemas were pronounced on all who held to the contrary. This remains the law of the Roman Catholic Church.²²

Protestant churches however, are firmly against celibacy for the clergy:

Luther, as early as 1520 advocated allowing Pastors their freedom in the matter and denounced compulsory celibacy as the work of the devil... (Calvin) denounced the 'vile celibacy' of the priests and the interdiction of marriage to priests as contrary to the word of God and all justice.²³

Protestant priests and even bishops of most Protestant churches can occupy the highest office of their churches. Nevertheless, when celibacy gained a superior mode, the institution of marriage got underplayed:

..the church saw marriage as a series of concessions to human weakness- to the need for companionship, sex, and children- and it did what it could to undermine all three. One marriage, it claimed, should supply enough companionship for any man; second marriages were adultery, third fornication, and fourth nothing short of 'swinish.' More specifically, it refused to regard sex as an integral part of marriage."²⁴

Thus we see how sexuality was never seen in a good light by the early church and to a very large extent, the church-prescribed norms of morality are still held sacred by most Christians. Michel Foucault in his work on sexuality, describes Christianity as a religion that considers the sexual act as evil, where it is "granted legitimacy only within the conjugal relationship"²⁵ Earlier Greek and Roman philosophers and thinkers already envisioned such a 'model of sexual austerity'. It's just that Christianity gave it 'a legal framework and an institutional support.' In Christianity:

Sexual activity is linked with evil by its form and its effects, but in itself and substantially it is not an evil. It finds its natural fulfillment in marriage, but with certain exceptions—marriage is not an express,

indispensable condition for it is to cease being an evil.²⁶ Since early Christian thought, Eros was put under the starkest suspicion. Confessional man replaced the aesthetics of pleasure by a painful, censorious, repressive introspection of debased desire. Spiritual overcoming of the libido ceased to consist, in Plato, in looking upwards and remembering what the soul knew long ago but had forgotten; rather, it came to consist in a constant watch-out for sin, in looking 'continuously downwards or inwards in order to decipher, among the movements of the soul, which ones come from the libido.²⁷

Sexuality became repressive in nature mostly during the Victorian age. It was during this period when silence, meant to be dignified in nature, was maintained with regard to matters associated with sexuality. Sexuality within marital relationships alone was deemed to be legitimate:

Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it merit a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation—whether in acts or in words. ...repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to know.²⁸

Things of course, have changed in the twentieth century. Foucault aptly describes how sexuality has come to be regarded in the west during recent times:

Today it is sex that serves as a support for the ancient form—so familiar and important in the West—of preaching. A great sexual sermon—which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices—has swept through our societies over the last decades; it has chastised the old order, denounced hypocrisy, and praised the rights of the immediate and the real; it has made people dream of a New City.²⁹

Foucault argues that the present discourse "purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy within reality, subvert the law that governs it and change its future"³⁰

are invariably linked. In fact Foucault places his reasons for attempting such a study within this ambit:

aim is to examine the case of a society which has been loudly castigating itself for its hypocrisy for more than a century, which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function... What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence? It is certainly legitimate to ask why sex was associated with sin for such a long time—although it would remain to be discovered how this association was formed, and one would have to be careful not to state in a summary and hasty fashion that sex was "condemned"—but we must also ask why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin. What paths have brought us to the point where we are "at fault" with respect to our own sex?³¹

Foucault's study of sexuality through its historicity so as to understand it as it is viewed today, especially his linking of Christianity towards the reason for sexuality becoming such a problematic concept, is vital to this thesis, where the sexuality of Christ as seen in the texts used here, becomes an area of contention. Foucault points out, the "penitential practices of medieval Christianity, the dual series constituted by the obligatory, exhaustive, and periodic confession imposed on all the faithful by the Lateran Council and by the methods of asceticism, spiritual exercise, and mysticism that evolved with special intensity from the sixteenth on"³² as major techniques that led to the concept of sexuality getting sidelined in a negative manner. He makes special mention of how confession was used to introduce rigorous norms of self assessment, which in turn led to the highlighting of 'insinuations of the flesh' that had to be scrutinized in detail so as to:

... trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following all its meanderings: beneath the surface of the sins, ...bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh. Under the authority of a language that had been carefully

expurgated so that it was no longer directly named, sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite.³³

Foucault's findings contribute immensely towards comprehending the manner in which sexuality acquired a certain negative shading in Christianity, even in very general terms. So one can imagine why it becomes scandalous when this theme is directly linked to Christ, who is God Himself as far as Christianity is concerned. Though the various Christian denominations may differ on their views so as to whether or not celibacy is required, all of them are unanimous in their opinion that Christ did not engage in any sort of physical relationship with any woman, as the Gospels don't mention anything at all to this effect. It would therefore be interesting at this juncture to take a glance at a book that argues that perhaps Christ could have been married after all!

William Phipps' *The Sexuality of Jesus*³⁴ sheds light on why the theme of sexuality is not just looked down upon but completely ignored by the Church. Phipps' book is based on the argument that Jesus belonged to a race that never denounced normal sex life nor ever felt the need that its spiritual leaders had to be celibate. Phipps quotes from the Talmud to show that Jesus must have been married. According to the Talmud, the responsibilities of a Jewish father to his son were as follows: " he must circumcise him, redeem him, teach him Torah, teach him a trade and find him a wife."³⁵ It seems the Talmud also states that, "An unmarried man may not be a teacher."³⁶ Phipps therefore argues that had Jesus not been married, his opponents would have attacked his neglect of a sacred duty. But nowhere is such a criticism of Jesus seen in the Bible, thereby implying that Jesus must have been married! Phipps also mentions Jesus' words to

Magdalene after resurrection, "Touch me not." [John 20:17], and argues that what Jesus could have suggested through this statement to Magdalene is that the relationship between them now will not be one of physical contact, hence suggesting that they had shared a physical relationship earlier. Phipps argues that the reason Christ's sexuality has not been addressed by Christianity is because though the Church had Jewish beginnings, it was influenced heavily by Hellenistic ideas that gave importance to sexual asceticism. "From the third century onwards it was believed that Jesus and his apostles were celibates."³⁷ Phipps mentions that several early philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, Democritus, Aristotle, etc, felt that in order to obtain intellectual supremacy it was essential to denounce sexuality. For example he quotes the ancient theologian Augustine who felt that:

guilt feelings were normative even in marital expressions of sex. The common inclination to cover one's genitals in public and to prefer privacy and darkness for engaging in marital relations is evidence that the sexual impulse is a sin and a shame... Augustine was among the first to relate sexual desires closely to original sin.

Phipps also quotes Thomas Aquinas, who held that "anyone who desired to develop his rationality had to exclude coital distractions."³⁹ He argues that even modern philosophers like Kant and Kierkegaard considered celibacy to be a superior form of living. Thus it is Phipps' contention that frontline philosophers and thinkers throughout the ages have all along "bifurcated the human self into a dishonourable physical part and a noble non-physical part."⁴⁰ He further goes on to say that "those theologians in church history who have advocated sexual asceticism have often unwittingly held a doctrine of man closer to

Athens than to Jerusalem."⁴¹ This forms the basis of Phipps argument regarding why the sexuality of Christ has always been a problem for the Church.

Often when fictional depictions of Christ focus on his sexuality, readers, who are believers, tend to center on this disturbing feature at the expense of missing out on other aspects/issues that may actually be given more weightage in retellings of the life of Christ found in fiction/film. So much so that works of art that not just focus, but even mention the sexuality of Christ become controversial, sometimes in a very volatile manner. An important element in this regard that gets overshadowed by the sexuality of Christ is his crucifixion and martyrdom. The ensuing chapter looks at the various renderings of episodes in the life of Christ that lead to his eventual crucifixion, an aspect that is of utmost significance as far as Christianity is concerned. As all the works taken for study here, focus more on the humanity of Christ than his divinity, the issue of Christ's resurrection is found to be conveniently absent in all these, except Lawrence's story. But here again the concept of resurrection is trivialized. So more, or rather complete attention is found to be given to Christ's martyrdom and the various modalities that shape this concept.

NOTES

- ¹ John W Petras, Preface, *The Social Meaning of Sexuality*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1978.
- ² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin, 1984.
- ³ Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1980, 61.
- ⁴ Martin Scorsese, dir, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, commentary, Universal Pictures, 1988.
- ⁵ Richard Lacayo, "Days of Ire and Brimstone", *Time*, 25 July, 1988.
- ⁶ David Ehrenstein, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, blurb, Universal Pictures, 1988.
- ⁷ *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Universal Pictures, 1988.
- ⁸ D.H. Lawrence, " The Resurrection of the Body", in Ellmann Richard and Charles, Jr. eds. *The Modern Traditions: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, New York, OUP, 1965. 922.
- ⁹ Keith Sagar, *The Art of D.H.Lawrence*, Ghaziabad, Vikas Publishing House, 1979,216-217.
- ¹⁰ Chaman Nahal, *D.H.Lawrence: An Eastern View*, New Delhi, Atma Ram and Sons, 1971,220.
- ¹¹ F.D.McDonald, ed, *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H.Lawrence*, "Resurrection", New York, 1936, 737.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Keith Sagar, *The Art of D.H.Lawrence*, Ghaziabad, Vikas Publishing House, 1979,220.
- ¹⁴ Reay Tannahill, "The Christian Church", *Sex in History*, London, Abacus, 1981, 130.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 131.
- " Celibacy", *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.3,147.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 145.

²⁰ "Celibacy", *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol.3,273.

²¹ Ibid, 274.

²² Ibid, 275.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Reay Tannahill, "The Christian Church", *Sex in History*, London, Abacus, 1981,134.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, Vol.3, Trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin, 1984, 235.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ .G. Merquior, *Foucault*, Scotland, Fontana Press, 1991,135.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, London, Penguin, 1984,4.

²⁹ Ibid, 7,8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8.

³¹ Ibid, 8,9.

³² Ibid, 116.

³³ Ibid, 20.

William Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus*, New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1973.

³⁵ Ibid, 39.

³⁶ Ibid, 45.

³⁷ Ibid, 77.

³⁸ Ibid, 85, 56.

³⁹ Ibid,87.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 92.

⁴¹ Ibid, 94.

CHAPTER HI

MARTYRDOM

This chapter looks at the concept of Christ's martyrdom as found in the various texts taken for study. Incidentally, this is one common theme that is found in all the six works used here. But before going into the details of how the concept of martyrdom is used by the various authors, it is important to have a working definition of the concept itself.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, martyrdom may be broadly defined as the voluntary laying down of lives by people for a particular cause, in solidarity with their group or community, which may be in conflict with another ideologically opposing group. The act of martyrdom is often considered as a higher purifying vengeance upon a powerful opponent so as to project the martyr's cause. A martyr may be seen as strengthening the community's resolve to bear their afflictions imposed upon them by another oppressing community. Martyrdom is not only a free and voluntary act, it is also altruistic in nature. The martyr accepts death for the sake of his/her own cause, even though s/he may have an option of avoiding this by conceding to the adversary. In due time, the martyr often acquires a sacred status and an authority too, around which the community rallies. Asceticism is also considered as a minor form of martyrdom. The enemy of the ascetic is bodily desire. The conquest of desire is seen as being equivalent to the conquest of a social or political adversary.¹ This may be treated as how martyrdom is defined in general religious terms.

This chapter will analyse how the life of Christ and the various events leading to his crucifixion and death are reshaped in the works used here. The biblical account of Christ's last few days would also be looked into. The character of Judas would be used wherever possible as an instrument to analyse the martyrdom of Christ as interpreted by the various authors. Judas is a common character in all these texts except Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*. While he is a major character in a couple of works, in some others, he is not given much importance. Works where Judas is given more weightage would be analysed first, thereafter moving down in descending order according to the prominence accorded to Judas. It is the two films—*The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar* that portray Judas as a very strong character. We may however, start with *The Last Temptation of Christ* as this looks at the entire life of Christ, whereas *Jesus Christ, Superstar* focuses on the last few days in the life of Christ leading to his crucifixion.

Judas is an integral character of *The Last Temptation of Christ* and is found right from some of the opening scenes till the very end. In fact it is he who awakes Jesus out of his last temptation-fantasy. Judas initially is a member of the Zealot group fighting against Roman occupation. Though he hates Jesus for making crosses for the Romans and is ordered by the Zealots to kill Jesus, he finds himself being drawn to this man who willingly offers his throat to be cut. Judas feels that Jesus is special and he decides to see whether he can really do something for Israel. But he warns Jesus: "If you stray (this much) from the path, then I'll kill you." All the same, it is to Judas that Jesus pours out his doubts and worries: "Judas, I'm afraid; stay with me." So when he tells him that he's not sure about his mission, about what exactly God wants from him, Judas advises him to

go to John the Baptist. But the Baptist increases Jesus' self doubts by not giving him a definite answer and by asking him instead: "Who are you?" They have lengthy discussions on Jesus' identity and the Baptist agrees with Jesus' decision to go into the desert in search of God. There, Jesus faces the temptations of lust, power and greed.

On returning from the desert, famished and weary, he stumbles into the home of Mary and Martha at Bethany. He comes to know from them that the Baptist has been killed in captivity. He returns to his disciples and tells them that he has come to baptize them with fire. Then he does what could be said to be his first miracle. He plucks out his heart and tells them, "God is inside of us. The devil is outside in the world, all around us. We'll pick up the axe and cut the devil's throat. We'll fight him wherever he is, in the sick, in the rich, even in the temple... Who's with me?" It is Judas who's the first one to respond to Jesus' call. He exclaims: "Adonai!" and kisses Jesus' feet. It's after this that Jesus begins his ministry in all earnest. He casts out evil spirits, gives sight to the blind, cures the sick, and even turns water into wine at a wedding. Nevertheless, the people of his homeland, Nazareth, ridicule his message and turn him away. But unperturbed by this, Jesus performs his greatest miracle. He confidently calls the putrid corpse of Lazarus back to life. But he is shocked when the rotting hand of Lazarus reaches out and touches him; and disgusted and scared when Lazarus hugs him, so much so that he can't help exclaiming, "Adonai! Lord help me." Next he goes to the temple at Jerusalem and violently disrupts the various businesses there and argues with the priests: "This is my Father's house and not a market... I am the end of the old law and the beginning of the new law."

Meanwhile, Lazarus is killed by Saul of the Zealots. Judas explains to Jesus that they did so, because Lazarus was the greatest proof of Jesus' abilities. They killed him because they did not want the focus of attention to be diverted from their revolution. Jesus then reveals to Judas that he had a vision, where the prophet Isaiah showed him a prophecy, according to which he had to die as the sacrificial lamb. "All my life I have been followed by voices, by foot steps and shadows and I know what that shadow is—the Cross! I have to die on the cross and have to die willingly." Jesus leads his disciples back to Jerusalem and this time the people hail him as "King of the Jews." They wave branches of pine and lay their cloaks in front of him. On reaching the Temple, he once again destroys the merchants' wares. He hopes that he will in this way earn the wrath of the authorities and get killed, so that he would not have to die a painful death on the cross. Soon Temple guards surround Jesus and the crowd. His followers plead with him to give the order to fight. Jesus himself asks for an answer from God. Suddenly he sees his palms bleeding. He realizes that he cannot escape the death on the cross. His strength suddenly disappears and he leans on Judas for support. The crowd that had earlier hailed him becomes frustrated that he does not do anything and throws rubbish at him. Later, when they are away from the crowd, Jesus requests Judas to help him get crucified, "God and man can never be together unless I die. I'm the sacrifice. Without you there can be no redemption." Judas however cannot even think of doing something like this, "No, I can't; get somebody stronger." But Jesus does not relent, "The temple guards will be looking for me, where there aren't any crowds... make sure they find me... I'm going to die, but after three days I'll come back in victory. Don't leave me, you have to give me strength." But Judas asks, "If you were me, would you betray me, master?" And Jesus replies, "No,

that's why God gave me the easier job—to be crucified." The strong willed Judas breaks down on realizing that he has to betray Jesus.

At the last supper, Jesus breaks the bread and asks his followers to share it; he tells them that it's his body and the wine they're drinking is his blood, "Do this to remember me." After this at Gethsemane, Jesus breaks down and prays to God to take away his cup of suffering. Jesus then sees John, who is actually sleeping beside Peter and James, give him a cup to drink from. Jesus then understands that he has no other choice but to accept the cup of suffering that God has chosen for him. Soon Judas arrives with the guards. Peter cuts off one of their ears. But Jesus rebukes him and heals the man's ears. Jesus is taken to Pilate who asks him to do some miracles. "I am not a trained animal. I'm not a magician," Jesus replies. Jesus does not answer any of Pilate's questions. He is flogged and tortured by the soldiers, a crown of thorns is placed on his head and he's then crucified at Golgotha. People jeer at him, but he asks God to forgive them. As his pain and agony increase, he screams, "Father! Why have you forsaken me?" It is now that the final temptation arrives in the form of a little girl, who claims to be Jesus' guardian angel. She encourages and enables him to lead the life he always wanted. He marries Magdalene and later when she dies, lives with Mary and Martha as a carpenter and father of their children. However on his deathbed, his disciples visit him. Here too, it is Judas who plays the prominent role by making Jesus realize that he's been beguiled by the devil. Jesus realizes his mistake and pleads with God to once again make him the sacrificial lamb. And eventually this is what happens. He finds himself back on the cross and is so glad to be there that he happily exclaims: "It is accomplished."

Though everything works out well in the end for Jesus, initially atleast he is very reluctant to pursue the path God chooses for him. God forces him to forsake his urge to live an ordinary life. But there is hesitation within him even after deciding to follow God's path. It's only after coming back from the desert that he becomes steadfast. He confidently raises Lazarus from the dead, but is rattled by his power to do so. Later he leads a mob to the temple, but refrains from giving them the final order to fight as realization dawns upon him that he has to die on the cross; no other manner of death is acceptable to God. He seems to be quite happy when he's rescued by the devil in the guise of a little girl and taken to Magdalene, but later regrets when he realizes that he has been tricked. Finally he's relieved to fulfill his mission by dying on the cross. This constant wavering between his own desires and his God-chosen mission is a hallmark of the Christ-character in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Martin Scorsese, while presenting his Christ-character, does not stray much from Kazantzakis' book, which inspired him to make the movie. But Scorsese's movie became several times more controversial than Kazantzakis' novel. However, much before Scorsese adapted Kazantzakis' book into a film, another artistic presentation of the Christ story that was adapted into a film had become controversial. This was Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's *Jesus Christ, Superstar* that was later made into a film by Norman Jewison. The plot as such covers the period in Christ's life from just before Hosanna up to his crucifixion. This is the Holy Week. It is significant that this period is chosen, as it is undoubtedly the most important part of Christ's life, and it is this period that really shapes the religion called Christianity. The most important theme addressed

here is that of Christ's martyrdom. The first instance in the film where Jesus gives a hint that he is going to be a martyr comes at the end of Simon Zealot's song where, replying to Simon's request to lead the people against Rome, Jesus clarifies that he is due for a different kind of power and glory. At the temple too, after driving out the merchants, Jesus says, 'My time is almost through.' Does he say this because he has divine knowledge of what's going to happen? Or because he knows that he has earned Caiaphas wrath and must therefore face the consequences of disturbing the peace in the Temple courtyards. In short, the question here is whether the Jesus in *Jesus Christ, Superstar* is human or divine? By and large, the Jesus here is overwhelmingly human, though there are a couple of contradictions here and there.

Thematically speaking, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* strays most from the Gospel in its depiction of a human Jesus Christ, especially by emphasizing the self-doubts of Jesus at Gethsemane in an extreme manner. There is yet another manner in which *Jesus Christ, Superstar* deviates from the Gospels. And that is in its unbiblical presentation of Judas' character. It is important to talk about Judas first; because it is through him that a lot of the divine aspects of Christ are questioned.

Judas here seems to believe that Jesus' main aim should be to free Israel from Roman rule. He feels that 'all this talk of God' is uncalled for. He does not like Magdalene stroking and massaging Jesus, for he feels that the proximity of a woman of 'her kind' could harm their movement. There is no need to waste expensive oil on Jesus when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The biblical Judas also

says the same thing [John 12:4,5]. But the Judas in the film seems hurt on hearing Jesus' words that though there will be poor always, he himself would have to leave them for good one day. Judas also looks so at other instances, like when Jesus screams that not a single one of his followers really care about him and that not even Judas understands the true meaning of power and glory. And truly, he finds it difficult to comprehend Jesus as king or God. To him, Jesus is just a man. He is perplexed when he sees Jesus' violent behaviour towards the merchants in the Temple.

The confused Judas is sitting in the desert when he sees military tanks rolling towards him. He runs away from them, straight to Caiaphas and his council. And his confusion is very much evident when he speaks to them. It is here that the betrayal of Jesus takes place. Why does Judas betray Jesus? In the Bible it is said that Satan entered Judas' mind and made him do the dastardly act:

Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of twelve. And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. And they were glad and covenanted to give him money. And he promised and waited for an opportunity to betray him unto them in the absence of the multitude. [Luke 22:3-6]

In the film, there are no clear answers to the question. Judas seems to be in a confused state of mind when he goes to Caiaphas:

Now, if I help you, with matters that you see, these sorts of things are coming hard to me. It's taken me some time to work out what to do. I weighed the whole thing up before I came to you. I had no thought at all of my own reward; I really didn't come here on my own accord! Just don't say I'm damned for all time. I came because I had to, I'm the one who saw

Jesus can't control it like he did before; I know that Jesus thinks so too.
Jesus wouldn't mind that I was here with you.

It's as **though he** himself doesn't seem to know what he's talking and why he's there in the first place. The last line seems to strongly imply that Jesus is a willing accomplice in the betrayal. The 'it' referred to could be the movement, which according to Judas is going the wrong way because of Jesus acquiring kingly and godly status. And perhaps Judas just wants Jesus to be reined in for the moment, so that 'all this talk of God' can be dispelled. Caiaphas and Annas don't let go of the opportunity. They promise Judas silver in exchange for information about Jesus' movements so that the soldiers can arrest him when he is away from the crowds. When Judas refuses to take their 'blood money', they tell him that he can use it for the poor, for it's just 'a fee'. Finally Judas accepts the money and tells them what they want. The background chorus gently sings 'Poor old Judas' repeatedly and fighter jets scream past Judas after this.

Nevertheless, Judas seems to regret what he has done, when Jesus, at the Last Supper reveals, "One of you here dining, one of my twelve chosen will live to betray me." Judas feels that Jesus wants himself to be betrayed for some other reason. He asks him, "What if I just stay here and ruin your ambition? Christ you deserve it." As Jesus persistently pleads with Judas to go, he goes away sobbing and stands at a distance. When Jesus goes towards him and gives him his blanket, Judas flings it away and angrily screams out:

You so pathetic man! See where you have brought us to. Our ideals die around us, all because of you. And now the saddest cut of all, someone has to turn you in like a common criminal, like a wounded animal.

Judas accuses Jesus of letting things go beyond his control and runs away. The scene at Gethsemane after the departure of Judas, where Jesus makes a passionate plea to God to take away his sufferings is quite a moving one. Jesus strongly feels the presence of God and voices all his concerns:

I only want to say, if there is a way, take this cup away from me, for I don't want to taste its poison, feel it burn me... now I'm sad and tired, listen, surely I've exceeded expectations, tried for three years, seems like thirty; could You ask as much from any other man?

Jesus repeatedly asks God why he should give up his life and is desperate to know His answer. God does not really answer Jesus; instead a wide range of portraits of the crucified Christ is flashed across the screen as though Jesus sees these in his mind and realizes that there is no escaping death on the cross. He resigns to his fate, but makes it very clear that he is going to do something very much against his wish:

Lord, thy will is hard. But You hold every card. I will drink Your cup of poison. Nail me to Your cross and break me. bleed me, beat me, kill me; take me now, before I change my mind!

When Jesus is taken to Caiaphas and when Annas thanks Judas and asks him to stay and watch Jesus bleed, the complete realization of what he has done hits Judas. He feels that he's to blame for Jesus' fate and tells so to Caiaphas and Annas. But they comfort him saying, "what you have done will be the saving of everyone, you will be remembered forever for this." But Judas is now terribly upset, for he realizes that he's responsible for the spilling of innocent blood and throws away the silver he had got for betraying Jesus. He's confused about his feelings for Jesus: "I don't know how to love

him...I don't know why he moves me ... he scares me... when he's cold and dead, will he let me be, does he love me too, does he care for me?" These are the thoughts that haunt Judas, as he seems to hear nails being hammered into wood. He becomes so maniacally disturbed: "I am sick; I've been used all the time for your crime, your foul-blooded crime. You have murdered me." With these words he hangs himself. Judas' repentance for betraying Jesus suddenly turns to disgust on realizing that Jesus deliberately used him as a tool for his own death. And it is this realization more than the feelings of repentance that prompts him to commit suicide. So we can see that the Judas here is so different from the one we find in the Bible. The biblical Judas comes into limelight just before the betrayal incident. But the Judas in the film is a strikingly prominent character right from the beginning. He's the only one among the disciples who displays a capacity to think for himself and question the various moves and actions of Jesus. As he himself says, "I've been your (Jesus') right hand man all along." So it is Judas who's Jesus' most important disciple here, not Peter or John as we find in the Bible. The biblical Judas commits suicide out of sheer repentance [Matthew 22:3,4]. But the Judas in the film does so because he cannot bear the fact that he has been used for the murder of someone he so dearly loved.

As Pilate pronounces Jesus' sentence, the most popular song of the film, 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' is performed. The setting for this is some sort of post- resurrection scenario where Judas seems to be speaking from the present century. So many probing questions are asked here:

Jesus Christ, Superstar! Do you think you are what they say you are? Jesus Christ, Superstar! Who are you, what have you sacrificed... If you'd come today, you'd have reached the whole nation; Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication... Did you mean to die like that, was that a mistake? Or did you think your messy death would be a record breaker?

This seems to be a picturisation of all of Judas' and in turn perhaps a lot of people's doubts and queries as to who exactly is this Jesus and what is it that he has really sacrificed. The film does not answer any of these questions. It only attempts to show that whatever it is that Jesus did was not without unwillingness on his part; that he had to suppress his own doubts, dilemmas and fears of what he had to do, in order to carry out the will of God. Judas, I believe, is a powerful instrument here, used to highlight the inner feelings of Jesus himself. And through this, what the film attempts to outline is a very human Christ, not the divine God figure we find in the Bible. Throughout the film, it's this projection of a human Jesus that is emphasized. Jesus' inability to cure the sick seems to be a negation of his divinity. His constant appealing to God to explain why he should die underlines a very human characteristic of the fear of the unknown, the fear of death. In fact while Jesus displays human feelings and emotions, his divinity gets underplayed. But then again Jesus' divinity fails to get completely negated. For the confidence with which Jesus reaches out to the diseased shows that he has the ability to cure them. It's a different matter that he fails on this occasion as their numbers increase and engulf him. The clash between humanity and divinity is quite evident here as also at the Last Supper where Jesus exhorts his disciples to remember him whenever they dine, for it is his blood and flesh that they are consuming. But he realizes the futility of his words as he feels that they have not really understood what he just said: "I must be mad thinking I will be remembered, yes I must be out of my head; look at your blank faces,

my name would mean nothing ten minutes after I am dead." But the divinity within him seems to suddenly surge when he predicts "Peter will deny me in just a few hours, three times he'll deny me." And later when Peter actually does so, Magdalene is bewildered and reminds Peter, "Its what he said you would do, I wonder how he knew."

It is as though in spite of the efforts of the lyricist and the director to focus on Christ's humanity by keeping out his divinity, they somehow cannot completely nullify the divine elements that Christ represents in the Bible. But because of this, there seems to be a conscious effort by the filmmakers to chip away at the divinity of Christ. And here again it is Judas who is used as a means to bring about this effectively. The undermining of Jesus' divinity goes to an extreme when this is ridiculed by Judas, at times emphatically—"I remember when this whole thing began, no talk of God then we called you a man," at times jeeringly—"Nazareth, your famous son should have stayed a great unknown, like his father carving wood he'd have made good," at times angrily—"You so pathetic man, see where you've brought us to, our ideals die around us all because of you," and at times pitifully—"Every time I look at you, I don't understand, why you let the things you did get so out of hand. You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned."

Everything that Judas feels about Jesus seems to come true when Jesus makes his passionate plea to God to take away his sufferings. If the Judas in *The Last Temptation of Christ* snaps Jesus out of his temptation-fantasy, the Judas in *Jesus Christ, Superstar* seems to be exhorting the audience to be prepared for a revelation of Jesus' innermost

doubts and anxieties which point towards the fact that "he's just a man, he's not a king, he's just the same as anyone I (Judas) know(s)."

In essence this is what Ted Neeley, the actor who plays the role of Jesus emphasises as being the primary objective of the film:

My own experience as a child, going to church constantly, I saw Jesus as a stained-glass window. In this project, we take him down off the stained-glass window, put him in the streets. Or, if you will, in the pew beside them, where he actually was. So that you get a personal view of the humanity of this perfect spirit...² The premise of this show is taking Jesus down off the stained-glass window and putting him in the streets where he was, adding the humanity element to Jesus that is not in the Bible... The stress is on the humanity of Jesus, not his sanctity... No one ever talked about Jesus as a man—the human side—and that's what this (musical) does.³

The worries and fears of Jesus that are part and parcel of every human existence are given maximum importance and distinctively brought out in the scene at the garden of Gethsamane, where Jesus feels the burden of the impending death on the cross wearing him down. He seems to be speaking like any human being when he asks God, "I want to know...I want to see...If I die what would be my reward!" A wide variety of human feelings like pain, anguish, suffering, regret, anger, etc are highlighted primarily to underline what Ted Neeley says, "adding the humanity element of Jesus that is not in the Bible." And before Jesus reveals his weaker human feelings, it is Judas who proclaims that Jesus is indeed just a man, by criticizing his divinity, which he describes as a myth! The main role of Judas itself is to countermand the divine element of Jesus. And at times he becomes larger than the Christ-figure while doing this.

This film can be better understood when we take a look at the period that produced it. *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, which began as an album, became a rock opera and eventually a movie, is a work of art firmly rooted in the American culture of the period that produced it. The late 1960s and 70s were a period that saw a lot of political and cultural upheavals taking place in the American society:

Students revolted in the streets of Paris, demonstrators were teargassed at the Chicago National Convention; Martin Luther King, Jr., was gunned down in front of his motel room in Memphis; and Robert Kennedy was murdered in a California hotel lobby while campaigning against Richard Nixon for President.⁴

It was a period during which African-American and feminist movements gained strength. The youth were becoming more vocal in expressing their opinions on what was happening around them. The American film industry too concentrated more on bringing to the fore themes and issues that were youth-centred and at times radical:

Americans favoured moody, off-beat performers with an edge...Thus, Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, and Robert De Niro brought with them culturally assembled images of what it meant to be an American male: They were not just smoldering like their predecessors but eruptive and violent toward an unjust society.

In general, it was an era during which "American society was in the process of being re-thought and re-invented."⁶ One of the major reasons for this was the Vietnam War, which created a general sense of disillusionment. The youth especially, were highly anti-establishment in their views regarding this war. Criticism against the American military

offensive in Vietnam was stringent and there was an overwhelming demand for ending the war and enabling the return of peace:

Especially after the Tet offensive in 1968, in which a cease-fire was shattered and a bloody spectacle created for television audiences, Jesus' hip, antimilitant stance in the album seemed to fit well in the late 1960s youth culture. This was a Messiah who seemed to be a refuge from hawkish establishment values. Far from the site of middle-class values and status quo existence, any messiah after 1968 had to be socially conscious, youthful and anti-establishment in order to be credible. More than any other Saviour invented by the culture industry, this Jesus had to proclaim peace.⁷

Jesus Christ, Superstar reflects its socio-political and cultural environmental surroundings quite closely. The manifestations of the youth-culture can be clearly seen in the film to a very large extent. The thin, frail-like appearance of Jesus and the hippy looks, hairstyle and costumes of his followers may be seen as markers of the period during which the movie was made. More importantly, the socio-cultural and political happenings of the period illustrate how the Christ-character in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, an anti-establishment figure, giving up his life, despite being apprehensive about it in the end, so that humanity may attain peace and salvation, is very much a product of the America of the 1960s and early 70s, so much so that at times he seems to be speaking directly for the youth of the period and voicing their concerns.

Both the visual forms of the depiction of Christ used for study in this thesis present their respective Judases as powerful characters, strong and sensitive to their Rabbi's feelings, so much so that at times the character of Jesus gets overshadowed by that of Judas'. Nevertheless it is only in these two films that Judas is so portrayed. In

most of the other texts, he is often portrayed as a minor character, though having a key role to play.

A good example of this is the Judas in *King Jesus*. Judas here is one of Jesus' disciples and as found in the Bible, does betray him, but for entirely different reasons. Though the Jesus here is primarily a kingly messiah, there are similarities with the biblical Christ. The royal Jesus, like his biblical counterpart, performs miracles, cures diseases, drives out demons, gets into trouble with the Pharisees and also raises Lazarus from the dead. His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on ass-back is similar to the episode discussed in the Bible. [Matthew 2:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-40, John 12:12-19] And exactly like in the Bible, he drives out money-changers, dove sellers and other merchants doing business in the Temple grounds. The Pharisees and the temple priests could not arrest him as they feared the pilgrim crowd, who were not only impressed with what Jesus did but also with the fact that he gave ample scriptural evidence for all his actions. And it was because of this that the so-called Doctors of Law could never defeat Jesus in an argument. And whenever they made any attempt to arrest Jesus, they were held back by Nicodemon and Joseph of Arimethea, two highly respected members of the Sanhedrin, who admired Jesus and found no fault in his teachings. However, Jesus knew that his time was drawing near. During his last Passover, he revealed to his disciples that one of them would kill him. They were shocked; each one asking, "Is it I?" and he replied, " At a goodly price have you valued me." Only Judas understood what he really meant. He recollected the citation of an ancient story, which formed the last chapters of the Book of Zechariah, where with two pastoral staffs called 'Grace' and 'Concord'

Zechariah attempts to stop the people from offering prayers to the Olympian gods and the Queen of Heaven to make them repent. But he fails and is scornfully referred to as the Worthless Shepherd and given thirty shekels. At this he cries, " At a goodly price you have valued me," and throws away the shekels. He breaks the staffs and sees himself in a vision impersonating the part of the Worthless Shepherd, who under divine orders, neglects all his duties and indulges in gluttony, preaches falsely and takes the sins of the people upon himself. Later he gets killed because his own parents betray him. But then everyone realizes that it's Zechariah's act of self-destruction that saves them from their own destruction.

Judas suddenly feels that Jesus intends to become the Worthless Shepherd in order to bear the sins of the people. Jesus had initially, even at the time of his recognition as King at Mt. Tabor, abstained from meat. But then revoked this decision at several instances. He had also broken his two staffs just like how Zechariah had done. Judas feels that the Eucharist itself was nothing but the attempts of Jesus as the Worthless Shepherd, a false prophet, to create something idolatrous, something that is against the holy laws given by Jehovah. But Judas knew that Jesus' mother would never betray him. Suddenly it dawned on him that the betrayal of Jesus would be at the hands of his own disciples and thereafter Jesus would be condemned as a false prophet till his body is pierced and then a final understanding would dawn on the people as what happened in the case of Zechariah.

Jesus then handed a piece of bread dipped in sauce to Judas and said:
"What must be done, do quickly!"... Judas rose at once and went out, pale with terror. His instructions were clear: he was to buy a sword with which to kill his master. How could he obey? How could he take the life of a

man he loved best? And why had Jesus chosen him as the assassin... Knowing him from what he was, how could he run him through? " Thou shalt do no murder!" To kill Jesus except in righteous indignation would be plain murder: and murder he would not commit. [KJ. 368]

Judas goes to Nicodemon and explains everything to him. Nicodemon too did not want Jesus to die. He envisaged a plan to place Jesus on the throne of Israel:

You (Judas) must go to the High Priest at once and offer him your help in arresting your master. You had better ask for payment, or else the subterfuge may be suspected. Once he is safely in custody, all will be well... Nicodemon's plan was based on his observation that Jesus had never, preached against Rome... why may Jesus not show friendship to the Romans, and peacefully put forward his claim to the throne of Herod, at the same time entering upon the Sacred Kingship of the whole Jewish race? ... His plan was, that when Judas had saved Jesus from the swords of his disciples by helping Caiaphas to arrest him, Nicodemon would approach Pilate, with whom he was on fairly good terms, and inform him that Caiaphas had arrested a Roman citizen, none other than the secret heir to the Herodian throne... He would be obliged to remove Jesus from the custody of the High Priest, who had no right to try a Roman citizen, and then to make a full report to the Emperor Tiberius [KJ. 369-371]

The Judas in the Bible follows no such plan. He betrays Jesus of his own free will, or as mentioned earlier, because of Satan. [Luke 22:3-6] In the novel, Judas betrays Jesus on the advice of Nicodemon, so as to place him on the throne of Israel, or as per Jesus' intentions, to help him die as the 'Worthless Shepherd'. Now this prophecy that Graves introduces is indeed found in the Bible, in chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Zechariah. God asks Zechariah to become the shepherd of a flock that is about to be butchered. [Zechariah 11:4,5] The shepherd is paid thirty pieces of silver as wages. But God tells him: "Cast it into the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord [Zechariah

11:13] In the Gospel of Matthew, when Judas hears that Jesus has been condemned to die, he returns to the Temple and says that Jesus is innocent. But the priests and other Jewish authorities refuse to listen to his pleas. He then throws the thirty silver pieces, which was his reward for betraying Jesus, in the Temple and goes and hangs himself. The money that Judas threw was used to buy the 'Potter's Field' that was used as a cemetery for foreigners. [Matthew 27:3-10] Meanwhile in the Book of Zechariah, the prophet is once again instructed to act the part of, this time, the 'worthless shepherd.' [Zechariah 11:16-17] God then orders the death of his shepherd:

Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn my hand upon the little ones. And it shall come to pass that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die: but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God. [Zechariah 13:7-9]

This is how the prophecy of the 'worthless shepherd' is found in the Bible. In the novel, Judas interprets Christ's desire to die as being similar to the death of the worthless shepherd. But there seems to be a contradiction of sorts here, because the worthless shepherd, as the above verses show does not die on his own. His death is ordered by God. And in the Bible, Jesus considers himself not as a worthless shepherd but as the 'good shepherd' who's willing to sacrifice his life for his sheep. [John 10: 11-16]

We can clearly see here that there is marked difference in the aims of the biblical Christ and Graves' royal Jesus. And Judas and Nicodemon help him achieve this.

Nicodemon, the Pharisee who advises Judas to betray Jesus, is found in the Bible as Nicodemos, someone who believed in Jesus' teachings. [John 3:1,2] Nothing more is said in the Bible about Nicodemus, except that it was he and Joseph of Arimathea, who took Jesus' body and placed it in a tomb after following the required Jewish customs for burial. [John 19:39-41]

Another character who plays an important role as far as Christ's crucifixion is concerned is Pontius Pilate. In a sense, he tries to save Jesus. [Luke 23:20] In the novel, Pilate is already aware of Jesus' royal lineage when he meets him. He speaks to Jesus about restoring him to the throne, but Jesus replies that his kingdom is not of this world and that he is more interested in the Truth. Pilate gets annoyed with him and sends him to Antipas, who is none other than Jesus' paternal uncle. Antipas tries to buy Jesus off his claim to the throne of Israel. But Jesus does not speak a word to him. Antipas then meets Pilate and requests him to put Jesus out of the way. In the Bible, it is Judas who gets thirty silver pieces for betraying Christ. However in the novel, Pilate agrees to Antipas' request for the price of thirty silver talents. Pilate also asks the High Priest for the best emerald necklace in Jerusalem for his wife in return for sentencing Jesus to death.

Meanwhile, when Judas realizes that Nicodemon's plan has gone awry and that Jesus had been condemned to the cross, he forces Nicodemon's son to hang him. In the Bible too, Judas commits suicide, but does so all by himself. It is important to note here that there was a certain kind of turmoil in Jesus' mind during the time of his crucifixion. He felt that he was being punished now by Jehovah for his sins of presuming to be the

Chosen One. By doing this the novelist remains true to his notion that Jesus is the Christ, the 'Christos', the anointed one, because of his royal lineage and not because he is the Son of God.

These are some of the ways in which Graves departs from the biblical version of Christ's crucifixion. Jesus' resurrection too is interestingly portrayed by Graves in the sense that his followers—Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Miriam, Peter, John and others actually wait for him to rise from the dead. But it is to his wife, Mary of Bethany that Jesus first appears. The Gospels have varying accounts about who actually went to the tomb of Jesus on the third day after his death and also with regard to whom he first appeared after resurrection. The Gospel of Matthew describes an angel appearing to Magdalene and the other Mary (which could be the Mary of Bethany) when they go to the tomb at dawn, informing them of Christ's resurrection. [Matthew 28:1-8] The Gospel of Mark gives two accounts of the resurrection. In the first one, Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. There they see a young man in a white robe, who tells them that Jesus has risen and asks them to inform the others about this. [Mark 16 1-7] In the second account, Jesus appears to Magdalene alone. [Mark 16:9-11] In the Gospel of John too, it is to Magdalene that Jesus first appears. [John 20:1-18] In the Gospel of Luke it is Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joanna who, on going to the tomb are told by two men in shining clothes about Jesus' resurrection. [Luke 24:1-11]

So in all these accounts the prominent individual is Magdalene. But in the novel it is Mary of Bethany. And along with her, his mother and another veiled woman who could be Magdalene, Jesus ascends into heaven. In the Bible though, Jesus ascends into heaven all by himself after asking his disciples to baptize people, preach the Gospel and spread the word of God:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.[Matthew 28:18-20]

Its important to note, especially while comparing *King Jesus* to other fictional depictions of Christ studied here, that although Graves depicts his Jesus as dying in a confused state of mind, he does not attribute sexual qualities or features to Christ. Jesus marries Mary of Bethany, but refrains from sexual relationship with her or for that matter, he does not seem to show any interest in her as a person. It's as though, since he was, as depicted by Graves, the rightful King of the Jews and a king required a queen, he married her. Graves' Jesus does not hate women, but feels that it is best to keep away from them for the Female is the companion of the Adversary. Graves depicts this as a reason for Jesus failure; his confused state of mind when crucified. Jesus here does not seem to realize that woman and man and their union are all part of life, part of existence, "... he tried to force the hour of doom by declaring war upon the Female. But the Female abides and cannot be hastened."[KJ. 408] Perhaps it is because this realization dawns fully upon him only after resurrection that he ascends to heaven with three women—his mother, Mary

the Queen and the other veiled woman who could have been Mary the Hairdresser. But the ending seems to contradict the five messianic theories advanced by Graves himself. All the five theories point towards the establishment of a kingdom. But Jesus here does not do anything of the kind. But then Graves does conclude the novel thus:

Jesus by his defeat of death remains alive, an earth-bound Power, excused incarceration in Sheol, but not yet risen to heaven. He is a Power of Good, who persuades men to repentance and love, whereas all the other earth-bound Powers (except only Elijah) are evil and persuade men to sin and death. In those days neither piety nor inequity was universal in Israel, therefore the Kingdom could not be established. But established it will be in the end, when the Female is conquered and then he will reign his thousand years and all the world will obey him. For he will be crowned once more, but this time his queen will be worthy of his virtues: a woman not carnal, nor arrayed in splendour as formerly but modestly clothed in fine white linen. [KJ. 417-418]

But here again Graves' messianic theories do not proclaim the destruction or defeat of the Female. Then why is such a pre-requisite put forth by Graves? There is an attempt by Graves to present Jesus as a king who subscribes to certain norms and traditions. And these seem to be in conformity with the divine right that kings enjoyed once upon a time in England as well as in other European kingdoms. According to this, a king's power was supposed to be given from God and it was absolute. The king was regarded as God's representative on earth. And one of the norms he had to fulfill was that of having a wife. According to this doctrine, the king is supreme. Everything else is secondary. So though the messianic prophecies don't discuss the destruction of the Female, it becomes difficult for Graves to depict the Female as having won over Jesus, who is king. If he did then it would be a contradiction, because here Jesus' power, even without being the Son of God, is absolute. Graves, I believe, has used those prophecies in the Bible that proclaim Jesus

as a king and combined these with the doctrine of the divine right to present a royal messiah who is human enough to marry just because a king should have a queen, and divinely powerful so as to rise from the dead. Judas, as we have already seen, is one of the tools that Graves uses to go in an antithetical manner to the life of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels.

Among the works taken for study here, *King Jesus* is the last one where Judas has at least some role to play. In Gore Vidal's *Live from Golgotha*, Judas is given no importance at all. The gospel here is presented by Timothy, the biblical assistant of St. Paul, who, 'anti-marriage' in his views in the Bible, is a homosexual in Vidal's novel. And Timothy is his partner—both spiritual and physical. Christianity in itself, as a fledgling religion, is based to a very large extent, on the fund-raising-via-hoodwinking-ability of Paul, who is also a juggler and a tap dancer. He uses these abilities of his to capture the attention of the masses when they are bored, or to distract them when they ask too many questions about Christ and his message.

The central plot revolves around the attempts of a twentieth century hacker to destroy all the existing records of Christianity and everything else associated with it. The hacker in fact, successfully erases all such records till 95 A.D. That is when the people at GE zoom back from the twentieth century to Timothy asking him to write a new Gospel, and plant it in the basement of his church, so that it will be found later on in time by archaeologists and thus save Christianity. GE also controls NBC, which wants to broadcast the crucifixion at Golgotha. Timothy is chosen to be the anchorperson of this

programme. A lot of people from the future have booked their tickets to be there at Golgotha when the crucifixion takes place.

It is only a few days before crucifixion that Timothy and others realise that the hacker is none other than Jesus himself. It so happened that when Judas had come with the soldiers to betray Jesus and get him arrested, Jesus turned the plates on Judas and declared Judas as the Messiah. As a result of this, it was Judas who had been crucified. And Jesus had escaped into the future time zone to work for GE. When everyone goes back in time to witness the crucifixion, Jesus too joins them as Martin Wessershein. At this instance, Timothy informs Pilate that it is Judas who has been captured and not Jesus. Timothy leads the Roman soldiers to the real Jesus, who is then captured and crucified. And thus Christianity is saved. This, in a nutshell, is Vidal's Gospel. The novel swells with blasphemy. For example, Timothy after having sex with Aquilla says what St. Paul feels the real trinity is—"I dried my own glans and the rest of what was in Saints' eyes at least, the true trinity and pulled on my tunic."

Though Timothy and St. Paul are important characters of this novel, it is the characterisation of Christ that this thesis is mainly concerned with. In one of the very first reports on Christ in the novel, Timothy, after getting acquainted with the happenings of the twentieth century, understands that dates are calculated from the year of the birth of Christ. But he feels that there is an element of uncertainty here, as "it is well known that our Lord was constantly knocking years of his age in order to appear youthful and with it." [LG.15] St. Paul and Timothy preached about Jesus like this:

The messiah had actually entered Jerusalem a few years earlier, on ass-back, where he was promptly denounced by the Jews as a self-hating Jew and by the Romans as a Zionist terrorist. He was then tacked up on a cross, with some help from the old-guard rabbis, as Saint liked to remind him his onetime co-religionists. Then, on the third day, postmortem, Jesus came back to life and waddled out of the tomb where a number of His personal media staff—secretaries, gofers and so on—saw Him, thus convincing them that He really was the messiah and the Day of Judgment and the kingdom of God and so on would take place just as soon as He returned from the days with His Father, god, in Heaven. For Saint there was only the One God who had sent his only Son to be crucified and resurrected and then while the rest of us hang around waiting for the end of the world, now slightly overdue according to Saint's original timetable, those who had been associates of Our Lord would teach the others how to live in a state of purity—no sex mostly—until He comes back and everyone has to appear in court where the good are routed up to Heaven and the rest down to Hell, and so on. It's really and truly a wonderful religion, cash-flow wise, and I say this now from the heart. [LG. 25, 27]

Timothy describes Jesus as a very fat person with a serious hormonal problem.

Fat as a butterball, He was. Bad color. Short of breath too... Halvah was a weakness of Our Lord, according to tradition. A kilo of mashed beans with olive oil was also a favorite—usually as a pre-sermon snack. Give Him the carbohydrates and he'd let the proteins go. Naturally, He was a martyr to flatulence. [LG.39]

Bui this fat man who is described here is not Jesus. The real Jesus is Marvin Wasserstein, a computer genius and also the hacker who wants to delete all traces of Christianity. The fat man believed to be Jesus was actually Judas. Jesus later explains how he escaped martyrdom:

There was poor fat Judas, all set to betray me and then I turn *him* in and he is the one who has to serve time up there on my cross—the look on his face! Don't you love it?" He whistled with delight. "Anyway, let's face it, the Roman administration of Palestine under Pontius Pilate was easily the stupidest and most corrupt until the British, of course, in the twentieth

century after my birth in a ...what was it they say I was born in?" "A manger. For horses. In a stable. At Bethlehem. A star overhead..." Jesus winced. "How I hate all that pagan stuff! That star shone at the birth of Mithras, on December twenty-fifth, so in order to con the Mithraists, they added all his shit to my story where it doesn't belong. Born in a stable? My father, Joseph, was the pretender to the throne of Israel, and a direct descendant of King David. That is why those 'begats' are about the only true thing in the so-called 'Christian Story.' We were also in the lumber business, wholesale and retail. Anyway, I was—and still am—the King of the Jews and the messiah, and what that goy-loving creep Solly (Paul) did to my story is, frankly, actionable. [LG.191]

Timothy realizes that this Jesus is so different from the one around whom Christianity was built by Paul "He was a zealot. A fanatic. A revolutionary. A Zionist first, last and always." [LG.192] The main aim of the Jesus in this novel is to liberate Israel from Roman rule and establish a Jewish kingdom. Since he knew that the Roman forces were too strong for him to handle, he simply took off into the twentieth century, determined to come back:

...I shall return Israel to glory—all enemies defeated as I establish the Kingdom of God. It will be awesomely beautiful, I promise you, and those illuminated skies over Baghdad will pale by comparison. In fact, Baghdad, Damascus, Amman and Cairo will be taken out during the first announcement, as I establish the so-called Ring of Fire, as predicted by Isaiah. [LG. 194]

Jesus' plans however do not work. Paul appears to Timothy in a vision and asks him to tell the Romans that Marvin Wasserstein is the real Jesus Christ. Timothy then overhears Jesus talking to his disciples. Here Jesus denounces Paul as being the Devil himself; because due to Paul's interpretation of Jesus as being part of the Trinity (the Holy Father, The Holy Son and the Holy Spirit), the true aim of Jesus—to create the Messianic Kingdom of Greater Israel was overshadowed. And Timothy realized that it was this

more than anything else that made it "necessary for Jesus, as Marvin Wasserstein, to become the Hacker in order to destroy Saint's great invention: Christ crucified."

[LG.214] But the knowledge of all this makes things more confusing for Timothy:

In one sense, I was delighted that Jesus was really the messiah and that he would establish the Kingdom of God and the terminal fire in the year 2001 A.D., long after my death next year. On the other hand, if Jesus was not Christian, as Saint Paul had taught, but just another run-of-the-mill Zionist terrorist, then I was all for doing him in right now. [LG. 216]

And this is what he eventually does. He takes the Roman soldiers to Marvin, who is captured and crucified. So Vidal's Jesus is basically a Zionist who's concerned only with Israel as a nation. He hates being referred to as the Messiah, which is why he destroys all existing records of Christianity, a religion of which he himself is the chief cornerstone. And because his aim was to free Israel from Roman occupation, he had no intention at all of becoming a martyr. Instead of being betrayed, he turns the betrayer and delivers Judas to the Romans. So martyrdom here is something that Judas had to put up with. It's a different matter that Jesus does not escape crucifixion thanks to Timothy, who ensures that Jesus is put to death. For as far as Timothy is concerned, the future of Christianity is at stake—without the crucifixion of Christ, there can be no Christianity!

There occurs only one problem though. Gulf + Eastern, the Japanese company, which was in charge of the broadcasting made a few changes while filming the crucifixion. Above the Cross on which Jesus is crucified is a bright sun—the product of special effects. At the centre of the sun, is the Sun Goddess, from whom were descended the Emperors of Japan. As Jesus dies, the Sun Goddess embraces the Cross. When the

blazing brightness of the sun recedes, the Cross is found to be empty. The broadcastings ends with a voice "Thus as foreseen, and foretold by John the Baptist, Jesus returns to his ancestress, the Goddess of the Sun, the ultimate divinity, Amaterasu. Banzai!" [LG. 224] The special effects for this was made by "...the Japanese Hollywood flagship, MCA Universal, (which) had been subcontracted by Gulf+ Eastern to create the special effects, using many of the same people who have made Steven Spielberg a byword for magic and box office. The last frame showed the new logo for Christianity: the cross within the circle of the sun." [LG. 224] So eventually, despite Timothy's efforts to the contrary, Christianity, the most powerful religion in the world gets hijacked by the Japanese!

By bringing in a Japanese firm more powerful than their American rivals, that uses advanced technology to appropriate Christianity, Vidal hints that this religion played a role in making western powers what they are today. This could be the reason why the Japanese try to make this and not any other religion as their own. In this novel too, Jesus is an unwilling martyr, but while in the other works he knows that he has to die for the sake of humanity, here he strongly believes that no good is going to come with his death. This is because he does not want to have any thing to do with the religion founded in his name. He wants to live as the King of the Jews, not die as the Messiah, which is why he conveniently slipped that tag on to Judas and escaped into the future, believing that he could return as the King of the Jews. Unfortunately for him, this does not happen, despite his earnest efforts to erase all trace of Christianity, as the religion grows, because if not the real Jesus Christ, somebody (in this case, Judas) has died as the Messiah. And Timothy and the others try to rectify this mistake and are successful in this by getting the

real Jesus Christ crucified. It's a different matter that nothing more is mentioned about what happens to Judas when the real Christ gets crucified.

Jose Saramago too uses Judas as the agent who helps Jesus in attaining martyrdom. But he remains just that. Unlike in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, Judas is merely an instrument used by the author to implement Jesus' death and not a close disciple or friend to whom Jesus discloses his innermost feelings.

The answer to the question as to why Jesus has to die does not include Judas in any manner. For the decision to die is his own, or rather he is forced to make it his own, thanks to God Almighty. Until he meets God for the second time, Jesus is not very sure about his mission. This happens on a misty morning when Jesus rows his boat right to the centre of the mist, where he meets not only God, who this time is in the guise of a wealthy Jew, but also the Devil, for "everything that concerns God, also concerns the Devil." [GJC. 281]. The Devil is none other than Pastor with whom Jesus had spent his teen years, tending his sheep and he feels that "without God's beard they could pass for twins." [GJC. 281].

His conversation with God clarifies a lot of things for Jesus. In fact he understands the very purpose of his being. To his question, 'Who am I?' God replies:

I mixed my seed with that of your father before you were conceived, It was the easiest solution and the least obvious, And since the seeds are mixed how can You be sure that I am Your son, I agree that is usually unwise to feel certain about anything, but I'm absolutely certain for there

is some advantage in being God. ...you have been what might technically be described as incarnated... [GJC. 280,281]

God then goes on to explain his plan for Jesus, and in effect, for the rest of the world. God says that He is dissatisfied of being the god of a tiny Jewish race. He wants to be lord and master of the whole world and He wants Jesus to spread "My word, to help Me become the god of more people." [GJC. 282]. He wants Jesus to be a martyr for He observes that it "is the best role of all for propagating any faith and stirring up fervour... it is only fitting that a martyr's death should be painful, and if possible ignominious, so that believers may be moved to greater fervour and devotion." [GJC. 283]. Jesus wonders whether it wouldn't be easier for God to use his might to become the god of more races. But God replies "it is forbidding by the binding agreement between the gods to intervene directly in any dispute." [GJC. 284]. For this purpose there are humans, "a piece of wood that can be used for everything." [GJC. 284]. Jesus however decides that he wants to have no part of this bargain and he tells so to both God and the Devil, and prepares to row back to shore. However, even after rowing for a long time, he does not reach land. He realizes that it is futile to resist the will of God. But he tells God that even if he goes around proclaiming that he is the Son of God, no one would believe him. God then points out certain techniques to Jesus in order to win over more followers. He asks Jesus to preach to people about sin and repentance, because everyone, God feels, would have sinned at one time or the other, and asking people to repent would be one of the best ways to make people 'worried and perplexed.' Jesus agrees, but requests God to tell him about the future, about what will happen to his disciples and about what is going to happen as a result of his death. God tells him that his disciples will die painful deaths. He recites a

litany of future followers of Jesus all of who will be martyrs. He tells him about the future wars and massacres where several thousands will be slaughtered. There will also be a lot of non-martyrs who will have:

to mortify their bodies with fasting and prayer... mortify the flesh with suffering and blood and grime... an endless procession of people, thousands upon thousands of men and women throughout the world entering convents and monasteries... all with the same mission and destiny, to worship us and die with our names on their lips. [GJC. 294, 295]

God also tells Jesus about the inquisition, where hundreds of thousands of men and women will be killed, "burnt alive because they have believed in you, others because they will doubt you." [GJC. 298]. He tells Jesus about all the brutal sufferings that people will have to bear because of him, that the Devil remarks "One has to be God to enjoy so much bloodshed." [GJC. 298]. The Devil makes it very clear that he:

simply took what God didn't want, the flesh with all its joys and sorrows, youth and senility, bloom and decay, but it isn't true that fear is one of my weapons, I don't recall having invented sin and punishment or the terror they inspire. [GJC. 295].

The Devil even goes to the extent of asking forgiveness from God. But God rejects the Devil's plea, because God feels that His 'Goodness' cannot exist without the Devil's 'evilness'.

Thus ended Jesus' conference with God and the Devil. As he rows to the shore, he sees a large crowd at the bank waiting for him. His disciple Simon informs him that it has been forty days since he had left shore. He returns and starts his ministry, not on his own

freewill, but because the power-lusting God who wanted to spread His name to all parts of the earth, wills it. Jesus begins to preach about sin and repentance and also performs a lot of miracles, healing the sick and giving wide publicity to the Son of God image. But he feels guilty and remorseful when he says:

Blessed are you when men shall hate you... and shall reproach you and cast out your name as evil for the Son of Man's sake. When Jesus finished speaking, it was as if his soul had fallen at his feet, for in that same instant, he could see in his mind's eye the tragic vision of the torments and death God had foretold at sea. [GJC. 309]

Nevertheless, Jesus has no choice but to obey God. He sends his disciples in pairs to various places to preach the 'good news.' He goes to Bethany to meet Magdalene's sister Martha and her brother Lazarus. At Bethany, Jesus does heal Lazarus, who is of a sickly disposition, but does not raise him back to life when he dies. This is at the instance of Magdalene, who feels that her brother was not such a bad sinner that he has to die twice.

Jesus also meets John the Baptist, who baptizes him. He goes to Jerusalem along with his disciples and drives out the merchants and moneylenders doing business inside the Temple. It is on his return from Jerusalem that Jesus learns of Lazarus's death. This greatly troubles him and following this comes the news of the Baptist's beheading, on the orders of King Herod. Jesus is disturbed and upset that both Lazarus, whom he had healed and John the Baptist, who had prophesized his coming, are dead. These events make him change his mind about playing the role assigned to him by God. He tells his disciples about their martyrdom and about all that is going to happen in the future and decides to go against God's plan:

The Son of God must die on the cross so that the will of the Father may be done, but if we were to replace him with an ordinary man God will no longer be able to sacrifice His Son... An ordinary man, perhaps, but a man who was prepared to proclaim himself King of the Jews, to incite the people to depose Herod from his throne and expel the Romans from the land. [GJC. 334]

Jesus strongly feels that he can prevent all the future bloodshed that is going to happen if he were not to die as the Son of God. He asks any one of his disciples to inform the Jewish authorities, that he is the King of the Jews come to overthrow Herod and drive out the Romans. But the disciples refuse, saying that if God wants Jesus to die as the Son of God, then so be it.

It is here that Judas comes into the picture. He heeds Jesus' request, despite the threats of the other disciples. And this is the only time that Judas is highlighted in this novel. Nevertheless it is important to note that even here it is Judas alone who seems to understand Jesus better than the other disciples. For only he feels like helping Jesus in his attempt to die as the King of the Jews and not as the Son of God. He becomes an informer for the sake of Jesus. Soon soldiers come and Jesus is taken as prisoner before the Jewish authorities and also before the Roman Prefect, Pilate. At both places, Jesus proclaims himself as King of the Jews and even denies that he is the Son of God. He requests Pilate to crucify him and also to put an inscription bearing the words "King of the Jews" on top of the cross. But if Jesus thought that he could hoodwink God by doing all this and dying as the King of Jews and not as the Son of God, then he was to be disappointed:

Jesus is slowly dying, and life is ebbing from his body when suddenly the heavens overhead open wide and God appears in the same attire He wore

in the boat and His words resound throughout the earth, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus then realized that he had been brought here under false pretences, as the lamb is led to sacrifice and that his life had been planned for death since the very beginning. [GJC.341]

But Jesus does make one last attempt to exonerate himself:

Remembering the river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the entire earth, he called out to the open sky where God could be seen smiling, Men forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done. [GLC.341]

The novel ends with Christ's death on the cross, and his last words seem to imply that life on earth would have been much better had not he died. Saramago's attempts to de-link Christ's divinity ends with his crucifixion. In fact most of the works studied here ends with Christ's crucifixion. *King Jesus* does talk about Christ's crucifixion, but D.H.Lawrence's story is an exception as it discusses, the post-resurrection period of Christ's life.

In *The Man Who Died*, we meet the resurrected Christ who wonders whether he has missed the simple joys and worries of an ordinary human-being because he had to play the role of the Messiah. Jesus does not offer any details regarding his past life. But after resurrection, he feels that it's time now to forgo the philosophies and principles of the Saviour and to start life afresh as a common man. This is the primary reason why he does not go along with Magdalene, one of his closest followers:

I have outlived my mission, and know no more of it. It is my triumph. I have survived the day and the death of my interference, and am still a man. I am young still, Madeleine, not even come to middle age. I am glad

all that is over... The teacher and the saviour are dead in me; now I can go about my business, into my own single life... [MD. 221]

Jesus says that through martyrdom he tried to obtain a kind of greatness that was beyond his own confines. And he feels that by attempting to do something like this he has harmed himself and also others like Judas:

I wanted to be greater than the limits of my hands and feet, so I brought betrayal on myself. And I know I wronged Judas, ... I gave more than I took, and that also is woe and vanity. So Pilate and the high priests saved me from my own excessive salvation... I have not risen from the dead in order to seek death again. [MD.222]

Jesus strongly feels that it was a mistake to try and change the ways of humanity. He feels that it would have been better if he had just minded his own business. He does feel that whatever it was that he had to do, he did and even died for this mission. But now it was time for him to live his own life without worrying about humanity and its problems, "Now I belong to no one and have no connection, and mission or gospel is gone from me. Lo! I cannot make even my own life, and what have I to save... I can learn to be alone. [MD.225]

Lawrence does not mention whether the role of the Saviour was thrust upon Jesus as seen in the other works studied in this thesis. But his Jesus does admit that he had forced Judas to betray him, which is why he feels guilty for what happened to Judas. The story as has already been detailed in the previous chapter, looks more at how Jesus lives his life during his post-resurrection period, rather than his life as found in the Gospels. But what Lawrence does through his brief description of Jesus looking back at his life as the Messiah, is to highlight the regretful mind of Jesus for having tried to become some

kind of hope for the people around him. He now feels that he never should have tried to force people to achieve something, even if that 'something' was as precious as eternal life itself. He says: "I tried to compel them to live, so they compelled me to die. It is always so, with compulsion. The recoil kills the advance."[MD.225]

So if in the other works we see Jesus as an unwilling martyr being forced by God to accept the painful death on the cross, in *The Man Who Died* we find a resurrected Jesus throwing his divine status to the winds and on hindsight even being apologetic and repentant of ever having tried to play the role of the Messiah.

In almost all the works referred to in this thesis, we find that the Christ character is an unwilling martyr. Different authors project their different Christs as having different reasons for being reluctant to accept the death on the cross. If in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus does not want to be a martyr because of his desire to marry and live the life of an ordinary man, in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, at the doorstep of martyrdom, he suddenly feels that this burden is too heavy for him. Like in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* too, Jesus is forced by God to accept martyrdom. If in *The Last Temptation of Christ* it's the powerful claws of God tearing his brains apart, in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, God appears in person to inform Jesus that he will have to be a martyr so that Jehovah, the Lord of the Jews can acquire a greater status by becoming a global God. In all the above texts, the Christ character accepts martyrdom, albeit unwillingly. However in *Live From Golgotha*, he does not accept it at all. The Jesus here is concerned only about the Jews and he hates

his name being used to initiate and develop a religion called Christianity, so much so that he travels to the future to erase all trace of this religion. In *The Man Who Died*, Lawrence's Christ regrets that he ever undertook such a task as to become the Messiah. At this point, it's important to take a look at how the concept of martyrdom is perceived in Christianity.

The ancient Christian communities within the Roman Empire had martyrs who suffered passively but who through their deaths were able to inflict moral or psychological pressure on the adversary. They were able to escalate their cause, unify their community and have their culture and ideology sanctified through their martyrdom. Often these martyrs were drawn from their socio-political and religious leadership. For example, almost all of Christ's disciples became martyrs. The history of the tradition of martyrdom in Christianity is invariably a stepping-stone to the veneration of saints. There was always a sense of dignity, joy and triumph associated with martyrdom. It was believed that "it is Christ Himself who is present and suffers in the person of the martyr. As a natural consequence, the greatest veneration was shown to the martyrs..."⁸ In the 3rd century, it was believed "the giving of life for Christ, the baptism of blood was the example equivalent of sacramental baptism in its effect of completely remitting sin and rendering the sufferer worthy of immediate admission to the joys of paradise."⁹ The martyr himself, "while awaiting in person the hour of the supreme sacrifice, was an object of solicitude and veneration to all his fellow-Christians."¹⁰ If at all the so-called martyr somehow escaped the ordeal of death, he is considered "as already possessing the dignity of priest-hood without ordination."¹¹ Sepulchers and mausoleums were

constructed over the tombs of martyrs, where the Eucharist would be celebrated and feasts were also held commemorating the martyr's death. All this was "recognition of the martyrs' dignity and formed the germ from which the whole calendar of saints' days ultimately developed."¹² As martyrs got elevated to the status of saints, their names were invoked at the time of death, for "it was felt that help might be looked for from those who had made the journey (to the next world) in triumph and whose acceptance with God was assured. Burial in proximity to the martyrs was itself a form of commendation, a tacit request for their intercession"¹³ Later, it was felt that even ascetics and bishops who did not actually die as martyrs but "suffered more in a lifetime of courageous endurance than if they had actually shed their blood for Christ,"¹⁴ also qualified to be venerated as saints.

It's interesting to note here that though Christians believe Christ as having shed his blood on the cross to save humanity, Christ Himself is not generally referred to as a martyr. In fact, Stephen is generally regarded as the first martyr in Christianity. [Acts 7:60] So where exactly does Christ figure in the Christian tradition of martyrdom? In a sense, though Christ is never referred to as a martyr, it is his act of dying for a cause that Christian martyrs imitate. Christ's glorious death vis-a-vis his crucifixion at Golgotha is what other martyrs attempt to emulate. But even then, he is not a martyr because as God, he already knows that he has to bear the sins of the world and die on the cross, so much unlike the Christ-figure found in fictional works, who is primarily human, an example of which is the Jesus in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, who agonizingly questions God, "Why should I die?" Hence the Christ-character found in the texts used for study in this thesis may be called martyrs, because as human beings they have no fore knowledge of the fact

that they have to die. As human beings they deliberate upon whether or not they should die at all for some cause. As human beings, they are quite unwilling to die voluntarily and finally they are forced to take the plunge, because they don't have much of a choice. The biblical Christ may be treated as being above a common martyr, because martyrdom is something that is attained when a human being dies for a particular cause. But when God Himself dies for the sake of human kind, it's something that is treated at a much elevated level than martyrdom.

It is important for the writers of the above texts to present a Christ character who does not want to be a martyr so as to emphasise their viewpoints of who or what Christ is—primarily human and not divine! We may argue that the resurrection of Christ is not being discussed by most of these writers so as to negate his divinity. D. H. Lawrence, the one writer whose work does focus on the resurrection, reasons that Christianity gives more importance to the crucifixion of Christ than to his resurrection:

The Churches loudly assert: We preach Christ crucified!—But in so doing, they preach only half the Passion, and do only half their duty. The Creed says: "Was crucified, dead, and buried...the third day He rose again from the dead." And again, "I believe in the resurrection of the body..." So that to preach Christ Crucified is to preach half the truth. It is the business of the Church to preach Christ among men—which is Christmas; Christ crucified, which is Good Friday; and Christ Risen, which is Easter...But the Churches insist on Christ Crucified, and rob us of the blossom and fruit of the year.¹⁵

But belief in the resurrection of Christ is regarded in Christianity as a prerequisite of salvation. Paul clearly explains the reason for Christ's death and resurrection, when he states, "Who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our

justification." [Romans 4:25] So the crucifixion of Christ becomes important not by itself, but in relation to his resurrection. Jurgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* elucidates this further. Moltmann argues that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ occupies a pivotal position in Christianity:

All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ. All Christian statements about history, about the future and about hope stem from the crucified Christ... Cross and resurrection are not facts on the same level; the first expression denotes a historical happening to Jesus, the second an eschatological event. Thus the centre is occupied not by 'cross and resurrection,' but by the resurrection of the crucified Christ, which qualifies his death as something that has happened for us, and the Cross of the risen Christ, which reveals and makes accessible to those who are dying his resurrection from the dead...When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the Invisible God,' the meaning is that this is God and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.¹⁶

We thus see that the crucifixion of the biblical Christ is something that is so divine, despite the fact that he is human. And Christ's resurrection is so divine an event that it becomes difficult to attribute this to him, were he purely human in nature. But as mentioned earlier, it is natural for the writers taken for study here not to give importance to the concept of resurrection, because they're focusing on the humanness of Christ. Though Lawrence and Robert Graves discuss this concept, they do so in a subversive manner, so that there is no divinity attached to it. And all the writers seem to be arguing that if the fictional Christ had his way, then he would have rejected martyrdom and his all-important mission to save human kind. The concluding chapter will examine why the humanity of Christ is stressed upon in these various texts, at times at the cost of his

divinity. The next chapter looks at what happens in the reception sector when only the human side of Christ is given importance.

NOTES

- ¹ "Martyrdom", *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 9, 230-235.
- ² Cecil Holmes, "Actor Seeks Biblical Spirit of Superstar", *Houston Chronicle Religion Editor*, 1996. <<ftp://ftp.charm.net/pub/usr/home/sky/superstar.htm>>
- ³ Bill Iddings, "The Jesus and Joseph Shows", *Muskegon Michigan Chronicle*, 1996. <<ftp://ftp.charm.net/pub/usr/home/sky/mc.htm>>
- ⁴ Richard C Stern, et al, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, New York, Paulist Press, 1999, 186.
- ⁵ Ibid, 187, 188.
- ⁶ Ibid, 188.
- ⁷ Ibid, 187.
- ⁸ "Saints and Martyrs", *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 11, 53.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid, 54.
- ¹³ Ibid, 55.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 56.
- ¹⁵ D.H.Lawrence, "The Resurrection of the Body", in Ellmann Richard and Charles, Jr. eds, *The Modern Traditions: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, New York, OUP, 1965, 919.
- ¹⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, London, SCM Press, 1974, 204, 205.

CHAPTER IV

RECEPTION

This chapter goes into the details of the response generated by the works used in this thesis, within their various socio-cultural dynamics. The general reaction to three such works will be used as case studies to examine how works featuring Christ tend to become debatable at times. The focus of attention would be not on critical reviews regarding the literary merit of the texts, but instead on the controversy these gave rise to. The chapter will attempt to provide a descriptive re-creation of the controversies in chronological order. It will look at the factors cited as being responsible for making these works disputable, the authors' response to these, and the eventual outcome of the altercations. It must be mentioned here that not all works chosen for this study have become controversial, at least not in a very public manner, while some have been more contentious than the others. There have also been instances when the polemics surrounding some works have been exaggerated to a large extent. We will begin with Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, which, among the works studied here, is the most recent casualty of the controversy surrounding works of art featuring Jesus Christ. Saramago's novel initially ran into trouble with his country's administration:

The Portuguese government lambasted his 1991 novel *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* (*The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*) and struck the writer's name from nominees for the European Literature Prize, saying the atheist work offended Portuguese Catholic convictions.¹

Although the book was later allowed to enter the contest, Saramago was disturbed by what happened; he left Portugal to settle in Canary Islands in Spain. The controversy surrounding *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* later came to the forefront when Saramago won the Nobel Prize for literature. Saramago had won this coveted award in 1998, and in the midst of accolades from the Portuguese President, Jorge Sampaio and the Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano* argued that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* was the "testimony of a substantial anti-religious sentiment."² The newspaper reported that Saramago was an agnostic who had remained "ideologically an unreconstructed communist"³ and that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* displayed his "largely anti-religious vision."⁴ It further went on to say that the selection of Saramago as a Nobel laureate, showed that it was "yet another ideologically slanted award."⁵ Saramago retorted back by saying, "...if the Pope were on the jury they wouldn't have given me anything... The Vatican is easily scandalized, especially by people from outside. They should just focus on their prayers and leave people in peace."⁶ The Swedish Academy too reasoned that Saramago was chosen because his works, "sustained by imagination, compassion and irony, continually enables us to apprehend an elusive reality... He invokes tradition in a way that in the current state of things can be described as radical."⁷ Nevertheless, the fact remains that the establishment in Vatican totally disapproved of Saramago winning this prestigious award.

Something similar, on a much larger scale, happened in the United States of America when Martin Scorsese made a movie based on the life of Christ. *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a film where we find the divinity of Jesus Christ, the most

important cultural icon of the West, being repudiated. To understand the film and more importantly, why Christ is being picturised in this particular manner, it becomes vital for the cultural background of the film to be taken into consideration. As the making of the film has already been looked into, it suffices to say here that the period in which this film was made, the 1980s, was when Ronald Reagan took over the presidency of the United States of America, and when America was involved in military and intelligence operations in various parts of the world like Libya, West Asia, Central and South America, etc. Reagan's presidency also brought back memories of the Cold War. According to Richard Sterne in *Savior on the Silver Screen*:

Reagan's rhetoric positioned America and its (covert) allies in Nicaragua as the "freedom fighters" against a government funded by the "evil empire" of the USSR. At the same time he was condemning the USSR, however, Reagan created an image of stability, even a grandfatherly figure of reassurance. A master of media manipulation, Reagan carved out a national space on nostalgia and a sense of superiority.⁸

Keeping in tune with this political scenario, Hollywood movies of the period began to portray the concept of evil as something that was not within but outside of the American society. Films like *Rambo II*, *Rocky IV*, *Red Dawn* and *Die Hard* are examples. Such a clear cut positioning of the good and the bad came about because the 1980s was seen as a period where the national pride, lost amidst the "defeat in South-east Asia and the shame of Watergate, and further burdened with a growing fear of the rise in terrorism"⁹, had to be restored:

The cycle of Vietnam War movies exhibited throughout the decade of the 1980s enabled the country to establish a fictitious, utopic space of victory, usually based on the dynamics of 'loss and recovery'. It is easy to see that the legacy of Vietnam in the 1980s—now restored into a vigilante motif

and an excuse for racism—would function well under the hegemony and rhetoric of nationalism and anti-terrorism.¹⁰

In a sense, it could be argued that "the failure of Vietnam and Watergate, created a decade of Rambos, vengeful and invincible."¹¹ Martin Scorsese, who came from the New York University's film school, belonged to a generation of directors who "acknowledged the classical industry conventions, but...revitalized and transformed generic conventions into something new."¹² Several movies on the life of Christ like *King of Kings* (1961), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1965), etc presented a Jesus who was very much like the Jesus in the Bible, well aware of all that he had to say and do. Scorsese understood these films as those that "typically placed Jesus as the center of knowledge in the story."¹³ He felt that such films failed to present Jesus as a vulnerable being, which would then highlight his humanness. We may argue that Scorsese's film became controversial because he explores the various facets of vulnerability present within his Christ character. And through this, he confronts the American "collective, cultural memory"¹⁴ of what Jesus is, "a deeply held community identity that has gathered itself around the image of Jesus"¹⁵ as opposed to the movies of the period that tried to "reassure the audience of its collective imagination."¹⁶

Without doubt, the most controversial among all works studied for this thesis, is Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The controversy in general, centred around the treatment of the Christ-character as being a man whose humanity overshadows his divinity. To put it more specifically, it was a scene towards the end of the film that shows Jesus as having sex with Magdalene that led to the film being branded

as an outright blasphemous movie. The *Time* magazine reported the issues that caused unease to a lot of people:

Fundamentalists are upset by scenes in which Christ (Willem Dafoe) is shown as tormented and self-accusatory ("I lied, I am afraid. Lucifer is inside me") and in which he persuades Judas (Harvey Keitel) to betray him because it is God's plan. But what has them fuming is a portion of a final dream sequence—meant to be Christ's hallucination while on the cross—in which Jesus is shown briefly engaged in sexual relations with Mary Magdalene, played by Barbara Hershey.¹⁷

This scene comes towards the end of the film and it may be seen as symbolizing the natural urge of Christ to live life as someone who wants to get along in the world as an ordinary individual, but has been forced to become the Messiah. It is the conflicting polar modalities that arise within him as some one who wants to live life in his own way, but is not allowed to, that Scorsese attempts to emphasize in this film. But a section of the American society opposed this attempt and criticized its producers and director.

Martin Scorsese let us note, was raised a catholic and identified himself as a believer. In fact one of his ambitions was to become a priest. According to Atlanasio:

At one point in his life, Scorsese wanted to be a priest; he was, however, expelled from the preparatory seminary. "I was doing good, then I was 13 or 14, I realized there were women, girls, y'know, and I started to get fascinated by that. You simply couldn't concentrate. And the idea of celibacy was very hard."...Although Scorsese got thrown out of the seminary, he never quite gave up on the idea of being a priest. While he was at NYU, he toyed with going back to it, toyed with being a filmmaker and a priest.¹⁸

Scorsese narrates his reasons for making *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In 1972, he was given a copy of Kazantzakis' book by Barbara Hershey, the actress who plays Magdalene in his movie. The book, especially the author's approach "that the human part of Jesus would have trouble accepting the divine", fascinated him.¹⁹ So much so that he decided to adopt it to celluloid. He finds it difficult to comprehend why such a hue and cry should be made about depicting the human side of Jesus:

Scorsese claims he had learned "from a priest friend that the Kazantzakis book is used in seminaries, not as a substitute for the Gospels, but as a parable that is fresh and alive, which they can discuss and argue about. And this is what I hoped the film would do." Scorsese was raised a Catholic and at one point wanted to be a priest... "I believe that Jesus is fully divine," he has declared, "but the teaching at Catholic schools placed such an emphasis on the divine side that if Jesus walked into a room, you'd know he was God because he glowed in the dark," instead of being someone "you could sit down with, have dinner or a drink with."²⁰ Scorsese succinctly puts it this way about what he wouldn't do: "I didn't want a Christ who glowed in the dark."²¹

Scorsese argues that the film is an expression of his faith. At times though, it may appear that Scorsese himself is in a dilemma so as to whether his Christ is God or man because though he says that he's interested in the humanity of Christ, he is in agreement with the majority of Christians when he proclaims that, "He's God. He's not deluded. I think Kazantzakis thought that, I think the movie says that, and I know that I believe that..."²²

I believe, what Scorsese attempts in his film is to define a Christ who's God but human enough to be recognized as one of us. He's treading a very fine line here because human beings are susceptible to sin and Christians find it difficult to accept Christ as

someone who sins. But the protests and the negative propaganda campaign against this film seem to show that Scorsese and his film were more sinned against than sinning.

The protests against this film gathered pace even before the cameras started rolling. And even at this stage they were powerful enough to make one studio house abandon Scorsese and his project mid way through. "Paramount had planned to produce it in 1983 but backed away, fearing pressure from Fundamentalists."²³ The protests at this initial stage were in the form of a letter writing campaign: "The campaign was initiated by The National Federation of Decency under the leadership of the Rev. Donald Wildmon, based in Tupelo, Mississippi."²⁴ And this campaign was successful.

In 1987, Scorsese managed to get Universal Pictures to fund his project, but the budget for the film was reduced from \$12 million to \$6 million and there were changes in the cast. Though Aidan Quinn was supposed to play Jesus, the role eventually went to Willem Dafoe, whom viewers will recognize as the super-villain Green Goblin in the recent blockbuster *Spiderman* (2002). The film was set to hit theatres across USA in September 1988, but the protests simply grew. Universal seemed to have learnt from Paramount's experience and took a few steps, which they felt would counter the hostile campaign against the film. One of these was to hire a born-again marketing expert called Tim Penland, "a consultant who had experience promoting films to the evangelical Christian market"²⁵, so as to use his religious tag to appease conservatives. But this move back fired when "Penland resigned in June, charging that Universal had reneged on a

promise to let conservative religious leaders see the film and comment on it well in advance of its release."²⁶

Nevertheless, Universal Pictures did not take the protests lying down. They advanced the releasing date by a month and justified this move by saying that it's important for people to actually see the film, so that it would "allow them to draw their own conclusions, based on fact, not fallacy."²⁷ The protests however only increased:

Jerry Falwell, the founder of the by-then disbanded Moral Majority called for boycotts of all theatres showing the film and all products of MCA, Universal's parent company. Bill Bright, leader of Campus Crusade for Christ reportedly offered to raise ten million dollars to reimburse Universal if the studio would render unto him for destruction all copies of the Scorsese film.²⁸

Advertisements were also placed in newspapers criticizing the film. The producers too retaliated in like manner: "Universal responded with lofty, full-page newspaper ads in four cities, quoting Thomas Jefferson and announcing that the constitutional rights to free expression and freedom of religion were not for sale."²⁹ At times, the protests also become anti-Jewish in tone:

The Rev. R.L. Hymers Jr., a Christian extremist in the Los Angeles area, staged a demonstration near the Beverly Hills home of MCA Chairman Wasserman, who is Jewish. An actor portraying Wasserman stepped repeatedly on the bloody back of an actor dressed as Jesus and carrying a heavy cross. An airplane meanwhile flew overhead trailing a banner that read, WASSERMAN FANS JEW-HATRED W/TEMPTATION, and a crowd chanted, "Bankrolled by Jewish money."³⁰

A group called Morality in Media was "particularly incensed by Jesus' anguished comment, 'I am a liar, I am a hypocrite. I am afraid of everything . . . Lucifer is inside

me."³¹ It's Director Joseph Reilly felt that *The Last Temptation of Christ* "is an intentional attack on Christianity."³² The protests also took different forms. For example a Methodist Minister sent out "2.5 million mailings protesting the film and scheduled anti-Temptation spots on 700 Christian radio stations and 50 to 75 TV stations."³³ The film was also criticized by Franco Zefferelli, the director of *Jesus of Nazareth*, a movie based on the life of Christ released in 1977. According to Zefferelli, "Scorcese's film is damaging to the image of Christ. He cannot be made the object of low fantasies."³⁴

However, there were voices that spoke in favour of *The Last Temptation of Christ* and some of these were from the religious fraternity. The *U.S. Catholic* of December 1988 had an article titled 'Thank You Martin Scorcese' by Father Henry Fehren where he appreciates Scorcese for "daring to portray Jesus as one who was tempted and for reintroducing the notions of temptation and sin for discussion in the church."³⁵ But then such voices were drowned by the din and fury created by those speaking against the film. Scorcese himself was quite irritated by these protests, because he felt that "Ninety-nine percent of the people who are complaining have not seen the picture."³⁶

Yet, the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Catholic Conference gave the film an 'O' rating which meant that it was a 'morally offensive' film.³⁷ Though there does not seem to have been an official ban on this film, the protesters did not completely fail in their mission. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released on August 12th, 1988 in select cities like New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, etc:

The protests and the continued calls for boycott reduced the number of theatres in which the film was screened nationwide and possibly made the film a box-office loser, at least according to leaders of the boycott. Even when the film was released in video format the next summer, there were video chains and local stores that refused to stock it.³⁸

Therefore it is evident that all the negative hype surrounding this film did have an impact, but then this was severe when *The Last Temptation of Christ* traveled to other countries like Chile and Russia. According to the Religious Affairs Reporter of BBC News, "Condemned by the pope, censored in South Africa. Israel and Chile, the film by Hollywood director Martin Scorsese has been the focus of often violent protests from Christian groups across the world."³⁹

So we see that the film became controversial in a lot of other places too: "Scorsese's movie generated a record 1,554 complaints to the UK regulator, the Independent Television Commission, when it was shown on Channel 4 in June 1995."⁴⁰ The film was banned in Chile during the dictatorial rule of General Augusto Pinochet. In fact, lawyers argued at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica to lift the ban on this film. According to one of the lawyers, Alex Munoz, "The film has been transformed into an emblem for the fight for freedom of expression, particularly artistic freedom to create..."⁴¹

In Russia, the popular television channel NTV "twice cancelled scheduled broadcasts of the film under pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and some parliamentary deputies."⁴² But on the third occasion, the channel decided to go ahead with the screening and this move received condemnation from the Russian Orthodox Church. BBC News reported:

Patriarch Aleksey II and the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church appealed to managers of the NTV independent television company to cancel the showing of Martin Scorsese's notorious *The Last Temptation of Christ*, scheduled for 9th November, (as they felt that) this heretical film profoundly insults the religious feeling of Orthodox Christians.⁴³

It's important to mention that NTV's decision to screen the film was criticized not just by the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by the Roman Catholics, the communists and Muslim groups.⁴⁴ All these make obvious that Martin Scorsese's movie raised a storm not just in the United States of America, but also in other countries.

Scorsese, recently in the news for being nominated the Oscar for his film *Gangs of New York* (2002), feels that he does not really stray much from the Bible as far as his Christ character is concerned. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, according to Scorsese:

Kazantzakis' Jesus is both human and divine, in accordance with Christian teaching. What interested Scorsese in the author's approach was that the human part of Jesus would have trouble accepting the divine.⁴⁵

However it is obvious that a section of the Christian society did not want a Christ-character who would have problems with his divine calling. The scene where Jesus has sex with Magdalene, employed by Kazantzakis and in effect by Scorsese to further emphasize his humanness was however used by the protesters as an amplification of their remonstrations. But at times, works of art featuring Christ became controversial, even if Christ's sexuality was not directly addressed. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* is an example in this regard. In fact, this text had become controversial for a variety of reasons.

It was condemned for being a "blasphemous hippie version" of Christ's life and also for the "flesh flashed by Christ's dancing followers."⁴⁶ The probability that Magdalene could have harboured thoughts of a non-platonic relationship with Christ was also not appreciated by Christian activists, who picketed the Broadway show for giving the Gospel a 'rock-pop music' treatment.⁴⁷ Jewish groups also joined the protests claiming that the "nasty portrayal of Jerusalem's high priests (in the film) would encourage anti-Semitism, while (Christian leaders like) Rev. Billy Graham decried the show's conception of Jesus as a mortal with delusions of divinity."⁴⁸ The unbiblical lyrics in the film like, "One thing I'll say for him, this Jesus is cool" sung by Caiaphas and Herod telling Jesus, "Prove to me that you're no fool/Walk across my swimming pool," were also criticized.⁴⁹ Ted Neeley, the actor who plays Jesus recalls the controversy:

Jesus Christ, Superstar triggered outrage, attempted bans and picketing both in New York and on the road. Part of that emanated from the rock-music treatment, part of it because the premise of this show is taking Jesus down off the stained-glass window and putting him in the streets where he was, adding the humanity element to Jesus that is not in the Bible... Everybody thought it was the ultimate blasphemy... We had to fight our way through picket lines every night just to get into the theater to go to work. We didn't think we could have opening night.⁵⁰ They said we were going to destroy the religious fiber of the community, and demanded that we not perform⁵¹ It was as if every religious group in the community was afraid we were going to destroy their religion. And the community was New York.⁵²

In short, the controversy seems to have risen mainly because of the depiction of a very human Christ. But the director of the film, Norman Jewison meant no disrespect to anyone. He felt that the musical was, "reverent and cynical at the same time."⁵³ Neeley offers more explanations:

The stress is on the humanity of Jesus, not his sanctity... In that way, it's different from the stage version. To me, Jesus was a great, charismatic leader, theologian and thinker, but not God. He was a man who got beyond himself and went too far.⁵⁴ No one ever talked about Jesus as a man—the human side—and that's what this [musical] does...⁵⁵

But if it was for the depiction of a human Christ that the creators of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* got brickbats, then more than 20 years later, it was for the same reason that they began to receive accolades. All the controversy generated earlier seemed to have worn off. According to Neeley, their musical has become highly popular:

It's considered wholesome family entertainment now, a rock-spectacle-with-a-message that enraptures audiences wherever it plays. We started out last year doing what was supposed to be a three-month tour...But everywhere we go, we're so successful we're invited back... Now I feel I'm the most fortunate person alive to be given this opportunity again.⁵⁶

It's a different matter that Neeley initially did not want to play the role of Jesus. He wanted to be Judas, as he felt that since Judas was a relatively unknown character, he could outline the contours of the role according to his own imagination:

I felt that, from the point of view of the acting premise, it would be great to create the character that nobody knew anything about, other than he had done allegedly the most dastardly deed of all time. I thought that I had free rein to create a human being that would be driven to do something like that. I didn't want to play Jesus because I felt—that everybody in the world knew exactly who he was.⁵⁷

But the role that Neeley coveted ultimately went to Carl Anderson, an African-American actor. As a matter of fact, getting the roles that they eventually played was no cakewalk either for Neeley or for Anderson, as neither was the first choice for the roles. Anderson clearly remembers director Jewison's words in this regard, "I got my Jesus and got my

Judas," he told them. "I don't want to deal with a black Judas, and I don't want to deal with recasting."⁵⁸ But both Neeley and Anderson performed exceptionally well in the screen test that Jewison had to give them the roles. Anderson went on to play the role of Judas in so many productions that he began to get tired of it:

I' hated this piece. I hated doing it, because I wanted to do the next thing... I had not a clue, didn't appreciate it. Now I understand it... Opening night, I said to Ted: I just want to thank God for the opportunity to redo this thing under these circumstances with the person that I should have done it with all the time... It's just that God wrote this part for me. Andrew Lloyd Webber was a willing pawn. Nobody else can do this.⁵⁹

This was after they had started doing a lot of shows together across America. The influence of Christ (or the lack of it), in the early lives of both Anderson and Neeley, helped them in dealing with the characters they played. Both of them had a religious upbringing, though this didn't mean that they themselves were very religious. Anderson in fact, was a rebel:

My father was a strict religious guy, which is why I ran away—in the revolutionary sense—from Lynchburg, Va., to Washington when I was 20. It was the only place I knew that had nightclubs open on Tuesday night.⁶⁰

Neeley feels that his religious upbringing helped him in carrying off the role of Jesus well:

On Sundays we'd go to Sunday school, attend a church service, then a church social and go back to church at night for a prayer meeting... Religion was part of life. It was there. It still is. (The character of Jesus) is so deeply set in my mind and spirit that I can go into the theater, put on the wardrobe, walk onstage and just do it⁶¹...I was born and raised Southern Baptist, and to an extent I guess I still am. I haven't been to church in years except for weddings and funerals or when I am invited to speak to a

congregation. Isn't that wild? I guess I believe that God in whatever form is in us. In that sense I guess I am religious.⁶²

He also feels that the role itself deepened his understanding of Jesus: "I try to play Jesus with such inner strength that would garner the respect of those around him."⁶³

The humanity of Christ seems to have been better received in the 1990s with Neeley even getting invited to churches to speak about his role and about the show:

In retrospect, we see that 90 percent of the groups that protested that opening back in 1971 are using the CD and the film as a teaching tool because they found this concept helps children learn about Jesus much easier because of the kinetics of the music... It's been an amazing turn of events... It's very satisfying to be so appreciated for something we were damned for 25 years ago... Now we're canonized every night on stage. That's why I've been with it so long, because it's been so rewarding.⁶⁴

So we see that *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, that was strongly protested against when it was released for its unbiblical portrayal of Christ by giving weight to his humanity, hit it off well second time around, and this time not as a film but as a musical show performed all over America; so much so that it has influenced viewers in a religious manner too. The words of Ted Neeley are quite noteworthy in this regard:

There are thousands and thousands of people in America and Canada who have become Christians because they went and saw this movie or this stage show... Yes, it's a musical, and yet there are people all over the world who think of it as a ministry.⁶⁵

In fact Neeley seems to have been elevated almost to the status that the biblical Christ enjoys. He feels that a lot of people link him with the Christ of their perception:

Everybody who sees this show comes into the theater with their own interpretation of Jesus... They project that up on the stage and onto me. Because of that, I do everything I can physically, spiritually, bodily, mentally, emotionally, to project what I feel is the true biblical essence of the character. They are in essence using me as a palette, upon which they're painting their opinion of who Jesus might be.⁶⁶

Several sincerely consider *Jesus Christ, Superstar* not as a film or a stage show, but a divine plan for Neeley to spread the Gospel. They take his role in the film far too seriously than he himself would like to take it. He says:

There are people who love the film, who look at it as literally a video Bible. They find a spirituality in it, a sort of salvation they can't find in scriptures or church... Then there are people who see the live show and forget that I'm a person playing a role. I've had people come up to me after the show and say, 'I loved your performance, but you really shouldn't be drinking that beer.'⁶⁷

But Neeley is very sure about his identity, which he makes crystal clear:

I don't believe I'm the character. I'm not opening the Church of Ted all across the country! That's a joke.⁶⁸ I play Jesus in the show... I'm a rock n' roll drummer from Texas. I'm a father, I'm a husband... I'm a human being.⁶⁹

Neeley reckons he's one of the most hugged men in North America. But he's worried about fans' adoration when they say that they see his face when they pray. But he tries to see the practical side of these responses:

When people come up to me and say 'You are in fact the true embodiment of Jesus Christ in this lifetime,' then that's endorsing our work as a group of performers,⁷⁰ Most of the people in the audience have seen the film or heard the music or seen the show on tour before... They bring such positive energy into the building, and they sit there and focus that energy onto the stage. I walk out on that stage every night surrounded by the most

positive energy I've ever felt in my life. Quite frankly, I just float around the stage every single night.⁷¹

All these responses seem to show how much Ted Neeley has influenced viewers in a spiritual sort of way, as the Jesus in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. So much so that he has a group of fans who call themselves 'Tedheads.'⁷²

It's important at this stage to look at the history of this phenomenon and how it developed through the years. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* has had so many incarnations. It was composed as an album by the British musician Andrew Lloyd Webber, and written by Tim Rice. Webber and Rice had actually wanted to release their creation as a stage musical. But financial constraints forced them to release it as an album. Money, however, never became a problem for them after this:

By February 1971, *Superstar* had hit the top position in all three major trade magazines (Billboard, Record World and Cashbox) and made music history by returning to the number one spot in all three magazines twice. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was a huge success in 1971. The album was the year's top-selling LP, with more than 2 million albums sold.⁷⁴

It premiered in Broadway in October, 1971 and became an instant hit:

It was the first Broadway show to have a \$1 million budget and more than \$1 million advance ticket sales. The original Broadway production ran for more than 700 performances and followed with a sold-out national tour.⁷⁵

It was made into a film in 1973, directed by Norman Jewison at various locations in Israel at a budget of \$3.5 million. "*Superstar* grossed over twenty million dollars and earned an Oscar nomination for Andre Previn's musical direction."⁷⁶ Ted Neeley and

Carl Anderson got two Golden Globe awards each for their portrayals of Jesus and Judas respectively in the film—one for best actor and another for best newcomer; Yvonne Elliman also won a Golden Globe award for best actress for her role as Mary Magdalene⁷⁷. However, it was not the film but the road show based on it, staged almost twenty years later, that really saw adulations pouring in. The stage show in 1992 was in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the film. The first show in December was in Baltimore and subsequently there were to be performances in other places for the next three months. But the show was so successful that it was staged continually for almost five years across the length and breadth of America. Such was the success of the show. But then *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was controversial when it was initially released.

An over emphasis on the humanness of Jesus Christ seems to be the cause that ignites controversy as far as the reception of the three works analysed in this chapter is concerned. But it becomes difficult to conclude so in very general terms, especially when one takes a look at Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*. In fact this book forces one to think that controversies hardly follow a set pattern. Incidentally, *Live from Golgotha* did not really spark off any major controversy. In fact coming three years after *The Last Temptation of Christ*, there have been no calls by religious groups to boycott or ban this book. An article titled, "Gore Vidal Spoofs History of Christianity" mentions that "there has been no reaction at all (to speak of) to this new Vidal book, which is far more truly 'blasphemous'" than *The Last Temptation of Christ*.⁷⁸ The reviewer discusses this novel as a satire: "The effect of this new Vidal satire is that of all great satirists: It will delight

those who like to see religion skewered, and it will infuriate those who take religion seriously."⁷⁹

Vidal here mocks at the historical Christ by making him a Zionist 'first and last' who's only interested in the establishment of a Jewish nation, which is why he escapes crucifixion by accusing Judas of being the Messiah. But more than Christ, it is other prominent Christian historical figures like Paul and Timothy who become the butt of Vidal's ridicule. Vidal does not explore the complexities of his Christ-character, leave alone mention anything about his sexuality. Perhaps this could be the reason why there was not much of a furor regarding this book, despite the fact that Paul is described as a homosexual and Timothy as his young lover.

By and large, the above-mentioned works are those that brewed controversies. There were protests against these works and also calls to ban these, which were successful at times. It may be observed here that visual forms of fictional characterizations of Christ have become more controversial than purely textual ones. The protests against these have also become thunderous on occasions. This is because visual forms of art like cinema, drama, stage performances, musicals, etc appeal and cater to a larger audience, than a novel or a story would. Perhaps this is why Vidal's novel and others like *King Jesus* and *The Man Who Died* did not attract much attention towards their unbiblical depiction of Christ. But it's difficult to generalize controversies as following a set pattern. There are deviants here too. For example, it's interesting to note that a work like *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, which was decried for its so-called blasphemous content, became extremely popular more than twenty years later. It is also interesting to

note that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* became controversial and attracted negative attention when it was initially entered for a European Literature contest and later when Saramago won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998. All this urges one to be inclined to think whether protests and remonstrations against works that stray from the biblical illustration of Christ's life are knee-jerk reactions or whether there are larger political issues at play here!

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CONCLUSION

"Twentieth Century Fictional Characterizations of Christ Across Cultures" is an attempt to examine and understand how Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity is portrayed in European and American literary and cinematic modes of expression in the twentieth century. This attempt is primarily done by focusing on the differences between the Christ of the Bible and the Christ found in books and movies taken for study here. A theme oriented study, based on those like the nativity of Christ, his sexuality and martyrdom was done so as to highlight the above-mentioned differences. This was done because though the story of Christ found in the texts is quite different from the canonically approved life of Christ as found in the Gospels, major differences in the characterization of Christ are highlighted mainly through themes like sexuality and martyrdom and also through portrayals of differing versions of the birth and early life of Christ.

It's important at this concluding stage, to look at why the various writers/directors try to create a Christ who's so different from the one we see in the Bible. It has already been mentioned in the chapters that what the various authors are trying to do is to converge on the human side of Christ, an aspect which though mentioned in the Bible, is not really given much importance. And while not all the authors concentrate on the all the three themes to emphasize Christ's humanness, they use at least one of the themes identified to do so. This can be seen in the very first chapter where of all the authors, only Jose Saramago and Robert Graves focus on the birth and early life of Christ. Both of

them, of course, offer different accounts of the birth and early life of Christ, essentially as a preface to their illustration of a human Christ. In neither of these works is Jesus the Son of God. If Jesus is the son of Joseph in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, in *King Jesus* he is the son of Antipater. And though he eventually becomes the Messiah, he is not sketched as a divine one. So the first chapter titled, 'A New Beginning' describes the birth and early life of Christ as a stepping-stone used by the authors to zoom in on the human traits of Christ. In fact this gets further intensified when Christ's sexuality is touched upon. Now there is no mention of the sexuality of Christ as far as the Bible is concerned. But this is a theme that is found in most of the works taken for study here. While some of the authors like Robert Graves and Norman Jewison touch upon this theme superficially, others like Jose Saramago, D.H.Lawrence and Martin Scorsese explore it in detail. The second chapter of the thesis dwells at length on how this theme is given importance to and highlighted. This theme is introduced by bringing in a woman character with whom Christ develops a certain level of and at times deep physical intimacy. While in most of the works this character is Mary Magdalene, in D.H.Lawrence's story, it is the priestess of Isis. Since Magdalene is a character found in the Gospels, the biblical depiction of this character is also looked into as this helps us to understand how Mary Magdalene's character has been recreated in the works studied here, so as to project the sexuality of Christ. But the fact that the sexuality of Christ is not at all addressed in the Bible, and that celibacy is given a lot of importance in Christianity may be seen as reasons why fictional representations of Christ that focus on this theme to project his humanness become controversial, so much so that other issues explored in the texts get sidelined.

The martyrdom of Christ is one such issue that often gets overshadowed. This theme is found in all the texts used in this study. In all these texts, Christ is an unwilling martyr. Not even one of the authors describes his Christ as accepting martyrdom wholeheartedly. The Christ character often has some reason to decline from martyrdom. But then to project the human side of Christ, it is imperative to depict him as an unwilling martyr. And it is for the same reason that the resurrection of Christ does not find a mention in any of the works except *King Jesus* and *The Man Who Died*. In fact Lawrence's story is based on the resurrected Christ. But even here we find a Christ who deplores the fact that he had to die and rise again.

The first three chapters therefore show how various authors bring to life a new Christ figure; how they de-create as well as recreate the biblical Christ by concentrating primarily on his humanness. The fourth chapter, 'Reception' looks at how such fictional interpretations of Christ are viewed in different socio-cultural spheres. The focus of attention in this chapter is mainly three works that became highly controversial due to their differing presentation of the Christ-story. These are Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. While all three works focused on the humanness of Christ, it was, as mentioned before, the authors' use of the theme of sexuality to project this humanness that became scandalous. And since these controversies were generated in different places like Portugal and the United States of America and also in far fetched places like Chile and Russia, one may be inclined to think that different cultures seem to

react in like fashion as far as the reception towards fictional characterizations of Christ is concerned, especially when sexuality is used as a tool to outline Christ's humanness.

Though it has already been mentioned earlier that authors attempt to create a different Christ from the one found in the Bible so as to focus on his humanness, it becomes imperative at this point to look at why different authors, especially those whose Christ characters become controversial, are inclined towards the depiction of a human Christ. To a very large extent, different authors' Christ-figures are built upon their respective views on Christianity. For example, D.H. Lawrence felt that Christianity or for that matter established religion "denied man's creative urge by fencing him within a framework of mental requirements."¹ According to Poole and Shepherd:

Lawrence's Jesus is different from the Jesus of revealed religion ... We find Lawrence admiring Christianity but crying that it has outlived its time. Lawrence respected Jesus, but he wanted to resurrect him to a new completion... Lawrence regarded as petty the idea that resurrection was a matter of morality, sin and salvation... In *The Man Who Died*, he denies the need for renunciation of desires, maintaining instead that Christianity should be based on the fulfillment of desire... Christianity had sought to impose a love mode instead of allowing the growth of love in natural man... The idea of 'conflict' is embedded in Lawrence, and particularly that of 'spirit' and 'flesh'.²

Lawrence feels that the 'fleshly' or more natural aspects of human beings are not given any importance in Christianity. These are often viewed in a negative manner and equated with sin. Lawrence, I believe, views the flesh not as something that is outside the spirit, but something that is well and truly within the spirit, and that this flesh should not be restricted by the spirit, but instead allowed to grow in a very natural and human fashion.

This is why Poole and Shepherd state that Lawrence wanted Christianity as a religion, to give importance to 'the fulfillment of desires':

For Christianity, the life of the flesh receives its sanction and purpose from a life of the spirit which is eternal and transcendent. For Lawrence, the life of the spirit has its justification in enriching and glorifying the life of the flesh of which it is in any case an epiphenomenon.³

Lawrence further discusses this in his essay on the 'Grand Inquisitor' from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*⁴. He emphasizes here his views on the Inquisitor's opinion about Jesus as being inadequate. Lawrence argues that the Inquisitor's opinion is Dostoevsky's own and states that:

The inadequacy of Jesus lies in the fact that Christianity is too difficult for men, the vast mass of men. It could only be realized by the few "saints" or heroes... The thing Jesus was trying to do was to supplant physical emotion by moral emotion... Christianity then is the ideal, but it is impossible. It is impossible because it makes demands greater than the nature of man can bear.⁵

These perceptions of Lawrence's, qualify him as a religious non-conformist and he truly identifies himself so.⁶ And this is very evident in the following passage where he describes certain Christian symbols and terminology:

When the evangelical says: Behold the lamb of God!—what on earth does he want one to behold? Are we invited to look at a lamb with woolly, muttoney appearance, frisking and making its little pills? Awfully nice, but what has it got to do with God or my soul? Or the cross? What do they expect us to see in the cross? A sort of gallows! Or the mark we used to cancel a mistake?—cross it out! That the cross by itself was supposed to mean something always mystified me. The same with the Blood of the Lamb—washed in the Blood of the Lamb! Always seemed to me an extremely unpleasant suggestion. And when Jerome says: He who has once washed in the blood of Jesus need never wash again!—I feel like taking a bath at once, to wash off even the suggestion.⁷

The above passage clearly shows that Lawrence regarded Christianity not just in a non-conformist manner, but also in a cynical mode. Once we understand how Lawrence viewed Christianity as a religion, it comes as no surprise that his Christ-character is only a representation of these very viewpoints. Christ here regrets that he ever denounced worldly pleasures. And after resurrection, he condemns the teachings and principles that he had once advocated, which were later to become the pillars of Christianity, and walks the ordinary path of 'everyman'. Therefore Lawrence's depiction of Christ in *The Man Who Died* may be seen as his attempt to present a renewed Christianity, which he feels, should give more importance to the flesh than the spirit.

Another writer whose Christ character is synonymous with his stance on Christianity is Robert Graves. In fact, the Christ-character in *King Jesus* seems to be attacking the institution that is following his words of baptizing and evangelizing today, when he says to the Essene monks:

You flee from the world, yet no solemnly sworn vows of purity will preserve a timid man from sin; neither will the locked gate to this compound, nor the earth work about it, nor the thorn hedge that tops the earthwork, nor your prophylactic girdles of calfskin, nor the thousand and one jealous rules of this Order, serve to keep out God's adversary when you spread so rich a table of temptation to entice him." [KJ.217]

This seems to be Graves' main reason for depicting a Christ so different from the one found in the Bible—to criticize and attack the institution founded in his name! Graves gets into the roots of ancient Christianity through his narrator in the novel who propounds that the founders of the Gentile Churches completely misunderstood not only Jesus as a person but also his teachings:

...the founders of the Gentile Churches so strangely misunderstood his mission that they have made him the central figure of a new cult which, were he alive now, he could regard only with detestation and horror. They present him as a Jew of doubtful parentage, a renegade who abrogated the Mosaic Law and, throwing in his lot with the Greek Gnostics, pretended to be a sort of Apollonian divinity, and this too on credentials which must be accepted on blind faith—I suppose because no reasonable person could possibly accept them otherwise. [KJ.283-284]

Graves' narrator also quotes several examples to show how the ancient Church misinterpreted Jesus' teachings. He argues that the incident in the Bible, where Jesus saves the life of a prostitute about to be stoned, by telling the mob, 'Let he who is without sin be the first one to stone her,' is actually forged. It seems that all an adulteress had to do to escape punishment was to feign ignorance of the Law before the Pharisaic High Court:

Where adultery was only suspected, not proved, she was given 'bitter water' to drink in proof of her innocence; then if she died she was proved guilty, but since the bitter water was merely a strong purge, she was invariably proved innocent. [KJ.286]

Similarly, Jesus' parable where a man who is ignored by both a priest and a Levite, after being attacked and left for dead by thieves, but is finally nursed back to health by a Samaritan (whom the Jews consider as outcastes) is yet another example of forgery:

... the text has been amended to emphasise the Gentile Chrestians' dislike of the Pharisees and of the Jews generally. The occasion of the story is presented as a dispute between Jesus and a Pharisee while in the story itself the nationality of the victim is not mentioned and the kindly God-fearing Israelite is no longer an Israelite but a Samaritan. [KJ.287]

Graves feels that Jesus other than being a king was also a prophet, but not God, as the Church teaches:

Many of his prophetic utterances have been willfully misunderstood by the Gentile Christians. The prophet, as the word implies, regarded himself as the mouthpiece of Jehovah: what he spoke under prophetic influence was not his own utterance, but Jehovah's... When Jesus is reported to have said: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life, or 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,' he must be understood as speaking in Jehovah's name and the prefatory word must be restored to the text. Any other interpretation is historically unthinkable. His usual preface was the twice-repeated Hebrew word Amen, which literally means 'He was firm,' and which he used in the sense of 'Jehovah has firmly declared.' The Gentile Christians, wishing to exalt Jesus into a God, translate the irksome Amen nearly as 'Verily' and often omit it altogether. [KJ.289]

Graves seems to be implying that the early Christians tried to equate Jesus with Jehovah in the belief that Judaism itself was a monotheistic faith. To negate this, Graves' narrator attempts to depict that Judaism had pagan origins. In his introduction itself, the narrator states that the Jews as a nation, suffered a lot because of their refusal to pay homage to the Great Goddess, the supreme one in Palestine, the land they occupied. "Indeed, that the Jews are at the present day perhaps the most miserable of all civilized nations—scattered, homeless, suspect—is ascribed by the superstitious to the Goddess's ineluctable vengeance." [KJ.4] He argues that the Jews did not have a monotheistic religious tradition even during Abraham's time. They had priestesses who interpreted utterances using Abraham's oracular jawbone. To further emphasize the pagan descent of the Jews, Graves' uses one of his characters, Herod, as trying to bring back pagan customs and practices.

Herod was sick and tired of the rigid Jewish customs and rules. He favoured a return to the worship of the Great Goddess, which was more lax and non-rigorous. He made a big attempt to initiate this. He impersonated himself as the Power and entered the sanctum sanctorum of the Temple, when Zacharias, the priest, who was later to become

the father of John the Baptist, was offering incense at the altar. Zacharias was frightened when he heard his name being addressed. He really thought it was God speaking to him. He fainted and when he came around, found himself looking straight at Jehovah. "O horror! The head was that of a wild-ass with glaring red eye balls and ivory white teeth, and it was with gold-shod hooves..." [KJ.73] He wanted to rush out and tell the people that all these years they had worshipped not Jehovah, but an ass. The shock of this sight made Zacharias dumb, but once his malady left him, he was questioned by the Sanhedrin and forced to tell what he saw. They accused him of blasphemy. But Herod's High Priest, Simon realized that Zacharias was not to be blamed. He knew that there was a secret passage from Herod's palace to the sanctum sanctorum of the Temple. And he knew that no one other than Herod would dare do something like this. But why? According to several ancient histories, the city of Jerusalem was first founded by the Shepherd Kings of Egypt. The Jews were their vassals. After the exodus of the Jews under Moses' leadership, when they settled down in Canaan, they still continued to worship the god of the Shepherds:

The God of the Shepherds was the Egyptian Sun-god Sutekh, or Set, who appears in Genesis, Seth son of Adam, and when King David captured Jerusalem after the Jebusites, the descendants of the Shepherds, Set became the God of all Israel under the title of Jehovah. [KJ. 121]

But Simon could not prove all this and failed to rescue Zacharias, who was stoned to death. Herod was greatly disappointed that his ploy did not work. Perhaps it was Herod's earnest desire to please Set that made him falsely accuse his noble son Antipater of parricide and demand his execution. Finally when the Emperor agreed that Herod could execute Antipater in whichever manner he pleased, Herod's joy knew no bounds:

There was only one manner of sacrifice acceptable to Set, the true Jehovah, and only one place where the sacrifice might properly be made... This offering of his first born, the son whom he secretly cherished and pitied, would alone satisfy Jehovah and persuade him to renew the covenant sworn with Abraham. Jehovah, whether or not he again chose to substitute ram for man, would thereupon heal him of all bodily distresses and renew his youth, as Abraham's youth had been renewed, and grant him victory over his multitudinous enemies. But even this supreme sacrifice would be insufficient unless the Temple Hill were first purged of its rabble of false priests; they must be hewn in pieces as the resolute Elijah had hewn in pieces the priests of Baal. Set must sail back to glory over billows of blood. [KJ. 142]

There are several more examples that the narrator quotes to prove the Jews' pagan origins. It seems that once upon a time, Jewish girls prostituted at the city gates and gave their offerings to Anatha, Jehova's consort. Even crucifixion was considered to be a sacrifice made to the Goddess.

All these references are perhaps being made to emphasize the fact that the Jews and subsequently the Christians are not as they themselves think, the Chosen People. The narrator through several examples seems to stress that the Jews were a peculiar people with their peculiar customs and traditions just like any other race. They were in no way superior to any other race or nation, as they seem to believe. This is further elaborated in the scene where Jesus (en route to meet Mary the Hairdresser) along with Judas come upon a group of people consisting of Arabs, Greeks, Phoenicians and Edomites, who are on their way to a fair at Hebron. All of them trace their ancestry to Abraham, whom the Jews consider as their great patriarch. But unlike the Jews, all the others give importance to Abraham's wife, Sarah, who some of them worship as Miriam "a Love-goddess with a fish tail." Others believe that Mary, the Hairdresser speaks oracles in the name of the

Great Goddess using the oracular jawbone of Adam. The Arab in the group mentions that they bring their barren wives to Hebron to be made fertile by the rites offered to the Kerm-king. All of them then expound who Abraham and his wife, Sarah as well as his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, mean to all of them. Interestingly, all of them have entirely different sets of beliefs regarding these. This perhaps, is another manner in which the narrator attempts to show that the Jews were not so special after all. His centrifugal attempt though, as mentioned earlier, is to subvert the Christian concept that Jesus is the Son of God.

Though *King Jesus* did not become controversial, the novel may be seen as an attempt by Graves to project his perception and views of what Christianity is to him and who or what Jesus stands for, according to him. His disapproval of Christian interpretations of Christ's sayings clearly show that he had serious problems in accepting Christianity as upheld by the Church. But while Robert Graves' interpretations escaped censure (in fact *King Jesus* sold 46,000 copies when it was first published)⁸, Martin Scorsese and his movie attracted condemnation from far and wide. To understand the reason for such a portrayal of Christ, we have to go back to Nikos Kazantzakis, the author of the book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In the preface to the novel, Kazantzakis mentions that his chief aim is to explore the confrontation between the good and the evil within oneself. By focusing on this conflict within someone like Jesus Christ, he shows that the forces of good and evil are inherent in everyone and that what is important is that one should make sure not to submit to the forces of evil. Through this, Kazantzakis wanted to create a Christ who was more human than divine. His translator Peter Bien

describes one of Kazantzakis' principal objective in writing *The Last Temptation* as follows:

Kazantzakis wanted to lift Christ out of the church altogether and—since in the twentieth century the old era was dead or dying—to rise to the occasion and exercise man's right (and duty) to fashion a new Saviour and thereby rescue himself from a moral and spiritual void... Kazantzakis tried to draw Christ in terms meaningful to himself and thus since his own conflicts were those of every sensitive man faced with the chaos of our times, in terms which could be understood in the twentieth century.⁹

To a very large extent, Martin Scorsese's film will appear to be less blasphemous if we understand it as his attempt to create a certain kind of 'Kazantzakian' Christ. Infact the film begins by clearly stating that the story of Christ here is based not on the biblical Gospels, but on Kazantzakis'. And this is the foremost reason for the portrayal of a Christ who is neither purely divine nor completely human in this film. Kazantzakis' depiction of a Christ based on his own inner conflicts did not go down well with the religious authorities. As has been mentioned earlier, the publication of *The Last Temptation of Christ* saw Kazantzakis being excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church, while his book got listed in the Catholic *Index of Forbidden Books*¹⁰. But these acts in the 1950s look trifling when compared to the reception Scorsese's film received in the late 1980s, as we have already seen in the fourth chapter.

As far as the works taken for study here are concerned, even the most recent controversial book with Christ as the central character, has an author whose perception of Christianity shapes his character. Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, on the whole, leads us to look at a lot of interesting points, all of them important in making the story of Christ here, different from the one found in the biblical Gospels.

Why is God depicted as a power hungry dictator, who seems to be pleased at causing a lot of bloodshed in order to attain glory? Why is the Devil called Pastor and pictured as good, while God is shown as evil i.e. why is there a reversal of good and evil? Why is Jesus an 'unwilling saviour' here and in effect why is there an attempt to show that the biggest religion in the world was founded on a 'bargain'? The answers to these questions will be vital in our understanding of the novel as a whole rather than dismissing it as blasphemous writing. The novel may appear to be anti-religious, but I think that this anti-religiosity stems from Saramago's attempt to question the authoritarian structurality of the Church. The author traces the beginnings of this Church through the words of God Himself who explains to Jesus:

There will be a Church ... a religious society which will be founded by you or in your name ... and this Church will be spread far and wide throughout the world and will be called catholic ... but in order to be truly solid its foundations will be dug out in flesh, and the bases made from the cement of abnegation, tears, suffering, torment, every known conceivable form of death known or as yet unrevealed. [GJC.289,290]

The dictatorial God in the novel may be equated with this structurality and the author's attempts to reverse the concepts of good and evil may be so because everything associated with the Church was persuaded to be looked upon as good. The figure of the despotic God in the novel may be equated as symbolizing the authority of the Church. But that Saramago attempted to attack the Church rather than God may be inherent in the following lines:

...sin and the Devil are one and the same thing, What thing, asked Jesus, My absence, How do you explain Your absence, is it because You retreat or because mankind abandons You, I never retreat, never, Yet You allow men to abandon You, Whosoever abandons Me comes looking for Me,

and when they cannot find You, I suppose You blame the Devil, No, he's not to blame, I'm to blame because I'm incapable of reaching out to those who seek Me, words uttered by God with a poignant and unexpected melancholy, as if He had suddenly discovered the limitations of His power. [GJC.295]

The portrayal of Christ, God, Devil etc, here may be seen as signifiers that aim towards a criticism of the centrality of the Church. And Saramago himself makes this very clear, when he says: "I respect those who believe, but I have no respect for the institution."¹¹

And in this regard the words of Jose Ornealas, Professor of Portuguese Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and President of the American Portuguese Studies Association, describing Saramago, are significant. He says that Saramago has been:

a leftist all his life and has been a member of the Communist Party, and all throughout his life—especially during the time of the dictatorship in Portugal—during the fascist regime—he was a person ... who was always in a vanguard of people who were fighting against the oppression in the country. He is an atheist. But, on the other hand, he is an atheist with a human face, because he has said all along, now, I'm an atheist, I don't believe in these things, but on the other hand, I cannot get away from what surrounds me, and what surrounds me is Catholicism, all the images, all the myths, and all the symbols of Catholicism.¹²

It is the centrifugal space that the Church occupies in almost all matters in a country like Portugal, that Saramago seeks to undermine. And though this may be easy for some one like Saramago, who is not only a leftist but also an atheist, he does this not by blatantly attacking the Church or its administrators, but by using the very images and symbols of Catholicism that surround him, to depict the view that the whole institution called the Church was founded not to make the lives of the believers any better, but to make

Jehovah, the Jewish and Old Testament God more powerful. Christ in this novel according to Saramago, is merely a means to justify the Inquisition, the Crusades, the several wars and bloodshed that have come about vis-a-vis, the largest religion in the world, Christianity.

The Christ of *Live From Golgotha* too is based upon its author's position on Christianity. Gore Vidal presents Christ as someone who's outside the religion founded in his name. In the novel, Christ is just a Jew, rather a Jew with royal blood concerned only with matters relating to Israel. Vidal's Christ has no role to play in the rise and development of Christianity. In fact he's vexed that his name has been used to create this religion in which he wants to have no part at all. He blames Paul for preaching wrongly about him and adding a lot of pagan mythology to his life story. So we have a Jesus who's against Christianity. What Vidal seems to be implying here is that organized Christianity is something that Christ himself is aghast at. Though Christ is not the central character of the novel, it is interesting to note that the Christ character in this novel knows that Christianity is the most powerful religion in the world; but still wants his name to be dissociated from it. This prompts us to look at Vidal's own views of Christianity, which further enables us to understand his Christ-character who abhors Christianity.

As far as his own religion is concerned, Gore Vidal defines himself as 'a born-again atheist'. He describes Christianity as "a silly religion."¹³ And he attacks not just Christianity but also other religions based on monotheistic traditions. According to Vidal:

Once people get hung up on theology, they've lost sanity forever. More people have been killed in the name of Jesus Christ than any other name in the history of the world.¹⁴ ... I regard monotheism as the greatest disaster ever to befall the human race. I see no good in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—good people, yes, but any religion based on a single, well, frenzied and virulent god, is not as useful to the human race as, say, Confucianism, which is not a religion but an ethical and educational system.¹⁵

We thus see from Vidal's own statements that he's not at all fond of Christianity. And in this regard his Christ-character is quite similar to him. What he's doing in this novel vis-a-vis Jesus, is to get at the roots of ancient Christianity. And for this it is important for him to switch the traditional roles of Jesus and Judas to make the betrayer the betrayed. Through this, Vidal seems to be implying that as far as Christianity was concerned, it did not really matter if Jesus was crucified or not; someone had to be crucified so that this new religion could sprout. And in Vidal's novel, initially at least, the new religion called Christianity develops because of Judas.

Looking at how the various authors studied in this thesis view Christianity, we may argue that almost all of them, base their respective Christ characters on their perception of Christianity, the religion whose greatest symbol is Christ, in order to project a human Christ. It's important to note however that, to a very large extent, the socio-cultural backgrounds of the different authors studied here have also played a role in the creative shaping of their works and their respective Christ-characters. For example, the authoritarian figure of God in Saramago's novel may be as mentioned earlier, equated with the supremacy of the Church and also with Salazar, the military despot, under whom Portugal suffered for decades during the mid-twentieth century. In fact Saramago's attempts to question the Church may have arisen, because the Portuguese society of the

'period was very much defined by the influence of the Church and the Church's hold on almost all matters was absolute. Similarly the protagonist of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, an anti-establishment figure, as well as other characters in the film are very much rooted in the America of the 1970s, a period that witnessed a generation that was highly critical of the U.S. government's military involvement in Vietnam, so much unlike the America of the present, that silently and at times, approvingly watches the military occupation of Iraq. If the Jesus in *Jesus Christ, Superstar* highlights the anti-establishment stance that was in vogue during that period, and in effect echoes the socio-political and cultural surroundings that produced the film, then the same can be said about *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Richard Stern sees this film as Scorsese's attempt:

To confront the dominance of a certain kind of prevailing tendency in 1980s America. *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a troubling, shrill, almost operatic film that wants to demythologize our cherished beliefs and, in doing so, becomes a lightning rod for criticism about morals, religion and the culture industry... Hollywood is a conservative cultural force that continues to reassure audience of its collective imagination... No wonder Scorsese received such vituperative condemnation from so many different sectors. He was assaulting not only an image of Jesus but the way we construct that image: safe, self-assured and predictable.¹⁶

It is in this regard that the confrontational politics of Reagan of that time and the movies of the period that highlight evil as something that exists outside the American sphere of life and comes from foreign shores, should be seen. Scorsese goes against this trend by showcasing a Jesus who " straddles the gap between good and evil within himself."¹⁷

So by and large, the works studied here may be viewed in a two dimensional manner as being products of the cultural milieus that produced these as well as the individual authors' attempts to de-lineate a Christ based on their perception of

Christianity, the religion founded in his name. Therefore the texts used for study here may be seen as mirroring their milieus as well as critiquing the Church. And one can't help feeling that fictional works featuring Christ become controversial because the religion that is based on Him is, at times at least, quite touchy about reinterpretations of Christ getting more prominence than the Church-established views. It's a different matter that controversies themselves are responsible for making a work attract much publicity, as a result of which readers/viewers are drawn towards these. The works taken here for study were understood as being controversial in nature because these do not conform to the norm—the biblical version of Christ's life, which is considered as the standard. These works have often been accused of being blasphemous in tone and content, and as the term 'blasphemy' has been used throughout this thesis, it is only appropriate at this 'afterword' stage to briefly outline this concept.

The Oxford Dictionary defines blasphemy as "profane or sacrilegious talk about God or sacred things."¹⁸ The authors of the works studied here may deny they've ever intended to be profane or sacrilegious. The Church of course would argue otherwise according to the above definition, and more so according to a different and detailed definition of blasphemy. Such a definition may be found in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, where blasphemy is stated as being three-fold in nature, "When it attributes to God what is not his, when it deprives Him of what is His, and when it assigns to the creature what belongs to the Creator."¹⁹ It may be argued that according to this definition, all the works studied here are blasphemous, as they attribute to God, humanness and they deprive Him of His divinity. In this regard when we look at 'heresy', we find the

dictionary describing this as "belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religious (especially Christian) doctrine; opinion profoundly at odd with what is generally accepted."²⁰ Heresy finds its origin from the Greek word 'hairesis' meaning 'choice.'²¹ Those who chose to take a viewpoint that was antithetical to that of Christian religious establishment's were once upon a time, tortured and banished and their writings and at times they themselves were burnt. Such things may have been a thing of the past, but even today, opinions that do not fit in with what are generally considered to be the norm, are not taken kindly to by the Church. For example, Leon Cristiani in *Heresies and Heretics*, identifies modernism as a kind of heresy that was condemned by the Pope St.Pius X²²;

Religion, that is, belief in God, is for him (the modernist) a spontaneous and irrational product of our nature. God is revealed to us, in the depths of the heart, by the demands of our moral conscience, by the instinctive feelings of Our soul which needs an ideal in order to live...As a believer, the modernist clings to this God revealed to him by his conscience, he looks at him, in the name of his interior experience, as truly real although indemonstrable, and for the barrenness of atheistic rationalism, he substitutes a tender though purely subjective mysticism...As a historian, the modernist affects to believe only in texts, sources and evidence. But, not forgetting that he is also a philosopher and a theologian, he sifts the texts in such a way as to bring them into agreement with his own philosophical and theological systems. Thus he declares that the miraculous is unthinkable and expunges from the texts whatever is supernatural in them..²³

To a very large extent, all the authors studied in this thesis may be identified as being modernists according to the above statements on how modernists regard religion. And the authors subvert the character of Jesus Christ by treating him as purely human in their works, so as to supplement their views on Christianity. It must however, be noted at this point that there were controversies within Christian theological circles as early as the fourth century regarding the humanity and divinity of Christ. The Arian heresy

proclaimed the Alexandrian theologian Athanasius' views that **God** and Jesus were different and separate from each other. "The Word was created and sent forth by God, but there was an important line and distinction drawn between the two. The Word was not—like God himself—eternal and unbegotten."²⁴ On the other hand, according to the Apollinarian heresy, Christ was divine, but not fully human.²⁵ There was also the heresy of Docetism, according to which "Jesus only appeared to be an historical, physical, human person and that he was in reality a ghost-like being, whose teachings are valuable quite apart from his own historical existence."²⁶ In fact Paul Schrader, who wrote the screenplay of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, argues that:

The point of *Last Temptation* was not to dismantle Christ's divinity or even his calling, but to refocus the debate of the early church between the Arian heresy (which claimed that Jesus was a man who only pretended to be God) and the Docetist heresy (which said that Jesus was a God who cleverly acted as a man.)²⁷

Anyway, all these controversies were fully put to rest at the Nicene Council, which declared that Christ was fully divine as well as human. And then, as is the case now, the Church has always felt the need to take up the battle against views and opinions that question its own:

If a man persists in holding and teaching a belief which undermines and destroys the fundamental Christian outlook and attitude, then the Church is obliged to identify and point out the seriousness of what he is doing, to warn others against it, and to withdraw its recognition of him as being in any way a representative or qualified spokesman for the Christian faith.²⁸

This represents the Church's view of how it would treat ideas and notions that are opposing to it. But rather than giving full weightage to religious definitions of blasphemy

and heresy and accordingly condemning the works taken here as blasphemous or heretical, it is important to look at these concepts in more general terms, so as to get a balanced picture. In this regard, David Lawton's definition of blasphemy is noteworthy.

According to Lawton:

Blasphemy defines difference...Blasphemy stands for whatever a society most abhors... It is a form of religious vituperation against those who have transgressed the timeless truths a society cherishes...Whether it takes oral or written shape, the words count for everything, not their speaker or writer. The personality of the blasphemer is of little importance... Blasphemy is impersonally received; and however personally it is conceived, however passionately meant by an individual, it is framed in terms of orthodox discourses that construct it and the institutions that produce it...When orthodoxy finds blasphemy, it is not failing to read: it is reading and simultaneously refusing..²⁹

When we look at the texts studied here in the light of all these interpretations of blasphemy, it becomes problematic and complicated to thoroughly conclude these as being blasphemous. Rather, these varying interpretations of the very term that is often used to portray the works used in this thesis in a negative shade, make it exigent that instead of proscribing and censoring works of art under the cover of blasphemy, ample space should be given for the existence of such works, so as to enable alternative forms of arguments and viewpoints to subsist alongside established ones.

It's true that nobody is burnt at the stake these days for questioning the Church. But whenever ways of thinking that are antithetical to those of the Church's are expressed, through written and especially through visual art forms like cinema and stage performances, that purvey to a wide audience, there is a tendency for orthodoxy to condemn these, at times in a suppressive manner. This is the case even in the beginning

of this twenty first century, as the latest cinematic version on the life of Christ shows. This is Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, a film being made simultaneously in Aramaic and Latin, that focus on the last twelve hours in the life of Christ. The film has already picked up controversy, though initial reports claimed that Gibson had even consulted Vatican officials regarding the making of this movie. As per reports:

(The film) has been condemned by influential Catholic and Jewish groups in America for its alleged anti-semitism and extreme violence...scholars are alarmed that *The Passion* which has been funded by Gibson, a devout Catholic, to the tune of \$25 million and which will release next year will portray Jews as responsible for Christ's crucifixion.³⁰

The Anti-Defamation League in America is at present leading the protests against this film, which is yet to see the light of day.³¹ This movie is no doubt extremely gory, as I can say after seeing the trailer posted on the film's website.³² But Gibson explains that this is so, because it is his attempt as the director of the film to portray a highly humanistic picture of the sufferings of Christ. Gibson further explains that it was Christ's sufferings that drew him towards the Messiah: "He says he was attracted to the story of Christ's last hours before the crucifixion because it is 'the drama of a man torn between his divine spirit and his earthly weakness.'"³³ And to depict this dilemma within Christ, Gibson argues that, "my Jesus will be shaken by his human suffering. Real blood will flow from the wound in his side, and the screams of his crucifixion will be real as well."³⁴ One of the reasons therefore, for this unreleased film to become controversial is the violence portrayed here. And this according to Gibson is to highlight the conflict between Christ's human and divine personas, which is something that all the authors studied in this thesis are also doing. And like most of them, Gibson too, is not favourably inclined

towards the Church, despite being a devout Catholic. "My love for religion was transmitted to me by my father...But I do not believe in the Church as an institution."³⁵ And Gibson denies that the Vatican is involved in any way with the making of his film.³⁶

The principal reason however, cited for the controversial nature of Gibson's film is its alleged portrayal of Jews in a negative light, which many fear may flame anti-Semitic sentiments. And this, it seems, has been the case since time immemorial: "Throughout history, Christian dramatizations of the passion, i.e. the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, have fomented anti-Semitic attitudes and violence against the Jewish people."³⁷ For example, *The King of Kings* (1927) a film by Cecil B. DeMille that adheres to the biblical depiction of Christ, had a good response from the movie-goers and critics. But there were protests by Jewish groups, that DeMille made a few changes to his film, like a foreword being added which emphasized that the Jews were under Roman control during Jesus' period, and the High Priest Caiaphas exclaiming that he alone is responsible for the death of Jesus [as opposed to the verse in Matthew (27:25), where the Jewish crowd cries out: "His blood be on us and on our children"].³⁸ *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was also criticized for its "nasty portrayal of Jerusalem's high priests."³⁹ Hence the manner in which Jews are depicted in Christ films also seem to be a reason for the beckoning of controversy. This however needs to be explored in detail.

But as of now, *The Passion*, the latest celluloid rendering of the life of Christ seems to be going the controversial way. Looking at all these, one might be inclined to think that fictional characterizations of Christ are by and large controversial in nature.

But this is not always the case. There are several novels with Christ as the central character that are not contentious in nature. Examples include *The Greatest Story Ever Told*⁴⁰, *Jesus The Son of Man*⁴¹, *The Nazarene*⁴², *The Big Fisherman*⁴³, *The Gospel According to Pontius Pilate*⁴⁴, *The Crown and the Cross*⁴⁵, *The Beloved Son*⁴⁶, *Joshua*⁴⁷, etc. Though some of these works have fictitious events and characters, the persona of the fictional Christ does not differ much from that of his counterpart's in the Bible. This may be the reason for the non-controversial status of these works. There are also movies like *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1966), *Jesus* (1979), etc., that have remained non-controversial. It would be definitely interesting to explore why when certain works attempt to question established norms, others despite being fictitious in nature, seek to conform. Are there different cultural forces that produce these divergent works? Or are these the products of similar cultural backgrounds? Is it possible to have a certain amount of tolerance towards works that are not in harmony with the standard touchstone? Or will such works continue to get censured for attempting to flow against the tide? Even here there is a certain kind of ambiguity as the reception towards works like *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, *Live From Golgotha*, *King Jesus* and *The Man Who Died* shows. Perhaps a more detailed inquiry into reasons behind cultural factors is called for to get these clarified, or maybe the very complexities innate to cultural artifacts deny us neat answers. Though the thesis constantly tried to pursue new historical frames and methods in explaining these complexities, larger questions concerning institutionalized religion, censorships on art, and bewildering reception-patterns still prevail.

NOTES

- ¹ R.H.Poole, and P.J.Shepherd, eds., *D.H. Lawrence: A Selection*, London, Heinemann, 1970,47.
- ² Ibid, 47-50,54.
- ³ Graham Gough, "D.H.Lawrence: The Quarrel With Christianity" in G.B.Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson Jr, eds., *Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, Michigan, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975,262.
- ⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1976.
- ⁵ Anthony Beal, *D.H.Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism*, London, Heinemann, 1967, 235, 237.
- ⁶ Harry T. Moore, ed., *Sex Literature and Censorship: Essays by D.H.Lawrence*, London, Heinemann, 1955, 166.
- ⁷ Ibid, 167,168.
- ⁸ <<http://www.robertgraves.org/bio.php>>
- ⁹ P.A. Bien, "A Note on the Author and His Use of Language," *The Last Temptation of Christ*, New York, Touchstone, 1960, 505.
- ¹⁰ Morton P. Levitt, *The Cretan Glance*, Colombus, Ohio State UP, 1980, 61.
- ¹¹ "Nobel Winner Criticizes Catholic Church," *Catholic World News-News Brief*, 9 Sept 1998.
- ¹² "Nobel Prize Winner," *Online Newshour*, 9 Oct, 1998.
- ¹³ Gore Vidal, "American novelist, At Home", in James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt*, 1988.
- ¹⁴ Gore Vidal, *Secular Humanist Bulletin*, Summer, 1995.
- ¹⁵ Gore Vidal, "American novelist, At Home", James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt*, 1988.
- ¹⁶ Richard C Stern, et al, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, New York, Paulist Press, 1999,288.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 291.

- ¹⁸ "Blasphemy" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th ed, 1999.
- ¹⁹ "Blasphemy" *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol.2,1974.
- ²⁰ "Heresy" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th ed, 1999.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Leon Cristiani, *Heresies and Heretics*, Transl. Roderick Bright, New York, Hawthorne Books, 1958,133.
- ²³ Ibid, 132, 133.
- ²⁴ John M Krumm, *Modern Heresies*, Connecticut, Seabury Press, 1961, 119.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 121.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 114.
- ²⁷ Richard C Stern, et al, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, New York, Paulist Press, 1999, 287.
- ²⁸ John M Krumm, *Modern Heresies*, Connecticut, Seabury Press, 1961, 11.
- ²⁹ David Lawton, *Blasphemy*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, 86, 3,
- ³⁰ "Religious Groups Oppose Movie", *The Hindu*, June 30, 2003.
- ³¹ ADL Statement on Mel Gibson's *The Passion*.
<http://www.adl.org/presrele/mise_00/4275_00.asp>
- ³² <<http://www.passion-movie.com>>
- ³³ Carl Limbacher, "Mel Gibson Attacks the Vatican", *NewsMax.com*, September 13, 2002. < <http://www.newsmax.com/showinside.shtml?a=2002/9/13/03811>>
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Holly McClure, "Mel Gibson's 'Passion' for Jesus Goes on Film", *ChristianCinema.com*.
<http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=16>
- ³⁷ ADL Statement on Mel Gibson's *The Passion*.
http://www.adl.org/presrele/mise_00/4275_00.asp>

- ³⁸ W.Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, Polebridge Press, California, 1997, 57.
- ³⁹ Steve Daly, "A Hit of Biblical Proportions: Jesus Christ Superstar Rocked All Ages in Concert 25 Years Ago", *Entertainment Weekly*, July. 19, 1996.
- ⁴⁰ Fulton Oursler, *The Greatest Story Ever Told: A Tale of the Greatest Life Ever Lived*. New York, Doubleday and Company, 1949.
- ⁴¹ Kahlil Gibran, *Jesus The Son of Man*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.
- ⁴² Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene*, Trans., Maurice Samuel, New York, J.Putnam's Sons, 1975.
- ⁴³ Llyod C. Douglas, *The Big Fisherman*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978.
- ⁴⁴ James R Mills, *The Gospel According to Pontius Pilate*, New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1977.
- ⁴⁵ Frank J. Slaughter, *The Crown and the Cross*, Cleveland and New York, The World Publishing Company, 1959.
- ⁴⁶ Cecil Maiden, *The Beloved Son*, New York, Dodd Mead and Company, 1961.
- ⁴⁷ Joseph F Girzone, *Joshua*, New York, Collier Books, 1987.

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