

Judas and the Jesus Revolution: Dateline, Twenty-first Century

Christianity is a religion of revolution. This revolution, which began with the birth, death, and resurrection of God's only Son, Jesus, is expected to culminate in the establishment of Christ's divine kingdom on earth. According to the scriptures, believers must not falter because Jesus could return today. But two thousand years have passed since those words were written. Many people think that the earth has become a colder, crueler place, and conscious belief in Christianity and "God" is in decline.

A pivotal figure in the Christian myth of the Jesus revolution is Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus to his enemies. His treacherous kiss in the garden of Gethsemane is often pointed to as the quintessential act of disloyalty. Historically, Judas has symbolized the evil forces that oppose Christ, which are assumed to be the enemies of the Christian church as well. But are these forces and enemies the same? Ironically, or perhaps fortuitously, the figure of Judas is a potentially revolutionary force against what many understand, or fear, to be the biggest enemy of a vibrant Christianity in the twenty-first century—the institution of the Christian church itself. As Christians struggle to maintain the vital energy of change within the bounds of an institution built to last, the figure of Judas Iscariot deserves reconsideration. Rollo May said; "Myth unites the antinomies of life [...]."¹ This is the power of myth. A new understanding of the schism between Judas and Jesus might bring fresh life to what has become, for many people, a stale doctrine.

Despite his importance to the Jesus story, the Bible contains little information about Judas. The stark contrast between the magnitude of his act and the brief sketch of his character and motivations has inspired some people to search for a new Judas, one

who is more than a weak, greedy man who inexplicably betrays his Savior for a paltry sum of money, or the pawn of Satan in that evil angel's hopeless struggle against the superior power of God. In his book *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, Kim Paffenroth traces both the theological wisdom concerning Judas, and his evolution as a figure in the popular imagination. The Table of Contents includes: "Judas the Obscure: Object of Curiosity," "Judas the Arch-Sinner: Object of Horror," "Judas the Villain: Object of Hatred and Derision," and Judas the Tragic Hero: Object of Admiration and Sympathy." The final chapter is titled "Judas the Penitent: Object of Hope and Emulation."²

As an "object of hope and emulation," Judas is often a close revolutionary comrade and confidante of Jesus. Paffenroth writes,

"For the last 250 years, the most popular depiction of Judas has been that of revolutionary and patriot who became disillusioned with Jesus' otherworldliness and his refusal to lead the disciples and the rest of Israel in a violent uprising to cast off the yoke of Roman oppression and establish a real, worldly kingdom."³

What are the implications of the modern fascination with Judas as a revolutionary hero, as a man of principle who, although he did not understand God's idea of revolution, was hardly a villain? Can this image of Judas allow the world to grapple with the long, dark shadow of the church in which the old Judas lingers, and perhaps revitalize a collective belief in a long overdue cosmic revolution?

The Gospel of Mark is commonly believed to be the oldest New Testament version of the life and work of Jesus, and is the source for the basic biblical picture of Judas⁴. Mark's concise narrative highlights the conflicts that surrounded Jesus and led to his preordained death and resurrection. He compresses Jesus' ministry to one year, says Christine Downing, in order to reinforce his central mythos: "Going to Jerusalem to die."⁵ Events in Marks' version of the myth unfold quickly. Jesus gathers his disciples and delivers his basic teachings. His miracles attract attention. At this point he tells his

disciples that he will be arrested in Jerusalem and condemned to death, but that he will rise from the dead after three days (10:32-34). When they reach Jerusalem, Judas immediately goes to the chief priests:

“Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him [Jesus]. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him”(14:10-11).

Jesus predicts the betrayal during the Passover meal but does not mention Judas by name: “Truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me” (14:18). The shocked disciples question Jesus but he only repeats that the traitor is one of them at the table. “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe,” Jesus warns, “to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born!” (14:21).

After supper, Jesus and his disciples retire to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prays. Finally he rouses the sleeping disciples with the words; “The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up; let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand”(14.41-42). Judas arrives with soldiers and priests. He identifies Jesus with a kiss. “So when he [Judas] came, he went up to him [Jesus] at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him (14:43-45). Jesus is arrested. Mark does not mention Judas again.

The other gospel writers, Matthew, Luke, and John, altered Mark’s text to varying degrees. The differences between the gospels reflect changes in the sociopolitical conditions facing the early Christians and the deepening conflict between Judaism and Christianity. When this split proved irreconcilable, Christianity was established as a distinctly separate religion and the Christian church became the authority regarding the history and meaning of Jesus’ teachings. The primary reason for the reworking of the Jesus narrative then, was the delay of the *parousia*, or “second coming.”⁶ Since God did not immediately move to establish his kingdom on earth,

believers had to grapple with ongoing opposition and disagreements among themselves.

Given his critical place in the story, the traitorous Judas underwent various transformations. The gospel of Matthew for example, which followed Mark historically, still highlights Jesus' Jewish origins and identity and expresses a conciliatory attitude to the Jews.⁷ Matthew provides the basis for belief in the redemption of Judas. When Jesus and Judas meet in Gethsemane, Jesus says, "Friend, do what you are here to do" (26:50). When Jesus is condemned to death, Judas repents, returns the silver, and hangs himself. The priests use his "blood money" to buy a potter's field in which to bury foreigners (27:1-10).

But Luke begins to disassociate from the Jews by stressing the universal significance of the story of God's salvation in and through Jesus Christ.⁸ He increases the cosmic sweep of the narrative and introduces Satan as the motivating force behind Judas' action:

"Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present" (22:3-6).

In the book of Acts, of which Luke is believed to be the author, Judas dies a gruesome death and his place among the twelve disciples is filled by another man (1:16-21).

John's major concern was engendering faith in the person of Jesus by providing a "portrayal of him as totally in control in his life as well as in his death."⁹ John emphasizes the Jews' rejection of Jesus and the importance of the gentiles who embraced his message. In the Gospel of John, Judas is a thief whose sinful nature is known to Jesus from the very start. John explains that Judas complained about Mary anointing Jesus' feet with an expensive oil, "not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into

it”(12:4-6). During the final Passover supper with his disciples, Jesus not only announces his upcoming betrayal but also identifies Judas and seems to put the deed into motion. When Simon Peter asks the identity of the traitor, Jesus answers,

“It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do” (13:26-27).

Judas leaves immediately.

These shifts in the characterization of Judas, from a relative cipher to the pawn of Satan, are the basis of Christian anti-Semitism. Paffenroth writes: “Judas and his act were only considered negative as the early church looked for a scapegoat on which to heap its increasing hostility towards Judaism [...].”¹⁰ The name “Judas Iscariot” has been interpreted to mean that Judas was born in Kerioth, a city in Judah. The rest of the disciples were from Galilee (Catholic Encyclopedia). Thus the betrayer was different from the rest of the disciples from birth. He was Jewish.

As the split between Jews and Christians became an institutionalized tenet of faith, Judas from Judah came to represent the Jews collectively. Judas the traitor became Judas the treacherous Jew, the Jew as Christ-killer, the Jew as tool of Satan, Christ’s cosmic foe. Many people recognize the persecution of Jews as part of institutional Christianity’s dark shadow, but anti-Semitism persists. For example, some critics of the recently released film, *The Passion of Christ*, see evidence of a dangerous anti-Semitism that is particularly frightening given its seemingly unconscious propagation by filmmakers and its unquestioning acceptance of viewers who find the film “biblical.”

In *The Origin of Satan*, Elaine Pagels explores the Christian concept of good and evil as personified by God and Satan. Satan, she says, was used by the gospel writers Luke and John as a solution to the problem of human violence in the world. “The gospel writers want to locate and identify the specific ways in which the forces of evil act

through certain people to effect violent destruction [...],” she writes; “The figure of Satan becomes, among other things, a way of characterizing one’s actual enemies as the embodiment of transcendent forces.”¹¹ The invocation of transcendent forces provides a cosmic screen for personal prejudices that legitimizes fear and hatred of one’s enemy and provides a justification for violence against them. An obvious example is the war that is undertaken with the conviction that “God is on our side.”

The Jewish people have not been the only group demonized in this fashion. Anyone who transgresses against mainstream Christian dogma and morality has been a target. Some fundamentalist Christians hold the wicked homosexuals, Christian or not, responsible for the tragedy at the World Trade Center. Non-Christians are not immune to this type of thinking. As Pagels points out, people who don’t believe in Satan are “[...] nevertheless influenced by this cultural legacy [...] whenever they perceive social and political conflict in terms of the forces of good contending against the forces of evil in the world.”¹² Self-righteousness is not an exclusively religious phenomenon.

Depth psychologists understand the conscious or unconscious invocation of “Satan” as the evil “Other” to be a personification of the unacknowledged psychological shadow possessed by every individual. The shadow contains everything that the ego rejects. One’s personal shadow exists in relation to the collective shadow projected by the culture as a whole. C.G. Jung was very concerned about the content of the collective shadow and feared the destruction caused by the collective act of projection. He felt that Western society was especially prone to dangerous projections because it does not recognize the need for the “symbolic life.” “Everything is banal, everything is ‘nothing but’; and that is the whole reason why people are neurotic,” he wrote; “They are simply sick of the whole thing, [...] They are all glad when there is a war: they say ‘Thank heavens, now something is going to happen- something bigger than ourselves.’”¹³ The

individual who engages the unconscious and struggles with the personal shadow is the only antidote against collective blindness.

A basic premise of depth psychology is the psychological need and responsibility to become conscious of one's projected shadow and establish conscious contact with what the ego finds unacceptable. Jung's notion of psychological "wholeness" is a state in which everything in the psyche belongs, including those qualities that the ego rejects as evil. Interestingly, some theologians and laypeople have recognized that every person is, in some sense, a Judas. They caution against laying all of the blame for Jesus' death on this one figure while turning a blind eye to the weakness in one's own character and spiritual practice. Or as Greg Mogensen, a critic of Christianity says; "Whatever we do not face, but gain salvation from, remains unredeemed and becomes Satanic [...] Ironically, the more we are saved the more there is to be saved from."¹⁴

The Christian church perpetuates the belief in a cosmic struggle between pure good and pure evil. But the long history of human cruelty, in which the church itself has often been a participant, undermines the authority of this dogma and calls into question the validity of this dualism. For many people, this simple calculus is an insufficient answer to questions about the nature of God and his human creation. The image of Judas as a revolutionary hero offers new ways to think about the human role in God's divine plan. In his handling of the Christ story, Joseph Campbell said; "Judas is the midwife of salvation, the counter player to Christ. He is the one who delivers Him to his death, and himself then dies in the shadow."¹⁵ Judas initiates the final, earthly chapter of the Jesus revolution through the seemingly evil act of his betrayal. Paradoxically, he is Jesus' creative counterpart.

In his controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese presents Judas as a revolutionary hero who was loyal and obedient to his friend and master until the bitter end. This Judas is brave and strong willed, "strong enough to kill someone he loved if

he did the wrong thing.” The “wrong thing” is betrayal of the Jewish revolutionary cause. Judas watches Jesus, coaches him in his role as radical, and keeps both of their feet to the fire. Jesus counts on his friend’s strength of conviction. He recalls their fateful conversation about being “strong enough to kill someone he loved” when he explains to Judas that revolution will not be brought about through armed insurrection, but by virtue of his willing death on the cross. “God will do it through you,” Jesus tells Judas; “make sure they find me in Gethsemane.” Judas weeps at the prospect. “If you were me, could you betray your master?” he asks bitterly. To which Jesus replies, “That’s why God gave me the easier job, to be crucified.”¹⁶

Some people are repulsed by Scorsese’s anti-hero Christ, who appears weak, timid, and neurotic. In *Imaging the Divine*, Baugh describes this Jesus as “A man oppressed by a sense of tragic destiny which permits him no freedom of movement or choice, he is also almost pathologically incapable of making decisions in moments of Crisis.”¹⁷ In his most dramatic transgression against Christian theology, Scorsese’s Jesus descends from the cross under the spell of Satan. He returns to fulfill his assigned mission only when he is shamed into it by a knowing Judas. Judas appears to be the wiser of the two.

Although Jesus is understood to have been both human and divine, the Christian notion of salvation rests upon the absolute supremacy of his perfect, godly aspect. The biblical Jesus is always depicted as having full knowledge of his fate and his divine purpose. Only his willingness to suffer extreme pain is human. But as the centuries unfold, the need to find a model for moral life on earth becomes more acute. The search for a more human Jesus is an attempt to find such a model, one who truly lives on earth and faces human problems.

Scorsese emphasizes Jesus’ humanity by making Judas a more equal partner in their relationship. The painfully bifurcated Jesus draws strength from his human foil. Is

this a case of “like father, like son?” The monotheistic Christian god has a unique and puzzling relationship to human beings. Monotheism must be lonely. There are no other gods to keep him company. The true nature of God and his relationship to humanity is the subject of the difficult Book of Job, in which Yahweh tortures one of his faithful followers to win a bet with Satan. In his commentary Miles writes; “The vision with which the Book of Job ends recognizes no principle operating independently of God, to which both divinity and humanity must submit [...] evil and good must be found simultaneously and personally in him [God] if they are to be found anywhere.”¹⁸ God himself is trapped in irresolvable questions of theodicy says Miles, because he is wrathful as well as gentle, a warrior as well as a father.¹⁹

In Jung’s interpretation of the Book of Job, he concludes that Job’s response to Yahweh was essential to God’s self-consciousness. Job held up a mirror to God, and in its reflection, God saw that he was, at least in human terms, both good and evil. Without the reflection in Job’s consciousness, God could not know himself. In *Answer to Job* Jung writes; “Existence is only real when it is conscious to somebody.”²⁰ Perhaps a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Jesus and Judas is a theological task.

Judas has been called the only obedient disciple. Throughout the gospels an impatient Jesus admonishes the confused disciples for their weak questions and lack of faith. On the fateful night that Judas bestows his kiss, the rest of the group falls asleep, leaving Jesus alone in his prayers. Paffenroth refers to the work of William Klassen, who argues that the Greek verb traditionally translated as “betray” can also refer to the more neutral act of “handing over.”²¹ “The task of ‘giving over’ is seen by the early church as fundamentally God- centered, initiated and carried out under the direction of god. It is, we would say today, a theological task,” Klassen writes.²² Klassen attributes

the doctrinal shift to the unambiguously sinful “betray” to the church’s institutional need for specific enemies.

One puzzling aspect of the Jesus-Judas story is the chief priests’ need for Judas’ complicity. Jesus was famous enough to be dangerous, and surely they had able spies within their own ranks. Paffenroth suggests that the painful betrayal by a friend was part of Jesus’ human suffering. He writes: “[...] it makes sense as part of Jesus’ overall mission to be fully human; although he could easily have avoided it, he willingly had to suffer the pain of betrayal and loss of a friend, a pain that most if us do everything in our power (unsuccessfully) to avoid.”²³

The flipside of this statement is the pain that a disillusioned Judas may have felt. Imagine the agonizing despair that he may well have suffered at the loss of Jesus and the role that he played in that death, perhaps unwittingly. Scorsese’s Judas weeps. Shared suffering is, according to Mogensen, “[...] a meeting ground between God and man” created through Christ’s crucifixion.²⁴ When Christ returns, believers will meet him in their own god-given perfection. But until then, earthbound humans contact God through the human suffering of Jesus, which they understand by virtue of their own.

In *Imaging the Divine*, Lloyd Baugh opens his discussion of film images of Christ with the following quotation from critic Andre Gaudreault, “La Passion du Christ: une forme, un genre, un discours:”

“How are we to deal with the problems created by the appropriation of *sacred* texts by a medium of *illusion* like cinema, or by the adaptation of a story that is presumed *true* into a vehicle of *fiction*?”²⁵

One of the “problems” with popular interpretations of the Bible like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, is the liberties that individuals take with religious doctrine. But the Protestant revolution paved the way for these personal, individual relationships with God and his Word centuries ago. The hostile attitude of some church authorities reflects the essential conflict between the evolutionary energy of revolution and the inertia of an

institutionalized dogma that draws its strength from the supposition that it is the only “truth.”

In one debate with a Christian minister, Marie Louise von Franz said, “To a theologian God is bound to His own books and is incapable of further publication. That is where we lock horns.”²⁶ But the spiritual hunger that drove followers to Martin Luther may operate in both the devout and the curious who are attracted to the unorthodox exploration of religious truths that must take place, or so it seems, in the relatively free, imaginative space of popular culture and find its expression in forms other than scripture.

The Hebrew tradition of the *midrash* arose from the recognized need to find fresh, contemporary meaning in ancient words. From this perspective, the way to honor the text is to engage with it, even argue with it, to discover its continued relevance. The rejection of the *midrash* by Christians, and its devaluation by some Jews, is a rejection of the “mythic” or “folk” in favor of the “authentic” or “historical.” But as Downing points out, the interaction of the multiple gospels themselves constitutes “an independent imaginal creation designed to get at the *meaning*, not the history” of Jesus’ life.²⁷ The revitalization of the *midrashic* tradition could be one way of re-approaching an ossified Christian doctrine.

Martin Buber explored the mythic dimensions of the “historical religions,” Judaism and Christianity. He called them “sagas.” Saga produced near in time to the events recorded has a certain character and value by virtue of that nearness he said, but; “[...] what was added later is also of importance to us. Even the men who round off and supplement do what they do not arbitrarily but under the sustained urge of the primeval impulse.”²⁸ The orthodox Judas is not a frustrated revolutionary, but people seem to need to imagine him this way, and the notion does not lie far beyond the parameters of the story.

History and the scriptures speak of the oppression of the Jews by the Roman Empire. Jews and Christians believe in the establishment of a new covenant with God. Jesus himself spoke of revolution: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled [...]" "Do you think I have come to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but another division!" (Luke 12:49-51). Revolution could easily have been in the air at the time of Jesus, whether that life is understood as historical fact or religious mythology. And if the disciple Judas was confused about the means and methods of the Jesus revolution, he was not alone. In a sample passage from Matthew, Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection and assures them that this is the needed revolution. But they did not understand: "Peter began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you'" (16.22). To which Jesus said; "'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'" (16.23). Judas was different from the other disciples, but that difference may have been his boldness, not his blindness.

Judas is not the only Biblical figure to inspire new stories that go beyond the institutionalized "truth" of the scriptures, but Judas was there in the garden. He was part of that critical moment when human actions and divine plans mysteriously collided. Images of a revolutionary Judas are valuable for their ambiguity; they show us a man on the horns of a dilemma, a man who could not know the full moral value of his actions. In this sense, a revolutionary Judas is truly modern.

In his reflections on the two world wars, Jung wrote: "Evil has become a determinant reality. It can no longer be dismissed from the world by a circumlocution."²⁹ Individually and collectively, believers and non-believers alike must dismantle the black and white dichotomy of pure good and pure evil that was created by men who believed salvation was eminent. One must recognize the relativity of good and evil and the importance of subjective judgment. The modern individual must be

guided by uncertainty and self-knowledge, said Jung; “He must know relentlessly how much good he can do, and what crimes he is capable of, and must beware of regarding the one as real and the other as illusion.”³⁰ The attempt to identify with a perfect Christ will always fail. Maybe it is time to investigate his creative foil, Judas, as another flawed human in creative collaboration with the divine.

Notes

¹ Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. 26.

² Kim Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox P, 2001).

³ Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, p. 82.

⁴ All biblical references are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, third edition with the Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

⁵ Christine Downing, “Myth in the New Testament.” Lecture. MS 701: Mythologies of the Monotheistic Traditions. Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, California. 10 December 2003.

⁶ Downing, “Myth in the New Testament.”

⁷ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, third edition*, p. 7.

⁸ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, third edition*, p. 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁰ Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, p. 68.

¹¹ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 13.

¹² Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, p. 182.

¹³ C. G. Jung, “The Symbolic Life,” *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Vol 18. Bollingen Series 20, trans. R.F.C. Hull, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), p. 274.

¹⁴ Greg Mogenson, *God is a Trauma*, (Dallas, Texas: Spring Pub, 1989), p. 25.

¹⁵ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That*, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), p. 75.

¹⁶ Martin Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Video. Universal Pictures and Cinoplex Odeon Films, 1988.

¹⁷ Llyod Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed and Ward, 1997), p. 63.

¹⁸ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*, (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 327.

¹⁹ Miles, *God: A Biography*, p.408.

²⁰ C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen series, Fiftieth-anniversary ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1958), p. 11.

²¹ Paffenroth, *Judas: Images of the Lost Disciple*, p. 68.

²² W Klassen, *Judas: Betrayed or Friend of Jesus?*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 202. Quoted in Paffenroth, p. 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁴ Mogenson, *God is a Trauma*, p. 23.

²⁵ Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film*, p. 7.

²⁶ Marie Louise von Franz, *Alchemy*, (Toronto: Innercity Books, 1980), p. 142.

²⁷ Downing, "Myth in the New Testament."

²⁸ Martin Buber, "Saga and History," *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), p. 18.

²⁹ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 329.

³⁰ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 330.