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Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*

By Thomas Robin Riley

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Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* arguably generated more resistance and conflict upon its release than any film before or since, engendering intense debate and even hatred between religious conservative protesters and liberal progressive defenders of the picture. This is the first full examination of the controversy, its participants, and their claims concerning the film's religious meaning.

This debate reflects deep levels of social and cultural insecurity produced by the shifting role of religion and religious language in an increasingly secularized society, and demonstrates how a popular film about Jesus captured, inflamed, and strengthened existing animosities. Providing new insights into film's significance as an indicator of the changing relationship between secular and religious domains, the work offers a thorough and fascinating historical analysis of the various interpretations of *Last Temptation* and its reception.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict offers an utterly absorbing account of the reception history surrounding Scorsese's film. In seven deft and meticulous chapters Riley, an assistant professor of electronic media in the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, examines The Last Temptation of Christ for its historical origins, the initial causes for the controversy that surrounded it, and the robust rhetoric employed by the different groups who reacted to it positively or negatively, according to religious persuasion."-Southern Humanities Review

"Riley presents a compelling case study of the religious and legal controversy created by Scorsese's 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ....The writing is refreshingly free of the jargon usually associated with these topics, and the book makes for an accessible, informative, and entertaining read for those interested in media law, communication theory, media and society, media and religion, or film history. Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates through faculty; general readers."-Choice

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"Set within a compelling historical context, Riley's analysis is fresh and original, as it reveals his own personal struggle to deal with his engagement with the conflicts introduced on multiple levels, and the resulting constructions of meaning. This is a book that once opened, the reader will not easily put down until it is finished."-Robert K. Avery Professor of Communication, University of Utah

"In his analysis of one of the most pivotal battles in the Culture Wars, the controversial case of director Martin Scorsese's Last Temptation of Christ, rhetorical scholar Robin Riley provides a clear and compelling understanding of the causes, strategies, and tactics of the various groups castigating, scapegoating, and defending the film."-Terry Lindvall, Ph.D. School of Communication and the Arts, Regent University

"Readers should be warned that the author takes a position not commonly held among scholars of communication and media. Instead, he directly challenges certain firmly held beliefs in freedom of speech and the secular marketplace of ideas. His book presents a strikingly alternative perspective that both clarifies and complicates taken-for-granted assumptions concerning free speech, religious belief, and the role of the media in contemporary society."-Christine L. Oravec Professor Emerita, Department of Communication, University of Utah

"Riley's illuminating study of public disputes and private agendas surrounding the release of the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* merits serious consideration today as secular and religious world views clash in postmodern society. Riley persuasively argues that victimage is alive and well in North America, and that disputes over media depictions of religion can shake the foundations of liberal democracy as they nurture distrust, misunderstanding, and even unfair criticism. Thanks to Riley for helping us to see the larger issues at stake in seemingly parochial culture wars about religion and the media."-Quentin J. Schultze Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, Calvin College

About the Author

ROBIN RILEY is Assistant Professor of Electronic Media in the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati.

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