

Spiritual crises in The Sacrifice

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Abstract: Tarkovsky's The Sacrifice is thus a profound statement on spiritual loss and the fallen ungrateful nature of mankind who have turned their back on God and Christ's atoning sacrifice. This is captured in the Nietzschean philosophy and profoundly mundane and materialistic ways the Swedish family is caught up with in the film – lost and in need of redemption, yet ungrateful and unworthy of redemption when the sacrifice is made. Tarkovsky's sacrifice is thus an indictment of the profound spiritual destitution of modern urban ways of living and the decline of faith in Europe.

Keywords: Faith, Europe, Spiritual, Crises, Decline

Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* is about Alexander, a man indifferent to spirituality and God until on his birthday, his family is plunged while celebrating his birthday into the midst of a nuclear apocalypse. Alexander then strikes up a bargain with God to save his family and promising to make a sacrifice for it – his voice and speech for example. When he goes to sleep, he awakes to find that things have been restored but is told by his friend to save the world by sleeping with his maid who is intimated to be a witch. Alexander does as

told and consummates the relationship to find everything to be restored back to normal and that the bargain he has struck with God has indeed been answered but with him making the sacrifice of sleeping with

his maid. Yet, when he returns to the family he saved- all is far from normal. His son wishes to migrate to Australia to escape them which leaves his wife desperate and angry. Maria the maid turns up as Alexander is driven mad by the remaining scene of the family in shambles and he sets fire to his house destroying everything he had sought to save by making the promise. He seeks to return to Maria but is dragged off by his family from her.

Clearly an allegory for man's fallen condition, *The Sacrifice* is about the innate barrenness of a life lived without spirituality and blind to metaphysical truths in the universe such as God's existence and the spiritual forces at work behind everyday phenomena. Hence Alexander is seen leading a mundane and unspectacular life till he is jolted to awareness of the need for redemption on his birthday as a nuclear apocalypse confronts his family and he finally makes contact with God to save his family from impending extinction by promising a sacrifice, much like Christ promises to sacrifice his life by taking on the sin of the world and dying for all of mankind. Alexander's sacrifice however does not involve death but the consummation of a sexual relationship with his maid who is intimated to be a witch who is treated lowly by household members. It is inferred that it is her poor treatment by members of the household that has led her to conjure a spell on the family and bring them



to doom with the threat of nuclear extinction and it is her spell on Alexander which she must sexually possess in order to bring the spell to an end. But the curse is not entirely undone as Alexander returns to the family members bickering bitterly over his son's decision to migrate to Australia to escape them. It would then seem the ruin the maid has brought on the family through her witchcraft refuses to go away- the family remains in shambles though Alexander has saved the world from nuclear apocalypse by sleeping with her. It is thus seen that the world that Alexander has sought to save through his sacrifice of sleeping with the maid is not worth saving as they are ugly and fallen- just as the mankind that Christ sought to save is not appreciative of Christ's atoning sacrifice and often return to their sinful brutish violent and destructive ways that Christ had sought to save them from. Alexander then goes mad and sets fire to all he had sought to save- his house which he sets on fire and his family whom he abandons as he makes his way to a mental hospital at the end of the film.

Thus inferring that the mankind he has made a sacrifice for is not worth saving in the end, the film works as a profound statement on the lack of spirituality in modern life. While Alexander and Christ make atoning sacrifices on behalf of mankind for their indifference to God, it is implied that these sacrifices are made in vain as man remains indifferent to God after his sacrifice, Hence aptly mentioned at the beginning of the film is Nietzsche's theme of eternal recurrence- man is doomed to repeat his fate without any divine redemption even after the price has been

made. Thus implied is the fallen, ugly and brutal nature of man who remains unworthy of redemption even after the price has been paid.

The film is shot in grainy hues of black and white and greyish colours to intimate the spiritual destitution in mankind. Indeed with faith losing its ground in Europe and man growing increasingly indifferent to God it is little wonder Tarkovsky sees a need to make a film about humanity's fallen nature and violence and its dire need of redemption- with the implicit implication that man remains so fallen humanity may not be worth saving in any case. The materialized existence trapped in the mundane and unconcerned with deeper spiritual truths haunts the film which is a profound indictment about the spiritual destitution of modern existence. The film remains an allegory of Christ's return to save the world from its self destruction but what is implied by the film is that mankind remains so fallen and indifferent to God that the sacrifice of Christ's atoning death is made in vain and man may not be worth saving after all. This is inferred from Alexander's family, as a metaphor for mankind, returning to strife and violent and cruel ways even as Alexander has made the atoning sacrifice of sleeping with his maid to save the world. The inherent brutality of mankind indifferent to redemption and spirituality and caught up with the material world and the mundane, unaware of deeper spiritual forces at work and profoundly Nietzschean sceptical and materialist and unworthy of redemption remains at play.



The cinematography is done by Ingmar Bergman's cinematographer Sven Nykist who makes use of long shots to capture the ennui and barrenness of modern existence and grainy black white and grey colours to intimate the lack of vitality and colour in the spiritual landscape. Altogether the film is a bleak commentary on the fallen nature of mankind who remains unworthy of redemption and whose ugly ways, indifferent to spirituality remain unworthy of Christ sacrifice. Tarkovsky's film is thus a deep indictment of the spiritual crises that has beset Europe with its decline in faith and indifference to its creator, God.

Indeed the film remains a profound indictment of the Nietzschean philosophy which as beset Europe with its declaration that God is dead when the film reveals that God remains very much alive and very much at work in the world, it is humanity who is indifferent to God and unworthy of his redemption and atoning sacrifice in the person of Christ. The reality of God is shown in the fact that God intervenes and allows Alexander to save mankind by allowing Alexander to make a sacrifice to save the world by sleeping with his maid- a metaphor for the fallen nature Christ had to take on in the fallen form of man and the crudeness of the crucifixion which demanded the sacrifice of his flesh and mortal life to save mankind. Yet the sacrifice is made in vain as Alexander returns to a household bickering over his son's selfish decision to migrate to Australia

to escape them all- leading Alexander to go mad and set the house which he had tried to save on fire. This is a metaphor for the destruction and hellfire and damnation which we all stand to face if we do not awake from our spiritual malaise and death and turn back to God. The implication from the film is that mankind remains spiritually dead even after Christ's atonement and has returned to their sinful and fallen ways which makes humanity unworthy and undeserving of Christ's sacrifice. Alexander as a metaphor for Christ goes mad because the world he has come to save remains indifferent to his gift of salvation and redemption through the sacrifice of his flesh to save the world.

Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* is thus a profound statement on spiritual loss and the fallen ungrateful nature of mankind who have turned their back on God and Christ's atoning sacrifice. This is captured in the Nietzschean philosophy and profoundly mundane and materialistic ways the Swedish family is caught up with in the film – lost and in need of redemption, yet ungrateful and unworthy of redemption when the sacrifice is made. Tarkovsky's sacrifice is thus an indictment of the profound spiritual destitution of modern urban ways of living and the decline of faith in Europe.

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