

The Python of the Christ

By Ian Bell

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So what did Monty Python's *Life Of Brian* ever do for us? Twenty-five years after the film was first picketed by nuns and banned by local councils who thought that banning things was the meaning of life, it's a good question. Is a movie that once had the incendiary power of the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch still potent? The Pythons think so. Terry Jones, *Brian's* director, recently and merrily confessed that the film's re-release in the US is a shameless attempt to cash in on the success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ*. The actual anniversary of the first showing does not fall until August, but a premature Second Coming has been arranged for *Brian* in the hope that outrage still equals publicity. With 90 million Americans claiming to be born again – "Yes! We're all individuals!" – it shouldn't take a miracle, whether by sacred shoe or holy gourd.

Some of us still consider it a loss, nevertheless, that the Pythons did not stick with their original title. Eric Idle came up with that one, as the others agree. Since they agree so rarely these days, they naturally cannot remember where the flash of divine inspiration happened – Idle says New York, Palin reckons Canada, Cleese says Soho, the others remember an incident in Amsterdam – but the gospel according to Python is clear on one point: after *Holy Grail*, they were asked what they might be doing next. "Oh," said Idle, "our next movie is *Jesus Christ – Lust For Glory*."

But lo, it never came to pass, more's the pity. In fact, it did not take the troupe long to conclude that Jesus was the wrong target entirely. They couldn't really fault his teachings and failed to see what was funny about them. The less relaxed followers of Jesus, on the other hand, were another matter entirely.

In the recent Python Autobiography, Jones explained it this way: "The *Life Of Brian* isn't blasphemous, it's heretical. It's not blasphemous because it takes the Bible story as gospel; you have to believe in the Bible, you have to know and understand the Bible story to understand it for the film, really. It's heretical because it's making fun of the way the church interprets it. Heresy is basically taking against the church's interpretation, not against the

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basic belief.”

John Cleese, equally, has pointed out that Jesus barely features in the film and is seen only while delivering, perfectly seriously, the Sermon on the Mount. “What I think [the film] does very usefully is point out that whatever the founder says, within three minutes everyone’s rewriting it in accordance with their own emotional needs and that’s an extremely good point.” Not to mention a blessing for the cheese makers.

So keen were the Pythons to avoid playing into the hands of conservative believers, they even discarded an alternative plot that has entered the apocrypha of cinema as one of the great unmade comedies. In this version, Brian was to be the 13th disciple, the one who always turned up late. As Cleese put it: “Of course, the funny thing is that if you turn up five minutes late for a miracle you might as well turn up two and a half thousand years late. So he’d missed the Last Supper because his wife had invited friends around and he was going to come on afterwards for a drink. I thought it was really funny, but that got dropped quite early on.”

Instead, the team hit the history books and discovered that it wasn’t too difficult to be mistaken for a messiah in the Holy Land in the 1st century. There was, indeed, a kind of messiah mania going on. Thus was born Brian – “He’s not the Messiah; he’s a very naughty boy” – just down the road from a certain stable. The humour, according to Jones, “lay in somebody preaching and talking about peace and love, and then in people who spend the next 2000 years killing and torturing each other because they can’t quite decide how he said it”. Understandably, the Pythons then went to Barbados to get themselves in the right mood to finish the script.

Their protestations of innocence in the matter of blasphemy were, they probably realised, a waste of time. Some people were always going to be upset by the very thought of Jesus in a comedy. Others would inevitably notice the unusual number of false and freaky prophets populating Python’s ancient Jerusalem. Michael Palin’s sublime turn as an ex-leper, complaining he’d been deprived of a nice little earner by a Christly miracle – “Not so much as a by-your-leave” – was never likely to appeal to those for whom God is a humour bypass. As Brian observed: “There’s no pleasing some people.” Palin: “That’s just what Jesus said, sir.”

Mel Gibson, in contrast, seems to know how to please any number of people. His scourged, agonised Christ stands in irreconcilable contrast to the jolly humanism of *The Life Of Brian*, where crucifixion calls for a song. “Life’s a piece of shit,” as Idle sings, “when you look at it/Life’s a laugh and death’s a joke, it’s true/You’ll see it’s all a show, keep ’em laughing as you go/Just remember that the last laugh is on you.”

The ditty alone, a piece of amiable atheism, was and remains enough of an indictment for

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the deeply conservative American Christians who see redemption in Gibson's universe of pain, anti-Semitic blood libel or no anti-Semitic blood libel. The Pythons, irredeemably, are what the American right calls liberal, meaning second cousins to the anti-Christ. It may be that their satire is too close to the mark for those who claim exclusive knowledge of God's intentions. It may equally be that there truly is no pleasing fundamentalists. If *The Passion Of The Christ* demonstrates anything, it is that America, taken as a whole, is now less forgiving than it was even 25 years ago.

Still, being banned is nothing new for Python. EMI was the first to offer funding for Brian, but then-chief executive Lord Delfont (brother of Lew Grade) took cold feet over an anti-Zionist skit – the Pythons were equal opportunity blasphemers – that was later cut from the script. It was left to George Harrison to play the angel, risking large quantities of his own money for the simple, Beatle-like reason that he just wanted to see the film. The result, soon enough, was that Monty Python became known in some circles as an agent of the devil.

First, the Association of New York Rabbis complained about the use of a prayer shawl in the stoning sketch. Then nuns with placards were holding vigils outside cinemas. In Britain, councils the length of the country were debating bans. When Cleese and Palin appeared on late night television with the Bishop of Southwark and Malcolm Muggeridge, doyen of the devout and smug, the jokes stopped being funny. The bishop said he hoped the Pythons would enjoy their “30 pieces of silver”. Muggeridge asserted that Christianity had been responsible for more good in the world than any other force in history, to which Cleese replied: “What about the Spanish Inquisition?” Nobody, it is fair to say, had expected that.

The Life Of Brian is the Pythons' most coherent film, though that isn't saying much. With hindsight, the complaints against it from certain Christians seem a little precious, since everyone, from Latin scholars to Trots, got it in the neck. Yasser Arafat's thoughts on the People's Front Of Judea, for example, are not recorded, but the point was well made. Tellingly, only the meek, with Brian as their representative on earth, were exempt. Then again, as script and Scripture record, they've had a hell of a time.

The enormous success of Gibson's bleak inquisition suggests that the Pythons were altogether too gentle with their satire. Then again, these heirs of Voltaire and Swift could never have known a quarter of a century ago how fundamentalism of every stripe would come to dominate the first years of the 21st century. Believers, it seems, are spoiling for a fight, and Brian is not really the film with which to answer them. It is neither of the school of Lenny Bruce nor of Luis Bunuel. It is too gentle, too entirely humane, for that. If it was a piece of halibut, though, it would be good enough for Jehovah.

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