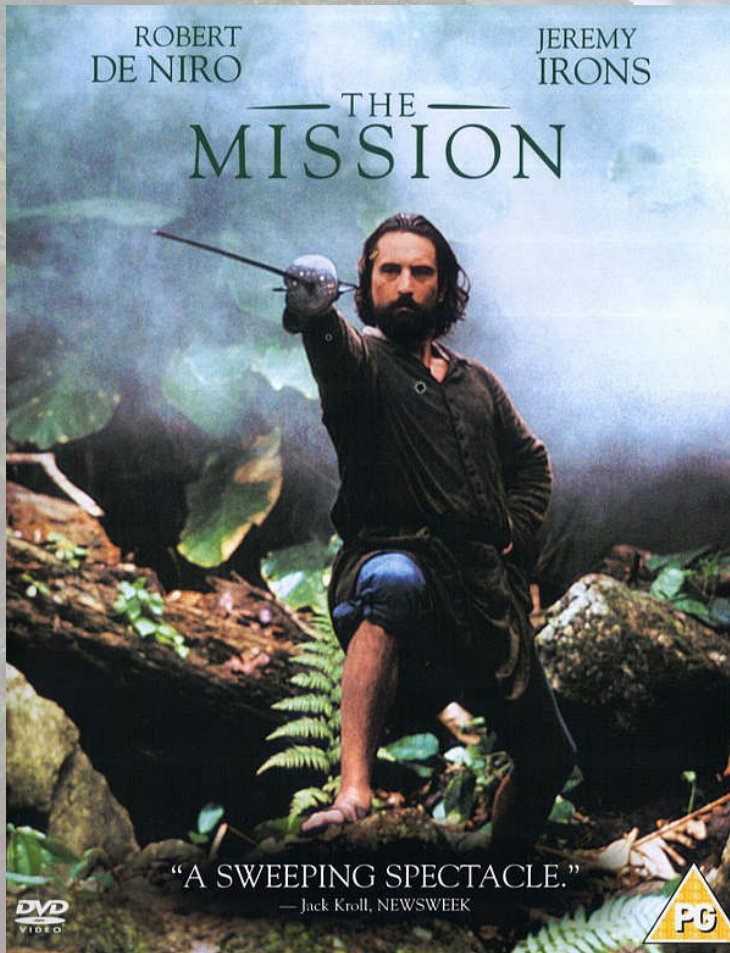


The Mission



**directed by
Roland Joffe
written by
Robert Bolt**

released in 1986

Cast

- Robert De Niro ... Rodrigo Mendoza
- Jeremy Irons ... Father Gabriel
- Ray McAnally ... Cardinal Altamirano
- Aidan Quinn ... Felipe Mendoza
- Cherie Lunghi ... Carlotta
- Ronald Pickup ... Hontar
- Chuck Low ... Cabeza
- Liam Neeson ... Fielding
- Bercelio Moya ... Indian Boy
- Sigifredo Ismare ... Witch Doctor
- Asuncion Ontiveros ... Indian

About the film

- *The Mission* is a 1986 British film about the experiences of a Jesuit missionary in 18th century South America. It won the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for Best Cinematography. In April 2007, it was elected number one on the Church Times Top 50 Religious Films list. The music, scored by Italian composer Ennio Morricone, was listed at #23 on AFI's 100 Years of Film Scores.

Setting: The realignment of the South American territories of Spain and Portugal in 1750



In the Treaty of Madrid, Spain was to surrender territory to Portugal. Slavery was illegal in Spanish territory but not in Portuguese territory. This change threatened the natives who had been living in Jesuit missions since the 17th century.

Father Gabriel



The film is set in the 1750s and involves the Jesuit Reductions, a program by which the Catholic Church was put under political pressure to end its protection of natives and to close its missions in South America. The story is a fictional recombination of actual events that unfolded in this era.

This is the story of a Spanish Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), who has built a successful Jesuit mission in the jungles of the Amazon and converted a community of Guaraní Indians to Christianity, and of the eventual destruction of the missions by the secular Spanish and Portuguese colonial governments.

Mendoza



The mercenary and slave trader, Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro), makes his living kidnapping Guaraní and other indigenous people and selling them to the nearby plantations. Nonetheless, he is shown to have a humane character, caring deeply both for his brother Felipe (Aidan Quinn) and fiancée Carlotta (Cherie Lunghi). However, when Carlotta reveals to him that she has fallen in love with Felipe, his anger at being rejected results in him stabbing Felipe to death in a duel.

Acquitted of the murder, as it resulted from a legal duel, Mendoza spirals into extreme guilt and depression and withdraws from all society. Father Gabriel, who has temporarily returned from beyond the falls and learned of Mendoza's situation, visits and confronts him, challenging Mendoza to have the courage to undertake a suitable penance. Mendoza joins Gabriel, joins the missions, and defends the natives he once sold into slavery.

Cardinal Altamirano



Nearly all of the film is a flashback shown while Papal emissary Cardinal Altamirano (Ray McAnally) is dictating a letter to the Pope detailing what happened. The Pope had made a political deal in Europe with Spain and Portugal which would close the missions. Altamirano is sent to South America to report back on the situation, but the outcome was already a foregone conclusion.

Cabeza



The Spanish landowner and “labor broker” Cabeza is pushing hard for the territories to be transferred to Portugal and for the Catholic missions to be closed down. If the natives are no longer protected by the missions, and slavery is legalized, his business will be much more profitable.

Historical basis

The Mission is based on events surrounding the Treaty of Madrid in 1750, in which Spain ceded part of Jesuit Paraguay to Portugal. The film's narrator, "Altamirano," speaking in hindsight in 1758, corresponds to the actual Andalusian Jesuit Father Luis Altamirano, who was sent by Jesuit Superior General Ignacio Visconti to Paraguay in 1752 to transfer territory from Spain to Portugal. He oversaw the transfer of seven missions south and east of the Río Uruguay, that had been settled by Guaranis and Jesuits in the 1600s.

As compensation, Spain promised each mission 4,000 pesos, or fewer than 1 peso for each of the 30,000 Guaranis of the seven missions, while the cultivated lands, livestock, and buildings were estimated to be worth 7-16 million pesos.

The film's climax is the Guarani War of 1754-1756, during which historical Guaranis defended their homes against Spanish-Portuguese forces implementing the Treaty of Madrid. For the film, a re-creation was made of one of the seven missions, São Miguel das Missões.

Notable dialog

Altamirano:

Your Holiness, a surgeon to save the body, must often hack off a limb. But in truth nothing could prepare me for the beauty and the power of the limb that I had come here to sever.

Prospects for success



Mendoza: For me there is no redemption, no penance great enough.

Gabriel: There is. But do you dare to try it?

Mendoza: Do you dare to see it fail?

Satisfaction

Altamirano:

This seeking to create a paradise on Earth... how easily it offends. Your holiness is offended because it may distract from that paradise which is to come hereafter. Their majesties of Spain and Portugal are offended because the paradise of the poor is seldom pleasing to those who rule over them. And the settlers here are offended for the same reason.

So it was this burden that I carried to South America: to satisfy the Portuguese wish to enlarge their empire, to satisfy the Spanish desire that this would do them no harm, to satisfy your Holiness that these monarchs of Spain and Portugal would threaten no more the power of the Church, and to ensure for you all that the Jesuits here could no longer deny you these satisfactions. (51:20)

The will of God

Altamirano:

Tell them they must leave the missions. They must submit to the will of God.

Gabriel: They say it was the will of God that they came out of the jungle and built the mission. They don't understand why God has changed his mind.

The way of the world



Hontar: We must work in the world, your eminence. The world is thus.

Altamirano: No, Señor Hontar. Thus have we made the world... thus have I made it.

Those who live on

Altamirano:

So, your Holiness, now your priests are dead, and I am left alive. But in truth it is I who am dead, and they who live. For as always, your Holiness, the spirit of the dead will survive in the memory of the living.

Conflict between religious and state power in *The Mission*



Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's

Matthew 22:21

The balance of power

Every great religion has been forced to co-exist with secular governments, and religious teachings are in obvious conflict with the goals of a government. Religion preaches love, compassion, peace, and sharing of resources, while the state upholds social hierarchies, systems of trade, and division of labor. It must defend itself and defend the established interests of its citizens.

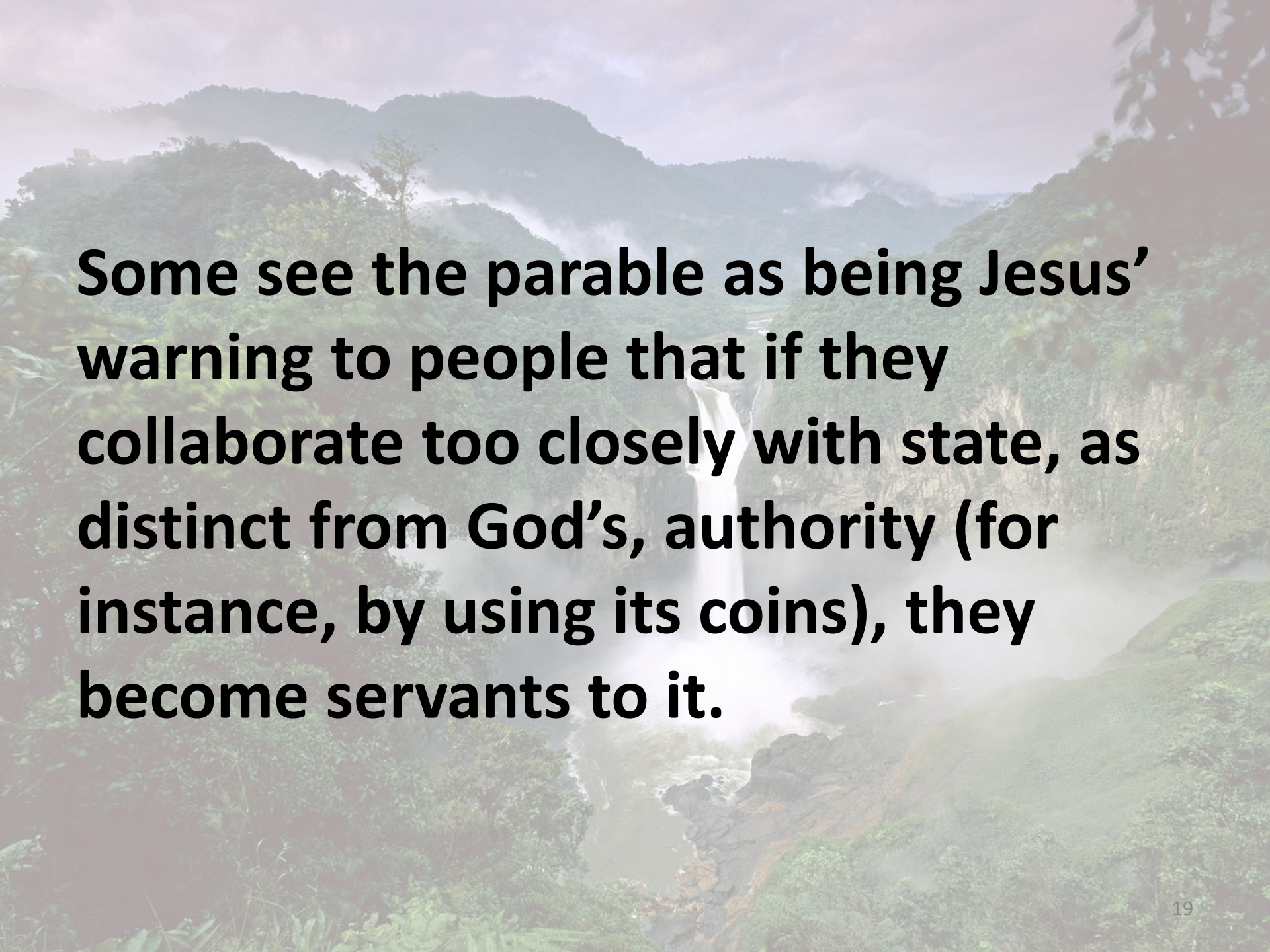
In this conflict, religions have always had to submit to earthly power (government), but governments have also been pressured by religions to govern according to the moral teachings of religions. Thus, in Europe, there has always been a balance of power between religion and the state.

While religion has often been a servile hypocrite to state power, it has sometimes played an important role in limiting that power. This quote from the Bible about “rendering unto Caesar” is the fundamental question about religion’s coexistence with state power. (Caesar is taken to mean *king, state, government or earthly power.*)

Should the faithful pay taxes to a ruler they reject?

The Bible states that questioners tried to trap Jesus into stating a clear policy on whether Jews should or should not pay taxes to the Roman occupation. They thought that Jesus would oppose the tax. Jesus first called them hypocrites, and then asked one of them to produce a Roman coin that would be suitable for paying Caesar's tax.

One of them showed him a Roman coin, and he asked them whose name and inscription were on it. They answered, "Caesar's," and he responded "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." His interrogators were confused by this strong but ambiguous answer, and they left disappointed.



Some see the parable as being Jesus' warning to people that if they collaborate too closely with state, as distinct from God's, authority (for instance, by using its coins), they become servants to it.

Thoreau writes in *Civil Disobedience*:

If you use money which has the image of Caesar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, if you are men of the State, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Caesar's government, then pay him back some of his own when he demands it; "Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God those things which are God's.

Mennonite Dale Glass-Hess wrote:

Jesus does not answer the question about the morality of paying taxes to Caesar, but he throws it back on the people to decide. When the Jews produce a denarius coin at Jesus' request, they demonstrate that by using these coins they are already doing business with Caesar on Caesar's terms.

... The Jews had already compromised themselves. Likewise for us: we may refuse to serve Caesar as soldiers and even try to resist paying for Caesar's army. But the fact is that by our lifestyles, by using the coins issued by the government, we are in debt to Caesar, who has felt it is necessary to go to war to defend the interests that support our lifestyles. If Caesar wants payment, it's a too late for us to say that we don't owe anything.

Mohandas K. Gandhi wrote:

Jesus evaded the direct question put to him because it was a trap. He was in no way bound to answer it. He therefore asked to see the coin for taxes. And then said with withering scorn, “How can you who traffic in Caesar’s coins and thus receive what to you are benefits of Caesar’s rule refuse to pay taxes?”

Jesus’ whole preaching and practice point unmistakably to not just refusal to pay taxes but complete non-cooperation with the state – that is, a refusal to use the coins issued by it.

All religions have faced the same question in varied ways

Other religions were no different. The *Yamabushi* of Japan originated as “mountain monks” who slowly became skilled warriors as they were forced into siding with political allies.

Originally, they wanted to live by the peaceful religious teachings of Buddhism. At first, they fought to defend their mountain territories from outside interference, but eventually they became involved in all the political and military conflicts of Japanese history leading up to the Edo unification.

A common theme in many stories



In the Japanese film *Princess Mononoke* one can see similarities to *The Mission*. In the former, we see the tension between the state government, independent mountain communes and religious ideals, in this case expressed as nature worship.

What is one to do?

According to the director of *The Mission* (Roland Joffe), the essential thing about his story was the choices made by individuals – how they chose to die in the final conflict.

Father Gabriel refuses to pick up a weapon, and he leads his followers into the guns of the attackers. The warrior monk Rodrigo dies for having chosen to save a child rather than to blow up a bridge that would cut off the approaching soldiers.

Joffe stresses that the struggle of the native people in the Amazon has not changed in three hundred years. It continues to this day.

Relevance

The story of *The Mission* would be utterly irrelevant if you could not connect it to the contemporary world.

- What is there in your world that you are going to live and die for?
- What is worth fighting for and preserving for future generations?
- Is it possible to not get involved, to ignore the world and just live life in the private and personal realm?
- How have we compromised ourselves by using “Caesar’s coin” ?
- and how are we going to resolve the problems we are trapped in?