

**God as a Spider: The Religious and Existential Implications of
Bergman and Nietzsche on Christian Faith**

by Sean Volk

When thinking about spiders, the first descriptors that come to mind are typically creepy and crawly. From early mythology to the more contemporary works of J.R.R. Tolkien, spiders have been crafty or villainous figures in literature. In western religious literature, spiders represent the darkness of the human condition. In *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Alva William Steffler writes, “The spider is primarily a symbol of Satan. As a spider traps with its web, so the Devil traps with temptation. The fragile construction of the spider’s web is compared to the vain hope of the godless.”¹ Besides E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, there are few sympathetic characterizations of spiders in popular western literature. The same is true in film. Classic Science Fiction B-Movies like “Tarantula” and “Arachnophobia” show spiders as creatures to be feared and avoided. In these films, humans fight legions of spiders hell-bent on making Earth a webby home for themselves with humans as their food. Legendary Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman also used spiders in his films, but without the special effects of a Science Fiction thriller. Bergman uses the spider as a metaphor for God in his films “Through a Glass Darkly” and “Winterlight.” This essay will focus on Bergman’s use of the spider metaphor in “Through a Glass Darkly.” Characterizing God as a spider is contrary to much of the religious imagery and symbolism in Christian culture. In Christian contexts, God is usually shown as omnipotent and benevolent, not creepy or crawly. But, the metaphor of God as a spider is not unique to Bergman. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche also references God as a spider in his work “Miscellaneous Opinions and Maxims.” An analysis of Bergman and Nietzsche’s conceptions of

¹ Alva William Steffler, *Symbols of Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 123.

God as a spider will show that both the director and the philosopher believe that it is the responsibility of the individual to create their own understanding of God and religion.

In “Through a Glass Darkly,” Ingmar Bergman sets out to deliver a simple message, God is love. Bergman writes in his cinematic memoir “Images,” “‘Through a Glass Darkly’ was a desperate attempt to present a simple philosophy: God is love and love is God. A person surrounded by Love is also surrounded by God.”² To convey this message Bergman tells the story of a family vacationing on an island close to their home. Karin and Martin are a young married couple facing a difficult time in their relationship. Karin is schizophrenic and has recently been released from a stay in a mental hospital. Recovery is possible, but unlikely. Karin’s father David is a popular author who escapes into the worlds he creates for his novels. Instead of confronting the interpersonal conflicts before him, he analyzes and writes about them in his novels. Karin’s brother Minus appears to have been altogether forgotten by the family as he struggles through puberty and becoming an adult. Minus is beginning to have sexual desires and he struggles to understand them.

At first glance, the four appear to be a happy family as they frolic along the beach, divide chores, and prepare for dinner. But it becomes clear that these people are not as perfect as they first appear. Karin has turned away from Martin in the bedroom leaving both sexually frustrated. David feels as though he has failed his children with his absence during their lives. Minus wants to experience sexual love but he is confused by his feelings. Martin is desperate to help his wife recover, but she continues to pull away from his assistance.

Karin’s schizophrenia becomes more pronounced over the course of the vacation as she continually makes nocturnal visits to the attic. During the night she goes to the attic to be closer to the voices that she hears, to try to find communion with them. In the attic, she is opened to

² Ingmar Bergman, *Images* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), p. 248.

another world. She hears whispers announcing that someone or something is coming. This being or thing will come to Karin through the closet door of the attic room. She waits for the arrival of this mysterious visitor. Karin allows the voices to determine her actions, ultimately becoming powerless to them.

At the end of the film, Karin has a complete psychological breakdown. She runs to the attic because the thing or being she has waited for is set to arrive. David and Martin try to force Karin out of the attic room but she fights back, demanding to stay behind. Once David and Martin agree to let her stay, the closet door slowly opens revealing an empty space to David, Martin, and the audience. But the space is not empty to Karin. She is frightened by something unseen by everyone else. Karin turns to shield herself from some thing that is moving at her. She swats at her body and tries to push away an invisible force. While she screams, Martin tries to calm her down but he cannot get through to her. Karin bursts through the attic room door and runs down the stairs. She is confronted by Minus at the bottom of the stairs and she turns around to run back up the stairs but she is stopped by Martin and David. They pin her down on the stairs and Martin gives her a shot from his medical kit to calm her down.

Karin calms down and tells her family that she saw God. God was not good; God came to her in the form of a spider. The spider crawled from out of the closet and attacked her. Martin, David, and Minus listen to her story dumbfounded by what they have heard. They witnessed the scene but Karin's story is so fantastic that they do not believe her. Martin takes her to the medical helicopter and he and Karin leave the island to seek medical help, leaving David and Minus behind. Minus asks his father about God and David says that God is love; love in all its beauty or perversion is God. Whether in a relationship with another person or with God, David tells his son that God is found in love.

The message of the film is falsely optimistic. The God of love shown by Bergman in “Through a Glass Darkly” is not benevolent or omnipotent. This representation of God is destructive and cruel. Bergman wrote about the figure which visits Karin in his production diary while making the film. He writes:

A god descends into a human and settles in her. First he is just an inner voice, a certain knowledge, or a commandment. Threatening or pleading. Repulsive yet stimulating. Then he lets himself be more and more known to her, and the human being gets to test the strength of the god, learns to love him, sacrifices for him, and finds herself forced into the utmost devotion and then into complete emptiness. When this emptiness has been accomplished, the god takes possession of this human being and accomplishes his work through her hands. Then he leaves her empty and burned out, without any possibility of continuing to live in this world.³

Bergman’s spider God is one that is selfish and hurtful. The spider God manipulated and hurt Karin. He did not love or nurture her like the Christian tradition suggests one will find in a relationship with God. He communicated with her, used her, and left her only a shell of a person. After Karin’s contact with the spider God, she was unable to relate to others or function in human relationships.

Bergman does not believe that God is actually a spider. Bergman’s notes describe that a god visits Karin, not God. She wrongly refers to the spider being as God. This aspect of the script makes Bergman’s film especially challenging. Karin’s reference to God as a spider characterizes God, not a god, as malicious. This causes the audience to challenge their conceptions of God, forcing the audience to accept their inability to understand all aspects of God and existence. How can a good God let evil and cruelty happen in the world? If there is a benevolent or omnipotent God, that God is not involved in human life for Bergman. This notion of an absent God is central in an understanding of Bergman’s theology and films. In “Ingmar Bergman: The Filmmaker as Philosopher,” Robert Lauder examines Bergman’s works as if they

³ Bergman, *Images*, p. 252.

were visual philosophy. He writes, “Bergman’s philosophy is that God is non-existent or at least silent and our only hope is interpersonal human loving. Because of God’s absence death forces us to look for redemption and salvation apart from God. Fleeting interpersonal love is only redemption for which we can hope.”⁴ Bergman uses his films to encourage people to develop their own understanding of the role and purpose of God in their lives. Bergman believes that God can be found in the beauty and significance of love in interpersonal communication. God is not a strict set of ideas or religious practices as proposed by religions of the world, God is found in personal connections. This relational understanding of God is the best that humans can have of God according to Bergman.

As an artist, Bergman works through issues of religion, God, love, abandonment, and pain on a daily basis, but that is not the case for many people. People shy away from difficult questions and they use religion to do this. In “The Disappearance of God,” Richard Friedman addresses a current surge in global religions. He is critical of those who blindly adhere to religion. He writes:

The increase in the number of adherents of devout movements in recent decades represents not that the heavens opened and rained down miracles to persuade people of religious truths; but rather, I think, the turning of many to orthodox faith was, at least in part, a response to how cold and frightening our times had become. This phenomenon looks like a grasp for hope – precisely in the face of the sensation of the hiddenness of God, precisely as an expression of the fear with which the absence of God leaves us.⁵

Instead of actively trying to create their own religious meaning, people blindly become a part of religious organizations to hide their theological and existential questions. Simply joining a church is not the answer for Bergman; this action covers the difficult personal journey required in discovering spirituality.

⁴ Robert Lauder, “Ingmar Bergman: The Filmmaker as Philosopher,” *Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1987), p. 51.

⁵ Richard Friedman, *The Disappearance of God* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) p. 201.

By characterizing God as a spider, Bergman forces the individual to justify their interpretation of God with the flawed, cruel being found in “Through a Glass Darkly.” Bergman’s conceptions of God as a spider and God as love challenges the individual to answer difficult questions about God and their beliefs. Before Bergman, German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that God was spiderlike. Nietzsche’s philosophy in “Miscellaneous Opinions and Maxims” works in dialogue with Bergman’s film. While Bergman challenges our conceptions of a creator, Nietzsche uses a spider metaphor to ponder what humans can actually know about existence. Nietzsche writes in Aphorism 32:

When the poet depicts the various callings – such as those of the warrior, the silk-weaver, the sailor – he feigns to know all these things thoroughly, to be an expert. Even in the exposition of human actions and destinies he behaves as if he had been present at the spinning of the whole web of existence. In so far he is an imposter. He practices his frauds on pure ignoramuses, and that is why he succeeds. They praise him for his deep, genuine knowledge, and lead him finally into the delusion that he really knows as much as the individual experts and creators, yes, even as the great world-spinners themselves.⁶

As humans we are limited. Try as we might through metaphysics, art, and poetry, our understanding of the world will never be complete. We can create ideas of God and try to explain the meaning and purpose of our lives, but that is something we can never truly know. In this Aphorism, Nietzsche references the “web of existence” and its creator. We try to use knowledge and art to understand this web and the “great world-spinners” but we cannot comprehend the entirety of existence. No matter how hard we try, no matter our self assuredness, no matter our life doctrines, we cannot fully understand the nature of what it means to exist. All we can do is posit theories and ideas. We can use religion, philosophy, and art, but clarity cannot ever be achieved.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All – Too Human* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964) p. 27.

This despair and angst in the face of existence is what Bergman works through in his films. When we try to understand our inability to grasp the meaning and purpose of God or existence, we see how alone we are in the world. Bergman's idea of a hidden or absent God becomes clear when we ask sincere religious and philosophical questions. Bergman scholar Jesse Kalin analyzes the themes in Bergman's work and focuses on God's silence in "The Films of Ingmar Bergman." He writes,

Now God appears not silent but monstrous and malicious, no different than the cancer or nuclear weapons He allows. Such real helplessness, if we do give into it, removes all hope and deprives our physical existence and suffering of any intelligibility, even that of a passion. There is only our humiliation... For Bergman it remains necessary to resist the defeat and despair these conditions counsel. Within this helplessness we must find something to offer each other, if only our shared humiliation and the comfort of not being alone.⁷

We are helpless to the cruelties and suffering found in our world but Bergman encourages us to live in spite of the torment. We cannot know God or truths with any degree of certainty.

Once we acknowledge the limitations of our humanity, we can begin to live. We make choices which shape our identity. We can choose to be religious, existential, or atheistic. Making the choice to live and accepting one's own limitations is the hardest aspect of engaging in life. In Aphorism 124 of "The Gay Science," Nietzsche uses a metaphor of a ship at sea to explain the harrowing journey into self-discovery and creation. He writes:

We have left the land behind and boarded the ship. We have burned our bridges – more than that, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, watch out! By your side lies the ocean; true, it does not always roar, and sometimes it lies there like silk and gold and daydreams of kindness. But the hours are coming when you will recognize the infinite, and that there is nothing more terrifying than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt itself free and now collides with the walls of this cage! Alas, when homesickness for the land comes over you, as if there had been more *freedom* there – and there is no longer any "land!"⁸

⁷ Jesse Kalin, *The Films of Ingmar Bergman* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 20.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995) p. 133.

In the metaphor, the land represents our complacent easy lives of accepting truth and prepackaged understandings of God and religion. When we form our own beliefs independent of those around us, we set out to sea. The waters of the future are unclear. As the ship sets sail, there is no way to know if new life you are living will be successful. The new life may not work out, but it will be more authentic than following the ideas and practices of those around you simply because they have already been established.

By embracing uncertainty and potential for error, humans are able to lead an authentic life. This life is more difficult than following the dogmas of organized religion because the individual creates something meaningful and new. Bergman encourages this existential life in his films. Kalin describes the goal of Bergman's film in his essay "The Films of Ingmar Bergman." He writes:

Bergman's subject is not being as such but the moral world – ourselves as human beings in the twentieth century: what is deepest and most true and essential about us, and what meaning we can find for our lives in the face of this truth. His goal is an essential portrait, an image of human being with its heart exposed and beating, a picture of what we each look like without our protective illusions, evasions, and lies. Such reduction to essentials provides a mirror in which we can see ourselves as we truly are, face to face.⁹

Not assuming the nature of God or the world enables the individual to live openly and honestly. Belief in God in the face of uncertainty is sincere, authentic faith.

Bergman and Nietzsche teach us that before we can believe in God, we first need to understand and believe in ourselves. Choosing God and faith is a profound decision when we acknowledge the limitations of our human condition and the existence of evil in our world. Bergman and Nietzsche present God as a spider to challenge our conception of God and existence. Instead of adopting one set of religious or existential ideas, Bergman and Nietzsche challenge us to see the uncertainty and the cruelty of the world and still have faith. Finding faith

⁹ Kalin, *The Films of Ingmar Bergman*, p. 1.

may be difficult, but that is part of the process of becoming faithful. Faith is not and should not be easy. By building a faith on a foundation of nothingness and sorrow, the beliefs are as authentic and true as they can be.