

Caught in the Crossfire

Gibson and his movie.

By Roy Schoeman

It seems odd that today's self-appointed arbiters of public morality are eager to canonize sodomy as a fundamental human right, and to defend the display of a dung-smearing Madonna at public expense as a heroic exercise of First Amendment rights, while condemning Mel Gibson's literal portrayal of the Gospels as beyond the pale of acceptable social behavior. It is enough to lead one to believe that, to these critics, it is God Himself - at least, a personal God who places any particular requirements on moral behavior or, worse yet, religious practice - who is the enemy. The only God acceptable to them would be an amorphous one with no religious or moral preferences, and the only acceptable religion one that asserts no claim to objective truth. Unfortunately Christianity fails both of these tests, and thus so do Mel Gibson and his movie.

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* commits a litany of unforgivable sins. It accepts the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus at face value, rejecting the "demythologizing" reinterpretations that have become the pseudo-dogma of the past several decades, thus incurring the wrath of a bevy of doctorate-wielding modern theologians (some of whom, to the shame of the Catholic Church, are on its payroll). It incorporates scenes from the mystical visions of Catholic saints, as though they might actually have historical value and not be simply the delusional hallucinations of pious psychopaths. Compounding the offense is Gibson's apparent belief that God played a role in his making the movie, as though God Himself might have an interest in the Gospel being preached "to all nations," and that Gibson's artistic decisions might have had some help from the Holy Spirit. Gibson's unapologetic admission that he understands Church dogma as it has been understood for most of the past 20 centuries of Christianity, rather than according to the more recent post-Vatican II interpretations, has only added fuel to the fire.

Since Gibson's foes would have a hard time claiming the moral high ground on the basis of their opposition to Christianity itself, they have had to resort to an always-convenient tactic in attacking Christianity - the accusation of anti-Semitism. This weapon can be trotted out perpetually, because there is - let's face it - something intrinsically opposed to Judaism at the very heart of Christian faith. It is not the belief that there is anything defective or inferior about the Jewish race; that is hardly sustainable, given that, according to Christianity, when God Himself took human flesh, he chose to take the flesh of a Jew. Not only was the incarnate God Jewish, but so was - at least in the Catholic faith - the only perfect creature God ever made: the Blessed Virgin Mary. No, Christian doctrine cannot be held to teach the inferiority of the Jewish race; if anything, it is in greater danger of teaching its superiority. But it is precisely because Christianity teaches that Jesus came as the Jewish Messiah to the Jewish people that the religion implies that Judaism is in fundamental error in its rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. The "Christian" theologians who have taken the lead in attacking the film - many of them leaders in the "Jewish-Christian" dialogue - have generally made their careers by sidestepping this dilemma by asserting either that Jesus was simply a great moral and ethical teacher, a Rabbi among Rabbis, whose later disciples conferred divine status on him (a view that is by definition non-Christian); or that Jesus introduced Christianity as a way for non-Jews to enter the Jewish covenant but never intended for Jews to become Christian, an interpretation which is contradicted throughout the Gospels. In either case, in their minds, "Gospel Truth" is bunk.

Hence, the attacks against the movie rest on the claim that its literal acceptance of the Gospels makes it unhistorical and anti-Semitic. This supposed anti-Semitism is produced not by the Gospels themselves, but by the false separation of Christianity from Judaism that is part of the modernist spin. Because upon honest examination, it becomes clear that it is not only most of the villains in the Gospels who are Jews, but also all of the heroes, starting with Jesus and his apostles; Caiaphas was no more a Jew than John the beloved disciple.

Our culture pretends that Judaism and Christianity are two separate but equal religions, with equal validity. But that is intrinsically illogical - one or the other must be wrong. They are one and the same faith, separated only by the matter of whether or not Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and the religious consequences stemming from that fact. Yet mention of this point must be avoided at all costs, under the current rules of our politically correct culture, for it implies that either Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, and all of today's Jews are mistaken, or that Jesus was not, in which case Christianity is a grotesque and idolatrous error.

Poor Mel. He finds himself on the front lines, abandoned by those who should be his allies, and getting it from both sides of the "Jewish-Christian" dialogue, as well as from anyone else infuriated with Christianity for any reason. I for one pray that he has absorbed more than a little of the spirits of those two famous characters he played, Braveheart and Mad Max. He'll need it.

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Inside the Vatican

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Your thoughtful article covering the controversy over Gibson's *The Passion* closes by asking whether the opposition to the film which claims to be opposition to anti-Semitism may rather be "opposition to certain fundamental truths of the New Testament itself". Based on my own experience as a Jew prior to my conversion to the Catholic Church, I can only answer in the affirmative. Although true anti-Semitism does still exist today, it cannot be found in Catholic doctrine or among genuine Catholics. Unfortunately some fundamental Christian beliefs are sometimes unfairly accused of being anti-Semitism.

One such is the belief that there is something intrinsically erroneous about Judaism. Yet this belief flows naturally from Christian dogma. If Jesus was the Messiah longed for and expected by the Jews, of course contemporary Judaism, in its assertion that the Jewish Messiah has not yet come, must be in fundamental error. It is no fairer for Jews on this basis to call Christians anti-Semitic than it would be for Christians to call Jews anti-Christian because Jews believe that Christians are in error about who Jesus was. Far from being "anti-Jewish", the Christian belief that the Jew Jesus was God incarnate is an exaltation, not a diminution, of the intrinsic dignity and importance of Judaism.

Another related Christian belief which is subject to the false accusation of anti-Semitism is the Christian's desire to see Jews convert to Christianity. If "no one comes to the Father except through me"(Jn 14:6), if "unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you"(Jn 6:53), if "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"(Jn 3:5) - all direct quotes from Jesus Himself -- then true charity towards Jews implies seeking, or at least praying for, their baptism and entry into the Church.

When Christians simply create a situation in which Jews are exposed to Christian images they are at times accused of anti-Semitism. The fact that Jesus originally came preferentially for the Jews (Mt. 15:24), that their rejection of Him caused Him particular pain (Lk 13:34), and that He never ceases to "stand at the door and knock"(Rev. 3:20), results in the fact that the drive within a Jew to preserve his Jewish identity reacts with horror to being exposed to images or environments which might open the door a crack. Thus the attempt to strip the Christmas season of all Christian imagery. It is apparent that the "spirit of the Christmas season" puts most people, even non-Christians, in a joyful or ebullient mood. But why should the dreariest, darkest part of the year have such an effect? The mood which people feel is intrinsically, supernaturally related to the coming of Christ, to the joy of all Heaven at the event two thousand years ago and the echoing of that joy in its commemoration, in all of Heaven and among much of mankind, today. I remember myself, as a small child almost entirely ignorant of Christianity, feeling that spirit, that joy, and how it resulted in a longing for the Christ child - exactly as it was supposed to do. That is what lies behind, I would argue, the desire among some Jews that any genuinely religious Christmas images, such as crèches, be excised from public life. It is an attempt to isolate themselves, and their even more vulnerable children, from the potential infection of belief; of sensing the Lord knocking at the door of their hearts and opening the door a crack. And it also lies, I believe, behind the accusation of anti-Semitism against Gibson's movie. For it is not only the sweetness of our Lord's birth which has the power to draw hearts, but also the beauty and sweetness of the love which He showed us in being willing to undergo His Passion for our sakes. The sight of His suffering, of His gentleness ("like a lamb He was led to slaughter"), of His forgiveness ("Father, forgive them..") had the power to convert hardened hearts at the time, and still does today. Thus the root motivation of some Jewish groups' opposition to the Passion is not the fear that it will cause Christians to hate Jews, but that it will cause Jews to love Christ. That this motivation should be so twisted and misrepresented as to garb itself in the almost unassailable mantle of "anti-Semitism" is not surprising, given the cleverness of the one who most directly opposes Christ. But that Christians should be duped into going along with this reversal - that is, calling the greatest good which could befall any non-Christian, that of falling in love with Christ, anti-Semitism - is shocking and shameful, and a dereliction of the Christian's duty to show true love to all, especially to the Jews who brought us Christ, and an act for which the Christian will be called to account when he comes to judgment before that Jew Jesus.

Roy Schoeman

Author *Salvation is from the Jews* (Ignatius Press)

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Roy Schoeman is author of 'Salvation is from the Jews: The Role of Judaism in Salvation History from Abraham to the Second Coming'. More information can be found at www.salvationisfromthejews.com and the Ignatius Press website.