

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

February 4, 2004

I have seen the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion of the Christ," on two occasions and consider it to be the most moving dramatization of the death of Jesus Christ ever made. It is magnificent beyond words. I stand with those Catholics, Protestants and Jews who have seen the film and do not find it to be anti-Semitic. If I thought it were, I would not hesitate to condemn it. Not everyone has, or will, agree with this assessment. That's fine. What is not fine is the sheer demagoguery that has accompanied some of the criticism.

Last summer, Boston University theology professor Paula Fredriksen said in *The New Republic*, "When violence breaks out, Mel Gibson will have a much higher authority than professors and bishops to answer to." Fredriksen is a self-described "raised-Catholic, Marxist-feminist convert to Orthodox Judaism." She did not say "if violence breaks out"—but "when."

More disturbing than Fredriksen has been Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL. Foxman recently gained admission to the film when it was previewed in Orlando; he did so by identifying himself as executive director of The Church of the Truth. In a news release, he wrote, "Will the film trigger pogroms against Jews? Our answer is probably not." Which means it may.

And who exactly is it that Foxman has in mind? On January 23, he was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* saying, "[Gibson is] hawking it on a commercial crusade to the churches of this country. That's what makes it dangerous." I wrote to him on January 26 asking for an apology, but none has been

forthcoming. "To say the film is dangerous because the people who are previewing it are church-going Christians," I wrote, "is an insult to practicing Christians." I added, "The subtext of this remark is that church-going Christians are latent anti-Semitic bigots ready to lash out at Jews at any given moment."

This is not an unusual reaction for the ADL. In 1993, when the Passion Play "Jesus Was His Name" was performed in 23 American cities, Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of the ADL's interfaith department, warned that the "presentation does not contribute to peace." The record will show that not one act of violence occurred in any city.

If history is any guide, there will be no pogroms of any sort following the release of the movie. Leonard Dinnerstein, author of *Antisemitism in America*, has said, "There never have been pogroms in America; there never have been respectable antisemitic political parties in America; and there never have been any federal laws curtailing Jewish opportunities in America." Indeed, Dinnerstein says that "in no Christian country has antisemitism been weaker than it has been in the United States."

This is not to suggest that Jews haven't been the subject of violence in the U.S. Historically, groups like the Ku Klux Klan targeted Jews. It also targeted Catholics and, of course, African Americans. But the claim that Jews need to be especially on guard against roving bands of thugs cannot be sustained.

In the late 1960s, a report was submitted to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. The commission, headed by Dr. Milton S. Eisenhower, released its findings in a book titled, *The History of Violence in America*; it was edited by Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr. The principal victims of violence identified in the book are Native Americans, African Americans, Roman Catholics and

labor.

The worst urban riots occurred in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. "Among the most important types of riots," the report says, "were labor riots, election riots, antiabolitionist riots, anti-Negro riots, anti-Catholic riots, and riots of various sorts involving the turbulent volunteer firemen's units." Except for the Civil War draft riots, things settled down after this period. But the point to be made is that the Jewish community, albeit small, was not then, or later, among the most likely to be victimized.

Violence against Jews in more recent times has either been waged, or encouraged, by such groups as the Aryan Nation, Christian Identity, National Alliance, National Socialists, Posse Comitatus and Church of the Creator. None of these organizations is remotely Christian and many are indeed hostile to Christians (e.g. Christian Identity and Church of the Creator). The Nation of Islam is another group that is hostile to Jews; it is also hostile to Catholics. Arguably the worst anti-Semitic violence ever to occur—it was certainly in the worst in New York City's history—was the Crown Heights riots of 1991. That this riot had absolutely nothing to do with a Christian animus toward Jews is disputed by no one.

The idea that Christians will attack Jews in the streets after seeing "The Passion of the Christ" is pernicious. Ken Jacobson, associate national director of the ADL, has said, "We have good reason to be seriously concerned about Gibson's plans to retell the Passion. Historically, the Passion—the story of the killing of Jesus—has resulted in the death of Jews." Not in this country it hasn't, and if the ADL wants to qualify its charge by citing examples from the Middle Ages, then it should do so.

Some critics of the film cite concerns stemming from the Holocaust and beyond. Harold Brackman, consultant to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, has said, "It is Christians who bear

the responsibility, after 2000 years of religious-inspired anti-Semitism, to inhibit rather than inflame the excesses of their own haters. When filmmakers with a Christological agenda fail to accept this responsibility, the blood that may result is indeed on their hands." Not only is this kind of inflammatory rhetoric destructive of good Christian-Jewish relations, it makes one wonder—if Christian hatred of Jews is so visceral—why have there been no pogroms in the U.S. in over 200 years?

More sensible were those American Jews who signed the 2000 statement, "Dabru Emet." Although they properly noted that Christianity has at times fueled anti-Semitism, they nonetheless concluded, "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon." Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch said it best: "It should never be said that Christians were responsible for the Holocaust—Nazis were. Blaming Christians would be as unjustified as holding Jews accountable for the death of Jesus. Individuals were responsible in both situations."

Moreover, Christians are no strangers to violence, either. Yehuda Bauer, former director of the Holocaust Research Institute at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and retired professor of Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University, estimates that 25 million non-Jews died in the Holocaust. I hasten to add that these victims, most of whom were Christians, were not selected for death because of their ethnic or religious status. This makes what happened to Jews of unique and surpassing importance. But it is wrong to discount the suffering of Christians. Furthermore, it is estimated that 70 million Christians have been murdered in the past 2000 years, 45 million of which occurred in the last century alone!

If "The Passion of the Christ" is so troubling, then why hasn't there been an uproar over the recent film, "The Gospel of John"? After all, it uses virtually every word of the Gospel, including words deemed offensive by critics of the Gibson film. Why was there no big hullabaloo over "Jesus

Christ Superstar"?; it depicted what one reviewer called a "demonic Caiaphas." Is it because Mel Gibson is a so-called traditional Catholic? And if so, what exactly does this have to do with proclamations of violence? For Foxman, it is not hard to connect the dots: "I think he's [Gibson] infected—seriously infected—with some very, very serious anti-Semitic views. [Gibson's] got classical anti-Semitic views."

If the movie is likely to engender violence, then we should expect that when people finish watching it, they will be in a rage. But no one who has seen the film has experienced anything like anger. Even Foxman has acknowledged as much: "As the lights came up, the silence was etched with stifled sobs and tears. The 3,000 Christian pastors, leaders, students and others who attended the preview of the film's graphic portrayal of the events leading up to the Crucifixion were visibly moved by the images that brought them closer than they may ever have been to bearing witness to the Passion of Jesus." Not exactly the kind of sentiment we would expect from Christians ready to act on their latent anti-Semitism.

Some, like Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, have said the movie has already provoked anti-Semitism; he cites bigoted phone calls and letters. But it must also be said that hate speech has been directed at the Catholic League as well. Indeed, at a rally against the movie, I had a Brooklyn rabbi tell me to my face that "your gospels are pornographic." Now I would no more blame Jews for this anti-Catholic outburst than Jews victimized by Catholic bigots should blame Catholics.

No doubt there will be anti-Semitic bigots in the Christian community who will like "The Passion of the Christ." But they will like it for all the wrong reasons, none of which finds support in contemporary Christian thought. The idea that all Jews at the time of Christ's death clamored for his crucifixion is historically wrong and patently bigoted: those who ascribe to notions of collective guilt are demented. The

idea that any Jew today is somehow responsible for the behavior of some Jews 2000 years ago is even more insane.

Foxman, along with ADL consultant Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, said after viewing the film, "What we saw makes a mockery of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council." I will stand with Catholic theologian Michael Novak: "Gibson's film is wholly consistent with the Second Vatican Council's presentation of the relations of Judaism and the Christian Church." Let it be said that reasonable people can disagree about this, but what cannot be tolerated is casting aspersions on "church-going Christians."

I am no stranger to the fight against anti-Semitism. I have joined with the ADL in publicly denouncing Louis Farrakhan; I have gone to Harlem at the request of the Jewish Action Alliance to condemn the hatred of the late Nation of Islam official, Khalid Muhammad; I have joined Norman Siegel, previously of the New York Civil Liberties Union, in denouncing the anti-Semitism that occurred during the controversy over the Brooklyn Museum of Art (he denounced the anti-Catholicism that took place); when a Jewish-led boycott of the Jewish Museum was organized to protest art trivializing the Holocaust, I asked Catholics to support it; in December I joined with Norm Siegel and others to publicly condemn a rash of violence against synagogues in Brooklyn and Queens. And on January 20, at the behest of Americans for a Safe Israel, I wrote a letter to Israeli Knesset members pledging support for "a safe and secure Israel."

Before closing, please understand that many Christians deeply resent the kinds of movies Hollywood has been releasing over the last few decades. They especially resent the long list of anti-Christian films that have been made (most of which have been explicitly anti-Catholic). And now that they finally have a film they can be proud of, some are calling them bigots, if not thugs.

Christian-Jewish relations have improved markedly over the past few decades, and in this regard no one has been more influential than Pope John Paul II. It would not only be unfortunate—it would be a travesty—if the reaction to a film about the death of Jesus were to undo the good that has been done. I pray it will not.