

What Catholics Have Said About “The Passion of the Christ”

Pope John Paul II:

“It is as it was.”

—*National Catholic Reporter Online*, December 17, 2003

Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, Prefect of the Congregation for Clergy:

“As I watched this yet unfinished version of the film, I experienced moments of profound spiritual intimacy with Jesus Christ. It is a film that leads the viewer into prayer and reflection, into heartfelt contemplation. In fact, as I told Mr. Gibson after the screening, I would gladly trade some of the homilies that I have given about the passion of Christ for even a few of the scenes of his film. ...

“This film is a triumph of art and faith. It will be a tool for explaining the person and message of Christ. I am confident that it will change for the better everyone who sees it, both Christians and non-Christians alike. It will bring people closer to God, and closer to one another. ...

—Zenit News Agency, September 18, 2003

Cardinal Geraldo Majella Agnelo, Archbishop of São Salvador da Bahia, Brazil:

“The film is a faithful rendition of Jesus Christ’s passion and death.”

—Associated Press, March 13, 2004

Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago:

"I've read the Passion narratives of the Lord and contemplated them and prayed over them many, many times, and I've never thought of the crucifixion with the images that I received while watching this. I'll never read the words the same way again."

—*Chicago Sun Times*, August 3, 2003

Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia:

"The film is a contemporary masterpiece, artistically and technically. It is not absurd to compare it with the paintings of the Italian master Caravaggio, because of its beauty and drama. ...

"Every type of person will come to see it, if for different reasons. Some believers will be affronted. More will have their faith strengthened. Non-believers will find it engrossing, an elemental struggle between good and evil. Those who are searching will be provoked to reflection. ...

"It will help outsiders understand why there have been so many martyrs prepared to die for Christ, (more in the 20th century than any other) and why Christianity has such a profound influence in many different cultures after 2,000 years. The call to follow Christ is personal and primal. There was never any medieval morality play with an impact like this film's.

"The finest sermon on Christ I have heard was by an English layman, Malcolm Muggeridge; but that was a pale contribution beside this."

—Zenit News Agency, February 24, 2004

The Most Reverend John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications:

"Foley said he had told [ADL Director Abraham] Foxman that he had found nothing in the film that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic. 'Certainly there are some Jews who call for

punishment for Jesus,' Foley said. But he said the Romans too were depicted harshly.

“‘I had absolutely no thought regarding any responsibility on the part of the Jews. I took it as a meditation on the Passion of Jesus, and my own responsibility and the responsibility of all of us for the suffering and death of Jesus.’”

–Associated Press, February 18, 2004

“From what I could see of the trailers, it seemed to be an excellent film. I don’t think they would be well-founded criticisms because all the material in the film comes directly from the Gospel accounts. There’s nothing in the film that doesn’t come from the Gospel accounts.”

–Zenit News Agency, September 18, 2003

The Most Reverend Charles Chaput, O.F.M., Archbishop of Denver:

“I thought it was an extraordinary work of art and extraordinarily faithful to the gospels. If I was critical of the film’s detractors it’s because I think it’s unwise for any group to try to intimidate either the church or people of Mel Gibson’s faith from speaking very clearly what they believe to be true. You know anti-Semitism is a terrible sin; it’s a sin the church has repented from and will need to continue to repent from if and when there are examples of it in church life. But to clearly proclaim our belief that Jesus is the messiah and that he suffered, died and rose from the dead is for us something we have a duty to proclaim. We can’t be intimidated from proclaiming it.”

–*Rocky Mountain News* (CO), August 21, 2003

The Most Reverend John F. Donoghue, Archbishop of Atlanta:

“I believe that all people should see this film. And as your bishop, I would urge all Catholics of the Archdiocese of Atlanta to see this film. But do not expect to view it

objectively or without being changed. It will not leave you the same person you were before – you will never again not be able to picture the scope of our Lord's suffering, and the terrible price He paid in order to save us. And consequently, you will never again be able to think of yourself as being innocent, or only relatively involved in the events of His Passion. That is a result of the true artistry that Mel Gibson has brought to the production, along with the work of an amazing cast, and cinematography that elevates this film to a place among the greatest ever made. But most importantly, it is a result of Mel Gibson's faithful adherence to the words and the spirit of the Gospel."

–Letter to the Catholics of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, February 19, 2004

The Most Reverend Mario Maulión, Archbishop of Parana, Argentina:

"I was impressed not so much by the painful part, which is really very intense, but the transmission of a message of hope in the Lord, hope of life and a message of fidelity to man and fidelity to the Father.

"I confess that it made an impression on me and moved me profoundly. ... What is more, I would say that it shook me spiritually and not only me. After seeing it, together with other brother bishops, we agreed that it shook us."

–Zenit News Agency, March 21, 2004

The Most Reverend Rubén di Monte, Archbishop of Mercedes-Lujan, Argentina:

"I loved the film. It is fantastically made; it reflects the things on which one has meditated so many times on the Passion of Jesus and responds to what sacred Scriptures tell us."

–Zenit News Agency, March 21, 2004

The Most Reverend Gaudencio Rosales, Archbishop of Manila

"I think I would recommend it to every Filipino to see it who believes in goodness and accepts the reality of evil."

—*Agence France Presse*, March 10, 2004

The Most Reverend Nicholas DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn:

"I will never pray the Stations of the Cross, say the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary or read the passion narratives in the same way ever again."

—*New York Times*, March 11, 2004

The Most Reverend Robert C. Morlino, Bishop of Madison:

"Let me take this opportunity to urge all of you and your friends, all Catholics, all Christians, and all people of good will to view Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion*, at your earliest convenience. The Holy Father's reaction to this film amounted to, it is as it was. At the same time, the Holy Father should not be seen on any list of those who have publicly endorsed any given work of art...The violence of the sufferings of Christ as portrayed in the film is nothing other than the violence which He endured for our sins. Regrettably our violent culture and society and world have desensitized all of us to violence, and this film is a powerful antidote to any desensitizing that might have taken place within our Christian hearts to the sufferings of Jesus Christ. And there are many artistic and theological nuances in the film...which give an added depth to the reflection afterward which the film not only provokes but demands from the soul of every viewer, believer and nonbeliever alike."

—*The Madison Catholic Herald*, January 29, 2004

The Most Reverend Joseph Galante, Bishop of Camden, New Jersey

I came away deeply touched and profoundly moved. This film is one that must be viewed in a context of faith. For those of

us Christian Catholics who have grown up and been formed in the Gospels...this film provides a vivid and graphic meditation on the reality of the passion and death of Jesus. ...The passion and death of Jesus can't be attributed to Jews or Romans or any instruments other than our own sins. This film powerfully and even disturbingly witnesses to the effects of sin and evil. There also is a tender beauty in *The Passion of the Christ*...we witness the powerful yet tender love between Mary and Jesus. The scene of Jesus being taken down from the cross and placed in Mary's arms was, for me, a far more powerful Pieta than Michelangelo's. This is a film that I would recommend to Catholics and to all people of good will as an opportunity to live this Lenten season with greater awareness, with a deeper sense of sorrow and with a greater desire for repentance. I shall meditate on its scenes many times.

—*Dallas Morning News*, February 25, 2004

The Most Reverend David A. Zubik, Bishop of Green Bay

"Having had the opportunity to view the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ*, I found it to be a profoundly moving religious experience. The one thing that crossed my mind as I viewed the film was that any person of faith who came to see the movie would leave with their faith deepened and any person who claimed that they did not have faith and viewed the movie would leave with faith sparked within them. ...

"The film is clearly a 'must see.' My own personal experience of viewing the film deepens my appreciation of the passion narratives in the four Gospels, meditation on the Stations of Jesus' cross and, most important of all, an appreciation of the profound presence of Christ within the celebration of the Eucharist."

—*The Compass* (Diocese of Green Bay, WI), February 27, 2004

The Reverend J. Augustine Di Noia, O.P., Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

“Looking at ‘The Passion’ strictly from a dramatic point of view, what happens in the film is that each of the main characters contributes in some way to Jesus’ fate: Judas betrays him; the Sanhedrin accuses him; the disciples abandon him; Peter denies knowing him; Herod toys with him; Pilate allows him to be condemned; the crowd mocks him; the Roman soldiers scourge, brutalize and finally crucify him; and the devil, somehow, is behind the whole action.

“Of all the main characters in the story, perhaps only Mary is really blameless. Gibson’s film captures this feature of the Passion narratives very well. No one person and group of persons acting independently of the others is to blame: They all are.”

–Zenit News Agency, December 8, 2003

The Reverend Richard John Neuhaus, Editor-in-Chief, *First Things*:

“It is a gross understatement to say that it is an extraordinary film. It is certainly the best cinematic treatment of the passion or, indeed, of any biblical subject that I have ever seen. I strongly urge everybody to see it.”

–*First Things*, February 2004

The Reverend Thomas Rosica, Chief Executive Officer, Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation:

“I rarely leave a theater or a film screening with a strong desire to pray and be silent. That is what I felt this morning as I returned to our offices. ‘The Passion’ is a deeply moving presentation of the final hours of Jesus’ life on earth. ...

“I recommend that all those in pastoral ministry, teachers and students of Scripture, and adult Christians view this film at some point. If Gibson’s desire was to allow people to draw closer to Christ through this film, he has accomplished his goal.

"If Gibson wished people to experience a conversion of heart to the nonviolent message of the cross, he has accomplished that as well. ...

"‘The Passion’ compels me to reflect on the cost of discipleship."

—Zenit News Agency, February 6, 2004

Michael Novak, George Frederick Jewett Chair of Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute:

"Gibson's film is wholly consistent with the Second Vatican Council's presentation of the relations of Judaism and the Christian Church. ...

"Gibson's version is not divisive or dangerous for Jews. Without preachiness, without external commentary, this cinematic reenactment has the potential to be transformative in powerful, mysterious, and quiet ways. When "The Passion" is released on Ash Wednesday its effect around the world will almost certainly be conciliating, quieting, and calming, for it induces awe at the suffering we inflict upon one another."

—*Weekly Standard*, August 25, 2003

Why Jewish Groups Passionately Hate Mel Gibson

by Rabbi Daniel Lapin

(Catalyst 6/2004)

Surely it is now time to analyze the vitriolic loathing

demonstrated by various Jewish groups and their leaders toward Mel Gibson over the past six months. This analysis might help forestall some similar ill-conceived and ill-fated future misadventure on the part of self-anointed Jewish leadership. At the very least it might advance human understanding of destructive group pathologies.

As the whole world knows by now, Mel Gibson, his movie, his father, his church and anything else even remotely associated with Mr. Gibson have been smeared as anti-Semitic. From the immoderate assaults, you might have thought that the target was a thug with a lengthy rap sheet for murdering Jews while yelling "Heil Hitler." From the intensity of the rhetoric you would have thought that from his youth, Gibson had been hurling bricks through synagogue windows. Yet until "The Passion," he was a highly regarded and successful entertainer who went about his business largely ignored by the Jewish community, so why now do they hate him so?

Even assuming for the moment that Jewish organizations had a legitimate beef with "The Passion," which assumption I have refuted in earlier columns, they should have hated the movie rather than its creator. After all, Judaism originated the calming idea of hating the sin rather than the sinner. Yet from the pages of the *New York Times* to Jewish organizational press releases and from rabbinic rantings to synagogue sermons the personal hatred for Mel has been palpable.

The key insight, vital to understanding their hatred, is this: just because an organization has either the word "Jewish" or else some Hebrew word in its title does not mean that its guiding principles emanate from the document that has been the constitution of the Jewish people for 3,500 years—the Torah. Every organization has a set of guiding principles which defines its purpose and unifies its membership. However the guiding principles are often not what they appear to be. This departure from founding principles is not unique to Jewish organizations but is found throughout our culture. For

instance, almost none of the eighteen hundred chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) supported the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court in spite of the undeniable fact that Justice Thomas was, and remains a "colored person."

Were the NAACP truly to be guided by the principle of advancing the interests of colored people, it would always do so even if it occasionally disagreed with the positions of the colored people it supported. For instance, back in 2000, when the NAACP filed an Amicus brief on behalf of convicted cop-killer Mumia Abu-Jamal, it surely was not endorsing the killing of law enforcement officers as a form of political expression. The NAACP was simply doing what it claims it was formed to do, support people of color. In reality of course, as their failure to defend Clarence Thomas reveals, the causes adopted by the NAACP share something far more profound than the skin color of their protagonists. They share a uniform commitment to the doctrines of secularism. In non-political terms one could say that the NAACP seems to be guided by the principles of secular fundamentalism. Secular fundamentalism is the belief system which buttresses the creed of political and economic liberalism just as the Biblically-based beliefs of Judaism and Christianity buttress the creed of political and economic conservatism. It was its adherence to the guiding principles of secular fundamentalism which compelled the NAACP to obstruct the rise to greatness of a religious conservative, even if he did happen to be a colored person.

Again, almost nobody in NOW, the National Organization of Women, supported radio personality Laura Schlessinger while her media career was being destroyed by homosexual activists. Now Schlessinger is undeniably a woman, so clearly NOW's guiding principles are not to support all women but to support only certain women. Had NOW been about all women, it would have supported Schlessinger, pointing out perhaps that although they do not endorse all her views, since she is a

woman under attack the organization supports her just as it was formed to do. After all, in 2001, NOW had no compunction supporting Houston child murderer, Andrea Yates, who cold bloodedly drowned her five tiny children. As Deborah Bell, president of the Texas chapter of NOW put it, "One of our feminist beliefs is to be there for other women." "Other women" obviously doesn't include Laura Schlessinger. An honest explanation is that NOW seeks to advance secular fundamentalism, and since Dr. Laura preaches religious conservatism NOW, in remaining true to its guiding principles, had no option but to oppose her.

Similarly, many Jewish organizations and even many individuals of Jewish ethnicity who possess the title "rabbi" are not guided by the principles Judaism found in the Torah. Instead, like the NAACP and NOW, they are guided chiefly by the principles of secular fundamentalism. Nothing else can explain their dogmatic and ideological commitment to causes such as homosexuality and abortion, both of which are unequivocally opposed by the Torah-based guiding principles of Judaism. How revealing it was last November, when one such Jewish organization saw fit to publicly applaud the Massachusetts Supreme Court on their ruling in favor of homosexual marriage. In choosing between courageously defending Judaism's unequivocal opposition to homosexual marriage and obsequious obeisance to the doctrines of secular fundamentalism, this "Jewish" organization made its choice and in so doing, proved my point. Paradoxically, these so-called Jewish organizations are virulent secularists because of belief—the belief that religion poisons the world and that we would all be better off living in an eternal utopia of secular democracy.

In their belief system, serious Christianity, which they recognize to have founded western civilization, must be confined to the home, synagogue, and church. It must never be allowed to influence our culture or our political law-making apparatus. In their belief system, religion, when practiced by

professional religionists like priests, pastors, and rabbis, is acceptable because these professionals, doing what they are expected to do, are unlikely to influence significantly the public perception of faith as a refuge for the uneducated, the unsuccessful, and the miserable. However, religion when practiced seriously by influential public figures such as presidents and movie producers is totally unacceptable because it might lead to upsetting the current religious-secular cultural balance.

Thus President Bush also merits hatred. Here is Whoopi Goldberg musing in the pages of the *New York Times*, "Wait a minute, is this man leading this country as an American or is he leading the country as a Christian?" Just try to imagine the outcry from the Jewish groups I describe herein were Mel Gibson to have asked during the 2000 presidential elections, "Will Joe Lieberman lead this country as an American or would he lead this country as a Jew?"

Once Mel Gibson revealed himself to be, like the President, a person of serious religious faith the gloves came off. Mel Gibson has done a major favor for serious faith, both Jewish and Christian, in America. He has made it 'cool' to be religious, but in so doing he has unleashed the hatred of secular America against himself personally, against his work, and against his family. God bless him.

Radio talk show host Rabbi Daniel Lapin is president of Toward Tradition, which is dedicated to bridging the divide between Christians and Jews by applying ancient solutions to modern problems in areas of family, faith, and fortune. This article was originally posted on April 8, 2004, on the organization's website, www.towardtradition.org.

Prominent Conservatives Join the Chorus Against “The Passion”

by Kenneth D. Whitehead

(Catalyst 4/04)

Many of the attacks on Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” should have been expected. They have mostly come from secular liberals who have already manifested their hostility to Christianity in the public life of the United States. As some wag noted almost as soon as the movie was announced: “If you didn’t like the book, you won’t like the movie.” Those who have characterized Mel Gibson’s graphic depiction of the sufferings of Christ as “pornographic” surely mostly have no objections to actual pornography, and so what are they so upset about?

Probably it goes back to their intense dislike of seeing authentic Christianity portrayed in a serious way in a society which has supposedly left all that behind as an outmoded (but still dangerous) superstition.

It is disappointing, though, when not just knee-jerk secular liberals but prominent conservatives whom Catholics have generally had cause to admire—for many of their positions on the right side in our current culture wars—find it necessary to join in the by-now unprecedented chorus of frantic and sometimes even hysterical criticism of “the Passion.” Talk about hate speech! The very thing Mel Gibson was supposedly fomenting against the Jews is what has relentlessly been directed against him!

So it is disappointing when respected figures such as historian Gertrude Himmelfarb and columnist Charles

Krauthammer, in columns published in *The Washington Post* (3/5 & 3/7/04), decide they have to join the jeering chorus of the Christianity-despising cultural elites. The criticism of these elites has long since exceeded the bounds of the respect which citizens in a pluralistic society ought to have for the religious beliefs of others, and, too often, beyond the bounds of common decency itself.

Professor Himmelfarb, like so many of the earlier critics of the film, does not even think it is necessary to go see it. Rather, she is concerned about its effect as a “phenomenon” on the “culture.” “Depictions of violence and barbarity that may have spiritual meaning for a particular faith,” she writes, “may not only be derogatory to another faith but also detrimental to society.” She goes on:

“How would we (Gibson and all the rest of us) feel if a Hollywood producer (a Hollywood so notoriously populated by Jews) made a film in the same ‘over the edge’ spirit vaunted by Gibson, dramatizing another historical event—the *auto-da-fé* in Spain in February, 1481, for example, in which six men and six women *conversos* (Jewish converts to Christianity) were tortured and burned alive at the stake, while richly robed prelates presided over the scene?”

How would we feel, indeed? This is not a bad description of how practically every Hollywood film ever made has *regularly* depicted the Spanish Inquisition! The same thing is true about how it has normally been described in fiction and drama, including Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* as Exhibit A. The Spanish Inquisition is virtually always depicted as a malevolent and sinister “Catholic” thing, “while richly robed prelates preside over the scene.” This is a burden that has long and consistently been laid upon Catholics. Does Professor Himmelfarb know of a single popular presentation of the Spanish Inquisition which does not do this?

Lost in the confusion about what everybody “knows” the

Inquisition was, are the facts that it was more an affair of the Spanish monarchy than of the Catholic Church as such; and, by the (exceedingly brutal) standards of the time in both Protestant and Catholic Europe, it was relatively fair—it quite rigorously followed a fixed procedure and “rule of law” that resulted in a high percentage of acquittals. Finally, compared to the totalitarianisms ushered into the world following the Enlightenment, the numbers of its victims were miniscule.

Professor Himmelfarb fears a “coarsening of religious sensibility evident in the response to this new Passion play, as if the message of Jesus is validated only by [the] degree of suffering, torture, violence...” Why is it, in a Hollywood given over generally to the portrayal of violence, that only Mel Gibson’s film is suddenly going to bring all this about? What about how Hollywood with equal regularity depicts Christians today as deluded simpletons, killjoy puritans, or ignorant fanatics hardly distinguishable from members of the Taliban? How is “religious sensibility” affected by all of this? As for concentration on “suffering, torture, and violence,” what are we to think of, for example, the Holocaust Museum, in which all these same things are relentlessly portrayed?

Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer presents a much harder case. The title of his *Washington Post* column is “Gibson’s Blood Libel.” He thus deliberately revives the term once used to stir up persecutions of the Jews with false accusations of ritual murder, poisoning of the wells, and such. To employ such a loaded term while accusing Gibson of “interreligious aggression” cannot but recall that old pot that called the kettle black. It ill befits Krauthammer to describe anyone as “vicious” while showing himself capable of using a term that brands Gibson as worse than a criminal.

It is sadly true, of course, that Jews have been persecuted by Christians in various times and places. This is something

contemporary Christians must not only deplore but take active measures to prevent any recurrence of—as Charles Krauthammer recognizes the Catholic Church did at Vatican Council II. At the same time, the grim picture he paints implying that historical relations between Jews and Christians consisted of an almost unrelieved record of oppression of the former by the latter is a gross simplification.

In the early centuries it was the Jews who persecuted the Christians. The Talmud composed back in those days contains slanders against the Christians that easily rival those directed by modern anti-Semites against the Jews. Early Christian writers were well acquainted with such slanders when penning replies to them in kind for which they are today reproached as “anti-Semitic.” It is unfortunately true that, down through history, not all Christians have consistently followed Jesus when he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Nevertheless, the idea that the persecution of Jews by Christians, when it occurred, was always something arbitrary and unprovoked, will not stand up to historical examination.

For one thing, in later centuries, the Jews constituted a minority that would not assimilate into the Christian society of the day. While this in no way justifies persecution of them, this was not always seen at the time, and the fact of it at least makes it more understandable when it did occur. There are today many sad examples of how minorities and outsiders are badly treated by “host” societies and cultures. It is a not uncommon phenomenon in human societies. And, in medieval times, when faced with a group that expressly denied the faith that the whole of society then mostly affirmed, Christians *were* seriously concerned.

Charles Krauthammer’s account, though, implies that Christian anti-Jewish sentiment was constant and consistent until Vatican Council II was brought to see the light in the wake of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. This fails

to recognize that it was the Church, particularly the popes, that were often the protectors of the Jews from popular outbreaks against them. Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-604) strongly condemned violence against them, called for respect for their worship and liberty of conscience, and counseled equity and kindness towards them. Quite a while before Vatican II, the Second Council of Nicaea (787) decreed that the Jews should be allowed to "be Hebrews openly, according to their own religion." A papal bull of Pope Calixtus II (1190) condemning violence against the Jews and attempts to baptize them under constraint was confirmed at least *twenty-two times* up to the middle of the eighteenth century. And these are only a few of the more salient efforts of the Catholic Church and her bishops in favor of the Jews in the course of European history.

Charles Krauthammer's historical account is thus both skewed and simplistic. That he fails to distinguish between a religious animus and the murderous modern ideology of the Nazis is another mark against him. He draws a direct line between the "blood libel" idea he has revived and the "six million Jews systematically murdered in six years" in wartime Europe. These six million should decidedly never be forgotten. But what "blood libel" does he think is responsible for the mass murder by those same Nazis of some nine million additional *non*-Jewish victims, of whom at least three million were Polish Catholics (not to speak of yet three million more Russian prisoners of war exterminated by the Nazis)?

No space remains to discuss his distorted view of the film itself, which he believes is untrue to the accounts recorded in the Gospels. He needs to read the Gospels! He objects in particular to the scourging, but does he have any idea of what was involved in a Roman scourging? The Romans employed a flagellum consisting of leather thongs with sharpened metal points, the effect of which could only have been what the film depicts.

His worst mistake, however, is to imagine that the “sinister, hooded” figure of Satan shown “moving among the crowd of Jews” is or was in any way intended to be directed against *them*. No Christian, viewing the film, would ever understand this portrayal of Satan as anything but a portrayal of Satan moving among *us*, as Mel Gibson surely intended.

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An Open Letter to the Jewish Community

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.

The Mel Gibson Controversy as Seen Through the Eyes of an Orthodox Jew

by Rabbi Daniel Lapin

(Catalyst 11/03)

Never has a film aroused such hostile passion so long prior to its release as has Mel Gibson’s “Passion.” Many American Jews are alarmed by reports of what they view as potentially anti-Semitic content in this movie about the death of Jesus, which is due to be released during 2004. Clearly the crucifixion of

Jesus is a sensitive topic, but prominent Christians who previewed it—including good friends like James Dobson and Michael Novak, who have always demonstrated acute sensitivity to Jewish concerns—see it as a religiously inspiring movie and refute charges that it is anti-Semitic. While most Jews are wisely waiting to see the film before responding, others are either prematurely condemning a movie they have yet to see or violating the confidentiality agreements they signed with Icon Productions.

As an Orthodox rabbi with a wary eye on Jewish history which has an ominous habit of repeating itself, I fear that these protests, well intentioned though some may be, are a mistake. I believe those who publicly protest Mel Gibson's film lack moral legitimacy. What is more, I believe their actions are not only wrong but even recklessly ill-advised and shockingly imprudent.

For an explanation of why I believe that those Jews protesting "Passion" lack moral legitimacy we must take ourselves back in time to the fall of 1999. That was when Arnold Lehman, the Jewish director of the Brooklyn Museum, presented a show called "Sensation." It featured, from the collection of British Jew Charles Saatchi, several works which debased Catholicism, including Chris Ofili's dung-bedecked "Madonna."

You may wonder why I highlight the Jewish ethnicity of the players in the Brooklyn Museum saga. My reason for doing so is that everyone else recognized that they were Jewish, and there is merit in us knowing how we ourselves appear in the eyes of those among whom we live. This is especially true on those sad occasions when we violate what ancient Jewish wisdom commends as the practice of Kiddush HaShem, which is to say, conducting our public affairs in a way best calculated to bring credit upon us as a group. Maintaining warm relations with our non-Jewish friends is a traditional Jewish imperative and the *raison d'être* of the organization I serve, Toward Tradition.

Almost every Christian organization angrily denounced the vile bigotry sponsored by the Brooklyn Museum. Especially prominent was William Donohue, president of the Catholic League, a good friend who has always stood firmly with Jews in the fight against genuine anti-Semitism, yet now, in his fight against anti-Catholicism, he appealed to Jewish organizations in vain. Almost every Christian denomination helped vigorously protest the assault that the Brooklyn Museum carried out against the Catholic faith in such graphically abhorrent ways. Even Mayor Rudolph Giuliani expressed his outrage by trying to withhold money from the museum. Where was the Jewish expression of solidarity against such ugliness?

Only a small group of Orthodox Jews joined their fellow Americans in protest at this literal defilement of Christianity with elephant feces. And were other Jews silent? No, unfortunately not. In actuality a small but disproportionately vocal number of them were defending the Brooklyn Museum and its director in the name of artistic freedom.

You may also remember Martin Scorsese's 1988 film "The Last Temptation of Christ." Then too almost every Christian denomination protested Universal's release of a movie so slanderous that had it been made about Moses, or say, Martin Luther King Jr., it would have provoked howls of anger from the entire country. As it was, Christians were left to defend their faith quite alone other than for one solitary courageous Jew, Dennis Prager. Most Americans knew that Universal was run by Lew Wasserman. Most Americans also knew Lew's ethnicity. Perhaps many now wonder why Mel Gibson is not entitled to the same artistic freedom we accorded Lew Wasserman?

When the Weinstein brothers, through their Miramax films (named after their parents, Mira and Max Weinstein), distributed "Priest" in 1994, Catholics were again left to protest this unflattering depiction of their faith alone while many Jewish organizations proclaimed the primacy of artistic

freedom. Surely Jewish organizations would carry just a little more moral authority if they routinely protested all attacks on faith, not only those troubling to Judaism.

Oddly enough, Jewish organizations did find one movie so offensive as to warrant protest. It was Disney's "Aladdin" that was considered, by Jews, to be needlessly offensive to Arabs!

Now I do have one possible explanation for why one might consider it more important to protest "Passion." It is this: in Europe, anti-Semitic slander frequently resulted in Catholic mobs killing Jews. Our hyper-sensitivity has a long and painful background of real tragedy. In any event, Jewish moral prestige would stand taller if we were conspicuous in protesting movies that defame any religion. Furthermore, opponents of "Passion" argue that this movie might cause a backlash against the Jewish community. Yet when so-called art really does encourage violence, for Jewish spokesmen, artistic freedom seems to trump all other concerns. Here is what I mean.

During the nineties, record companies run by well known executives including Michael Fuchs, Gerald Levin, and David Geffen produced obscene records by artists like Geto Boys and Ice-T that advocated killing policemen and raping and murdering women. During that decade of shockingly hateful music that incited violence, our Jewish organizations only protested Michael Jackson's song "They Don't Care About Us" and the rap group Public Enemy's single "Swindler's Lust," claiming that these songs were anti-Semitic. It is ignoble to ignore the wrongs done to others while loudly deploring those done to us.

In truth however, even though Catholics did kill Jews in Europe, I do not believe that the often sad history of Jews in Europe is relevant now. Why not? Because in Europe, Catholic church officials wielded a rapacious combination of

ecclesiastical and political power with which they frequently incited illiterate mobs to acts of anti-Jewish violence. In America, no clergyman secures political power along with his ordination certificate, and in America, if there are illiterate and dangerous thugs, Christianity is a cure not the cause. In America, few Jews have ever been murdered, mugged, robbed, or raped by Christians returning home from church on Sunday morning. America is history's most philo-Semitic country, providing the most hospitable home for Jews in the past 2,000 years. Suggesting equivalency between American Christians today and those of European history is to be offensive and ungrateful.

Quite frankly, if it is appropriate to blame today's American Christians for the sins of past Europeans, why isn't it okay to blame today's Jews for things that our ancestors may have done? Clearly both are wrong, and doing so harms our relationships with one of the few groups still friendly toward us today. Jewish groups that fracture friendship between Christians and Jews are performing no valuable service to American Jews.

These protests against "Passion" are not only morally indefensible, but they are also stupid, for three reasons. The first reason is that they are unlikely to change the outcome of the film. Mr. Gibson is an artist and a Catholic of deep faith of which this movie is an expression. Does anyone really believe that Gibson is likely to yield to threats from Jewish organizations?

The second and more important reason I consider these protests to be ill-advised: While Jews are telling Gibson that his movie contradicts historical records about who really killed Jesus, Vatican Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos has this to say: "Mel Gibson not only closely follows the narrative of the Gospels, giving the viewer a new appreciation for those Biblical passages, but his artistic choices also make the film faithful to the meaning of the Gospels, as understood by the

Church.”

Do we really want to open up the Pandora’s Box of suggesting that any faith may demand the removal of material that it finds offensive from the doctrines of any other faith? Do we really want to return to those dark times when Catholic authorities attempted to strip from the Talmud those passages that they found offensive?

Finally, I believe the attacks on Mel Gibson are a mistake because while they may be in the interests of Jewish organizations who raise money with the specter of anti-Semitism ... they are most decidedly not in the interests of most American Jews who go about their daily lives in comfortable harmony with their Christian fellow citizens. You see, many Christians see all this as attacks not just on Mel Gibson alone or as mere critiques of a movie, but—with some justification, in my view—they see them as attacks against all Christians.

Right now, the most serious peril threatening Jews, and indeed perhaps all of Western civilization, is Islamic fundamentalism. In this titanic 21st century struggle that links Washington, D.C., with Jerusalem, our only steadfast allies have been Christians. In particular, those Christians who most ardently defend Israel and most reliably denounce anti-Semitism, happen to be those Christians most fervently committed to their faith. Jewish interests are best served by fostering friendship with Christians rather than cynically eroding them. Rejecting flagrant anti-Christianism on the part of Jews claiming to be acting on our behalf would be our wisest course as a community. Doing so would have one other advantage: it would also be doing the right thing.

Radio talk show host Rabbi Daniel Lapin is president of Toward Tradition, which is dedicated to bridging the divide between Christians and Jews by applying ancient solutions to modern problems in areas of family, faith, and fortune. The complete article is also posted on the organization’s website,

www.towardtradition.org.