

MALIGNING MEL GIBSON

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There are several reasons why Mel Gibson is under attack for his movie, "The Passion." But at bottom it all comes down to the fact that our secular elites have a hard time dealing with traditional Catholics. Add to this the fact that there is a group of Catholics who are more interested in currying favor with these elites than they are in defending their own religion.

The furor over the movie stems from a controversial piece by the *New York Times Magazine* back in March. Gibson was painted as a hopelessly traditional Catholic who was following in the footsteps of his elderly father. Hutton Gibson, Mel's father, was depicted as a sort of retro Catholic—a throwback to pre-Vatican II days. Thus was the seed sown: Gibson is an ultra-conservative Catholic who is doing a film on a subject that is bound to make Jews nervous.

It didn't take long before some Catholic scholars joined with the ADL to do the ultimate hit job: working with a stolen script, they blasted Gibson for making a Jew-baiting film. Sister Mary C. Boys, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said the movie "could be one of the great crises in Christian-Jewish relations" because "all the way through, the Jews are portrayed as blood thirsty."

Sister Boys has not seen the movie but she thinks it will provoke a crisis. However, the crisis is in her head. It is she who fantasizes about a Christian-Jewish crisis. What disturbs her, and the other Catholic members of this unofficial panel, is the fact that Gibson didn't ask her to vet his film.

Gibson got all the theological advice he needed from Jesuit Father William J. Fulco, a National Endowment for the

Humanities professor of ancient Mediterranean studies at Loyola Marymount University in California. When questioned about the concerns of the Catholic panelists and the ADL, Father Fulco said “there is no hint of deicide” (the charge that Jews are Christ-killers) in the movie. He’s right.

The two most prominent Jewish leaders who have attacked the film are Abraham Foxman of the ADL and Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Both men have blasted the film, though neither has seen it.

In a televised debate I had with Rabbi Hier, he came pretty close to denying any Jewish role in the death of Christ. MSNBC host Joe Scarborough got exasperated listening to him and then threw me this question: “How does Mel Gibson do this film and do a biblically-based film without at least having Jewish leaders in there that play such a key role in the story of the crucifixion?” To which I answered, “Well, you can’t do it. All right? I mean, they weren’t the Aleutian Islanders. They weren’t the Pacific Islanders, all right? It wasn’t the Puerto Ricans.”

I also made it clear that there is an attempt being made by some to sanitize history. I specifically mentioned “a notorious anti-Catholic bigot by the name of Daniel Goldhagen.” He and others object to the New Testament account of Jesus’ death. For example, Alex Beam of the *Boston Globe* has said that “the film will be perceived as anti-Semitic, because the Christian Bible holds that Jesus was a Jewish prophet rejected by his own people.” In other words, the problem is the Gospels, not Gibson’s movie.

Frank Rich, writing in the *New York Times*, wrote a particularly disturbing piece on this subject. He said, “Whether the movie holds Jews of two millennia accountable for killing Christ or not, the star’s pre-emptive strategy is to portray contemporary Jews as crucifying Mel Gibson.” All of which is a lie.

Rich can't seem to figure out why Gibson is wary of allowing some people to preview his film. As I told the *New York Times*, Gibson "has had his script stolen; his elderly father has been maligned; his integrity has been attacked; his religion has been labeled anti-Semitic; his film has been branded as bigoted—by those who haven't seen it—and he has been accused of fomenting violence."

Regarding the latter charge, Paula Fredriksen, one of the so-called Catholic scholars, made exactly this point in an incredibly irresponsible piece in *The New Republic*. In the July 28-August 4 edition, she wrote, "When violence breaks out, Mel Gibson will have a much higher authority than professors and bishops to answer to."

Note she did not say if violence breaks out, but when. I immediately branded her remarks demagogic and concluded, "How disappointed she will be when none occurs." It is worth noting, too, that it was in *The New Republic*, where Goldhagen wrote a lengthy attack on the Catholic Church.

So this is what Mel is up against. He is a decent man who is being unfairly attacked. The Catholic League is honored to defend him.