

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 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.