

Letters on The Passion of the Christ

10 March 2004

Below we post a selection of recent letters on "Why has The Passion of the Christ evoked such a popular response in America?"

I read David Walsh's review of Gibson's film with interest and admiration. Mr. Walsh made a sincere effort to balance the known historical contradictions and inadequacies of organized religion in general with the sincere desire of people to live a truly charitable religious faith. I have not seen this movie and I have no wish to see it. As a Catholic, I actually have no problem with the violent images of the Passion, for I think that modern American religion is too far gone into a "feel good," consumerist religion to have any real understanding of the sacrifices of the man they believe to be the son of God. Furthermore, as Walsh points to, if the sacrifice of Jesus is to have relevance, it must be seen in the light of his social message and (for believing Christians) his Resurrection. I was raised in the Catholic Church of the 1970s.

RG

5 March 2004

Your article on *The Passion* is in itself a great work of art, of intellect, of compassion, of wisdom. You are the finest nonfiction writer I know. I am going to forward it to everyone I know.

Highest regards,

RW

5 March 2004

Dear Sirs,

I wish to respond to your review of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. But first a word about myself so you'll know where I'm coming from. I am a Catholic, but hardly of the fundamentalist camp, having been schooled in liberation theology and active through the years in various progressive causes. I am also a great fan of your web site and find your reporting and analysis almost always excellent. Lastly, I am very sympathetic to the socialist vision you espouse of a world remade around the political and economic empowerment of the working class.

Of course, I did not expect you to find anything positive to say about Gibson's movie.

But I was surprised and impressed by the nuance of your response. You obviously realize that many will be deeply moved by the film and do not want to consign all of them to the outer darkness where only fascists and holocaust-deniers dwell. Thus, you situate them, or many of them, among the politically and socially alienated. Compared to most of the commentary on the film which I've read coming from the left, this response is quite nuanced.

Let me offer some thoughts spurred by one paragraph in your review, the one beginning, "The destruction before one's eyes of a passive, virtually inert human body..." My thoughts are those of a Catholic Christian who found this paragraph disturbing, raising as it seems an incisive question which goes to the very heart of the Christian faith.

From its beginnings the Christian gospel has proclaimed that Jesus went *freely* to his trial, torture, and execution, and in doing so freely took upon himself (literally, into his flesh) the full force of the idolatrous powers that find embodiment in this world in *all* forms of human sin, oppression, injustice, cruelty, hatred, violence, murder. Thus, at the heart of what Christians call "the scandal of the cross" lies a seemingly contradictory mixture of inert passivity under inflicted suffering—or of what might more

humanly be called nonviolent protest—and a transcendent, unconquerable human freedom, the revelation of an integrity of person which Christians believe can only have its ground in God and God's eschatological justice.

Now, for Gibson to desire to make a movie which sets forth, in a perhaps excessively graphic and unrelenting way, this central drama of Christianity seems to me an entirely legitimate project (however limited in itself). On the other hand, the sentiments you express in the above-mentioned paragraph of your review seem to me strangely tone deaf to this possibility. (Whether or not Gibson has succeeded in such a project is another question; I am talking about the mere possibility of it.) That is why I find this one paragraph of your review particularly incisive and disturbing, going to the very heart of the Christian faith. It has led to me to reflect on my own relation to this *scandal of the cross*, and whether or not I may be, in my own way, equally tone deaf to it.

Moreover, I am fully aware that Christianity has failed its faith and its gospel repeatedly and at times grossly, a fact which brings the gospel itself into question. But then, the same can be said of socialism, which has its own degenerate history of self-idolatry and brutal inhumanity to bear. And yet its vision of a world transformed through and beyond the inert fact (or "flesh") of sin and suffering by the power of a restored human freedom within history (whatever its transcendent source), this vision endures, and rightly so.

If it is true, as you say, that Gibson's "is a largely soulless Jesus Christ, a nonentity," then his film is indeed a monstrosity, and especially for Christians, since it is therefore a betrayal of the gospel. But when all is said and done, and as much as I profited from your review of the film, I simply did not have that reaction to it. I hope that doesn't mean I've merely been blinded and alienated by my religious commitments.

Sincerely,

DS

Little Rock, Arkansas

5 March 2004

This was a very powerful piece of writing. I am going to see the film soon to make up my own mind, but I can't help feeling after reading this article that it won't do justice to the life of Christ, after all, if it is as you say violence from start to finish, I will see no point in staying to watch it after say an hour.

Yours,

MJ

5 March 2004

Dear David,

I have read your reviews quite often, and always with great interest. I just wished to thank you for your comments on *The Passion of the Christ*. It is a profound essay. I found it deeply comforting to know that there are people compassionate and astute, like you, willing to comment in these "dark times."

NS

5 March 2004

You know I didn't have the stomach for even finishing your review, it is like all the others unintelligently put together. So much so that you reverberate the story like we haven't seen it. So I skipped over it. I think you should leave Psychoanalysis to the professionals before you cast

judgment on an area you have neither the background nor the education to back it up. Anti-Semitic, that is a media promotion because it is the furthest thing from a Christian mind when watching the movie they are so focused on Christ's suffering that the Jews are completely insignificant.

To understand this movie you have to first be a Christian and know the Bible, second understand the message being sent by listening with your heart and soul not your mind. And remember that Mel Gibson is a Catholic Christian and holds not just sacred scripture but sacred tradition passed down by the Apostles as a relevant source for his movie, and to us who are Catholic also we understand the significance of many of the scenes depicted in the movie. This was not made for unbelievers, so why are you criticizing it? However, I know of many unbelievers who are now questioning their beliefs because of this movie.

If you sit back and think about how many Christians worldwide will view this movie, you will find yourself seriously outnumbered. And if you ask me that scares you people, and that is why you are on your bandwagons trying to deter people from it. Because you all know that something powerful has happened but because you lack the ability as "Pilate" to hear the "truth" you follow your own truth. As Christians we hear the truth loud and clear, we need no signs, no evidence, no scientific proof we believe because He lives within us, and when he speaks we hear, and those who are of this world do not understand this kind of truth.

I have a solution: you don't like it, don't watch it. It is that simple, we are not asking you to believe and no one stood up for Christians when they brought out the sacrilegious movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." No one deemed it anti-Christian. To portray Jesus as purely human is blasphemy in the Christian belief and yet who cared about that in Hollywood. So now we have a movie that represents the pinnacle of our Christian faith, the suffering of our Lord. It is hardly our problem that you have not read the life of Christ before seeing the movie.

K

6 March 2004

Excellent review of the Gibson bloodfest! However, I would have suggested the headline: "Mel Gibson prays all the way to the bank."

SB

Melbourne.

7 March 2004

I found your closing statement profound:

"Whatever the immediate fate of Gibson's work, its reception underscores, above all, the increasingly unstable social and moral state of American capitalist society, inexorably coming face to face with its own peculiar Passion."

Several months ago I scribbled the following few lines ... seems we "feel" the same.

It is time to 'fish' or 'cut bait'

I have a feeling the real 'war' is about to begin ...

The essence of capitalism is ... winners ... and ... losers Darwinian in nature ... sold to us on the premise that only the strong will survive and the human species will be better off as a result

Today, any serious thinking person will know this is a bunch of crap!!

The war in Iraq is the 'fruit' of capitalism..

By definition, the pinnacle of capitalism is ... "one winner" ... we are frightfully close

Be prepared to make a choice between 'slavery' and 'freedom' ... the choice is yours to make

Should you choose 'freedom' ... please pass this message to as many people as you can

BM

5 March 2004

You have missed the point. Everyone that has ever been born did so that they could live. Christ lived for the purpose of dying. He came to earth to die in my place and your place to cover the sins he knew we would do.

JB

8 March 2004

As a Jew, I find your analysis of *The Passion* shallow and full of self-deception. Americans for the most part are familiar with both of the Testaments and have concluded in the main that a belief in "God" is a necessary component of a fulfilling life. Ninety percent of Americans in a recent poll profess to believe in a God. For the most part we are not concerned with particular religions. We are concerned with a civilization that will play by the rules laid down by any God and all Gods. Capitalism relies on traditional religious law present in all faiths. The degradation of God as a fiction to promote egalitarianism in the here and now will never diminish Godly fervor on this earth. Mel Gibson's film merely reminds Americans of their obligation to live for their future generations ... to give their efforts so that their children do not have it as difficult.

Unfortunately, drugs and popular entertainment have torn down the educational system in the US. Now we live on the brink of bankruptcy that will foster a worldwide depression in the immediate future. WE will be the epicenter. The reason for this coming catastrophe is the new American dogma to get it all in one's lifetime ... which is not implicit in God's laws. Once the great coming of deflation in asset values here is complete, the population will be drawn to God's laws, and reflect on them for comfort. Never in history has man turned away from God during very bad times. The residual hope will always rest in Him.

The vast immigration of Mexicans, with their fervent Christianity and work ethic, replaces the new seculars that find no proof in God's existence. A reemergence of faith will be soon upon us. Christians will come back into the fold; especially those who have had a hard time of it during the coming collapse of their fortunes and comforts. *The Passion* is merely a reminder of duty to do what is right; giving even our lives for what passes as charity.

The world's economy is cyclical and passes through stages of accumulation and distribution. Our accumulation stage is over for now, except in the Far East. But even they will suffer a slowdown in the years to come as American investment dries up.

It is a time to return to God, or be in a living Hell.

Regards,

RF

6 March 2004

To David Walsh:

Your review is superb—it's an article that I'll read several times, both before and after seeing the film—and then keep to read again.

There is an aspect that I wonder about as a possible motivation for Gibson's making the film at all, and in the relentless focus on the suffering of Christ. In a TV interview by Diane Sawyer, Gibson alludes to his serious addiction to alcohol and drugs, which he nervously describes as being rather all-consuming. He does not mention receiving any form of therapy or attending any group that might use the 12 Steps or other recovery principles..

My experience as a 28-year member of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, also active as a lay psychotherapist, is that such untreated addicts are not at all happy and content in sobriety. Rather, they constantly struggle against their desire to drink and drug, and tend to wallow in self pity and rage against fate. The 12 Steps promise that alcoholics/addicts will become "happy, joyous and free." Mel Gibson is the antithesis of that.

He probably suffers every day from an almost overwhelming desire to drink/drug, and uses the image of Christ's Passion to comfort him—Gibson probably identifies with Christ as a fellow sufferer—he suffers like Christ suffered. That might explain the fixation on the gore and violence rather than on the positive aspects of Jesus' teachings.

All of this is speculation, of course, but it would explain a lot if true. Thanks again for a very penetrating analysis of *The Passion*.

WL

5 March 2004



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact