

Why has *The Passion of the Christ* evoked such a popular response in America?

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The Passion of the Christ, directed by Mel Gibson, screenplay by Gibson and Benedict Fitzgerald

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is a deeply repugnant film, but not an insignificant one. While offering no contribution to our understanding of Jesus' life or his teachings, or the relation of religion to modern life (even from the point of view of a believer), it does provide insight into a certain contemporary American mentality and mood. In that sense, Gibson's film is far less a work of theology, much less a serious artistic effort, than a revealing, quasi-autobiographical *cri de coeur*—and deserves to be treated as such.

The Passion of the Christ opened to great fanfare in the US last week and has attracted a large audience, especially among the fundamentalist Christian faithful. By and large, the American media has treated the film with great respect. Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *New York Post* dedicated its front page to the film, as did the *New York Daily News*. It has made front-page headlines in every major newspaper and received wide play on television. The film has also come under criticism in some quarters, particularly from liberal and Jewish commentators.

The essential facts of *The Passion's* production are now widely known. Gibson, a leading man in numerous action and dramatic films over the past two decades, belongs to a traditionalist Catholic splinter group, one of the many sects that reject the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. His father, Hutton Gibson, is a Holocaust denier who has railed against the Church hierarchy for decades. Gibson senior describes the Second Vatican Council, which, among other things, officially absolved the Jewish people of responsibility for Christ's death, as "a Masonic plot backed by the Jews."

The movie actor privately financed *The Passion of the Christ*, filmed in Italy in Latin and Aramaic. Its lead performer, James Caviezel (*The Thin Red Line*), is another devout Catholic, who announced on the Christian talk show "The 700 Club," in late February, "I believe I was called to play this role." Gibson first screened a rough cut of his film last year for Christian fundamentalists and other right-wing political and media figures, while excluding potentially critical voices.

The film treats the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, as recounted in the four New Testament Gospels and other, later embellishments, particularly the version of the Passion set down by the German Augustinian nun Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a mystic and anti-Semite. Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* adds sadistic details to the Gospel accounts and is filled with references to the "Jewish mob," depicted as "cruel," "wicked" and "hard-hearted."

Gibson's film is disgustingly brutal, perhaps unlike any other widely distributed film before it. For two hours, virtually non-stop, a man is beaten, punched, spit upon, whipped, scourged, tortured and finally nailed to a cross. All the bloody, horrifying details are lovingly filmed. *The Passion of the Christ* is also profoundly anti-Semitic in its imagery and narrative thrust. The entire frenzied, violent work is oddly unaffectionate.

The filmmaker asserts that he has limited himself to the last half-day of

Jesus' existence on earth to emphasize the "enormity of the sacrifice." Other possible motivations suggest themselves. The narrow scope of *The Passion of the Christ* renders impossible any serious discussion of Jesus' religious and social message. It also excludes the fact of his popularity with wide layers of the Jewish population in Jerusalem. After all, only a few days before his death, according to the Gospels, Jesus was welcomed to the city by jubilant crowds. Most accounts of the Passion begin with this triumphant entry.

Gibson's work, on the other hand, opens with Jesus' internal struggle the night before the crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane. Foreseeing what is to come, he asks God that the chalice might pass from him, adding, however, "your will be done." A sinister, androgynous Satan tempts and taunts him (he/she reappears throughout the film).

Jesus is arrested, through the treachery of his erstwhile disciple, Judas. Why do the armed men sent by the Jewish high priests take Jesus into custody at night? Gibson's film never addresses the question, because a serious answer would have to take into account the officialdom's fear that the charismatic prophet's detention might lead to popular protest.

The extreme brutality begins almost immediately upon Jesus' arrest. Dramatizing one of Emmerich's additions, Gibson has his captors hang Jesus over the railing of a bridge at the end of his chains, to the point of nearly killing him.

Brought before the Jewish high priests, led by Caiaphas, Jesus is condemned as a heretic and blasphemer. They demand to know if he claims to be the son of God. "I am," he replies. Jesus is spit upon and further abused. "Death!" shriek the offended Jews.

Writing of Gibson's approach to the leading Jewish officials, the *New Republic's* Leon Wieseltier notes justly: "The figure of Caiaphas, played with disgusting relish by an actor named Mattia Sbragia, is straight out of Oberammergau [location of the medieval German Passion play that depicted the Jews as "Christ-killers"]. Like his fellow priests, he has a graying rabbinical beard and speaks with a gravelly sneer and moves cunningly beneath a *tallit*-like shawl streaked with threads the color of money. He is gold and cold. All he does is demand an execution." These are, as Wieseltier observes, "classically anti-Semitic images."

While Pontius Pilate and the other Roman officials vacillate, seeking to avoid imposing a death sentence on Jesus, the Jewish leaders are utterly relentless. They become ever more enraged and bloodthirsty. Gibson follows the spirit of the Emmerich ravings: "[T]he sight of [Jesus'] sufferings, far from exciting a feeling of compassion in the hard-hearted Jews, simply filled them with disgust, and increased their rage. Pity was, indeed, a feeling unknown in their cruel breasts."

Caiaphas and the "Jewish mob" demand Jesus' death, but Pilate promises only to "chastise" him. A group of brutish Roman soldiers sets gleefully to work whipping, beating, scourging Jesus. The scene, which lasts more than half an hour, is one of the most repellent in the film. The brutish soldiers first beat Jesus with rods, then whips, then a kind of cat-o'-nine-tails whose various strands are tipped with metal. The latter is

first tested on a wooden table, where it tears out chunks of wood. When it is used on Jesus' back, bits of flesh and skin fly through the air. By the end of the beating, which no human being could endure, Jesus' body is a mass of striated, bloody flesh. The placement of the crown of thorns on Christ's head is an occasion for additional torture and streams of blood.

Still unsatisfied when the flayed and nearly unconscious Jesus is brought before them, the Jewish mob demands his death. Fearful of mass unrest, Pilate gives in to their demands and authorizes the crucifixion. Jesus is obliged to bear the massive wooden cross up Calvary (in three of the Gospels another man carries it, and, historically, criminals were only obliged to carry a cross-beam). The driving of the nails into Jesus' hands and feet is another horrific sequence, with the drunken Roman soldiers inflicting unbearable pain on their victim. Stuck on his cross, Jesus begs forgiveness for those persecuting him, and dies. When a centurion sticks a spear in the dead Jesus' side, a shower of blood pours out. In an epilogue, as it were, Jesus rises from the dead, unmarked except for the holes in the palms of his hands.

What is one to make of all this?

Gibson is not without talent. He has obvious skills as an actor. His *Hamlet* (Franco Zeffirelli), while not brilliant, was competent and sometimes moving. Alongside the super-violent *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* series, the American-born, Australian-raised Gibson appeared in a number of films produced by the "new wave" of Australian directors who emerged in the late 1970s (Peter Weir and Gillian Armstrong). He could give relatively straightforward performances in works like *Tequila Sunrise* and *The River*. His persona (and something of his real personality may find expression here) has suggested equal parts genuine amiability, bewilderment and death-defying recklessness.

Even as a director (*The Man Without a Face* and *Braveheart*), Gibson has his moments. His treatment of Pontius Pilate in *The Passion*, perhaps the only character allowed to exhibit genuine contradiction in the film, reveals a certain sensitivity. Pilate is someone he bends over backward to understand. Ideology has apparently prevented Gibson from treating the Jewish leaders in the same fashion.

The characterizations in general are cartoonish. One becomes inured to the bloodletting or averts one's eyes. The overall result is tedium, monotony. This is not a compelling artistic or intellectual experience. Furthermore, although a few miracles are duly recorded, the film does nothing to explore the sacred, the mythic and the epic elements in religion and religious belief. The entire affair is rather banal and cold, and—aside from the extreme level of violence—thoroughly forgettable.

The destruction before one's eyes of a passive, virtually inert human body is a horrifying spectacle, but not necessarily a deeply moving one. To feel the significance of Jesus' death, one must have some grasp of the significance of his life. For all Gibson's assertions about the depth of his faith, his is a largely soulless Jesus Christ, a nonentity. His mother Mary, Mary Magdalene and his supporters are reduced to horrified spectators. Activity and life lie almost entirely with the tormentors and oppressors. A peculiar state of affairs. It's difficult to see how this film might convince the skeptic or waverer about the truth of Jesus' doctrines.

Again, one must insist that Gibson's treatment of Jesus has relatively little to do with traditional Catholic or Christian faith or its artistic iconography. The Passion takes up three or four chapters of each Gospel (in Matthew, 26-28; in Mark, 14-16; in Luke, 22-24; and in John, 18-21). Mark simply says, "And it was the third hour, and they crucified him." The emphasis in the Gospels is on Jesus' teachings, not his horrifying death.

A Canadian Catholic priest, Gérald Caron, writes, "[T]o make such a spectacle of Jesus' passion and death totally disconnected from his message and life mission is theologically flawed. It is not the quantity of blood and suffering that has redeemed us, but Jesus' death—crowning a life of 'service' as Mark says in 10:45. It was the price He had to pay, not

to God, but to remain faithful to the call and mission of His life. It was His vision of God's reign that led Him to the cross—not the other way round."

Western art, from Giotto in the late 1200s and early 1300s until the age of the great secular Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, is inconceivable without images of Jesus and the Passion in particular. Hardly a great name is missing from the list of those painters who took up the suffering and death of Christ: Bellini, Mantegna, El Greco, Bosch, Dürer, Caravaggio, Van Dyck, Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Grünewald, Titian, Correggio, Rembrandt, Leonardo ("The Last Supper"), Michelangelo, Raphael, Tintoretto, Botticelli, Van Eyck, Cranach, Rubens, Velasquez and many more.

While the contemporary museum-goer may weary of the religious imagery, it clearly had great collective spiritual meaning to the artists and the viewing public of the time. Christianity's "double bookkeeping," as Trotsky referred to it, did not make the ills of this life disappear, it merely solved them fictitiously. Society, through the medium of the Church, handed out a promissory note, which the oppressed masses were to redeem in the next world. Nonetheless, artists and viewers alike drew real consolation from the death and resurrection of Jesus, a God-in-Man who felt deeply for their suffering, who had died for them, whose return held out the promise of a paradise on earth.

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is a work from which love and compassion for humanity, everything "Christlike" in the best sense of the word, are largely absent.

The postwar Biblical epics (*Quo Vadis*, *The Robe*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Ben Hur*, *King of Kings*, *Barabbas*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*), for all their clumsiness and sometimes downright foolishness, nonetheless pursued certain themes: tolerance, forgiveness, opposition to official repression and cruelty. Particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the slaughterhouse of two world wars, filmmakers felt that the message of universal brotherhood and resistance to tyranny would find a receptive audience.

Many remember the scene from William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959) in which Jesus gives a thirsty slave a drink of water, angering a Roman soldier, who proceeds to threaten Christ. Jesus simply stands there, the epitome of compassion, looking at the soldier and the latter backs away, awed.

Each generation creates a Jesus in its own image, so to speak. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) belongs loosely to the radicalized era of "liberation theology." Pasolini's work, which is not above suspicion of political opportunism, coming as it did in part as a byproduct of the Catholic-Communist Party rapprochement in Italy in the early 1960s, is nonetheless breathtaking at times. Pasolini's Christ violently ejects the moneylenders from the temple, orders his disciples to surrender their possessions and break from their families, and expresses his preference for the poor and the meek.

Gibson has something else in mind. The actor/filmmaker may not have a specific political agenda, but he is no naïf. To have screened his rough cut last summer for the likes of the *Wall Street Journal*'s Peggy Noonan, the *National Review*'s Kate O'Beirne, syndicated columnist and *Fox News Channel* analyst Linda Chavez, and David Kuo, the deputy director of the Bush administration's "faith-based initiative"—right-wing scoundrels all—provides some indication of his general orientation.

The traditionalist Catholic strain has been inextricably linked to right-wing politics. Michael Cuneo, in his *The Smoke of Satan*, wrote that its practitioners "would like nothing more than to be transported back to Louis XIV's France or Franco's Spain, where Catholicism enjoyed an unrivaled presidency over cultural life and other religions existed entirely at its beneficence." In his *Verdict on Vichy*, Michael Curtis pointed out that Frenchman Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, one of the founders of the traditionalist movement, and his followers supported an extreme right-wing ideology, imbued with anti-Semitism. For many years, they provided

sanctuary to Paul Touvier, who tortured and murdered Jews while serving as a Vichy policeman during World War II.

How could Gibson, linked to such ideas and circles, possibly do justice to the humane and indeed profoundly subversive message of Jesus in the Gospels?

The German philosopher Hegel cites Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," and calls this "a dictum of the noblest simplicity." This "pure heart," Hegel points out, further citing the Sermon, is filled with love for "the peacemakers," for those "persecuted for righteousness' sake," for those who strive to be "perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." What remarkable sentiments!

Inevitably, comments Hegel, this exacting doctrine must assume a "polemical" (revolutionary-practical) form. "Whatever might disturb the purity of the soul, should be destroyed," he continues. Further quoting Jesus, "Wilt thou be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give it to the poor, so shalt thou have a treasure in heaven, and come, follow me," Hegel adds, "Were this precept directly complied with, a social revolution must take place; the poor would become the rich."

Socialists have often noted the resemblance between early Christianity and the socialist working class movement. Both originated as movements of the oppressed, Christianity as a movement of slaves and freed slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights. Both movements preach and predict a future liberation from bondage and misery, Christianity placing salvation in the afterlife, socialism struggling for the transformation of conditions on earth. Both movements were subject to cruel persecution, outlawed at various points, declared to be enemies of the existing social order.

This subversive, socialistic content, which at least found passing reference in nearly all the Biblical epics of the past, is missing from Gibson's *Passion*. What takes its place, as the film's real positive content?

Critics like Wieseltier and others are capable of scoring points at the film's expense. They may even express outrage. Richard Cohen in the *Washington Post* legitimately points to the cult of violence in Gibson's work and calls it "fascistic." But none of these liberal or erstwhile liberal critics hints at the possibility that *The Passion of the Christ* tells us anything about contemporary America and its discontents.

Gibson is clearly a political right-winger of one variety or another, but the film cannot simply be reduced to those dimensions, although it has undoubtedly become an element in the Bush campaign, even a plank in the Republican election platform, one could say.

The film bears witness to a more general socio-psychological process. What emerges most strongly is the bitterness, resentment and even self-pity of definite social layers.

In the traditional depiction of the Passion, the Roman soldiers and the Jewish bystanders represent *us*, general humanity, including the artist himself. The death of Jesus brings out human capacities for wickedness, for indifference, for nobility. It is intended to set these qualities in relief and permit us to examine ourselves, the degree to which we are "pure in heart." For Gibson, this is not of any great interest. Such considerations are largely brushed aside.

Rather one senses a semi-autobiographical impulse at work in Gibson's film. And one is not referring to his individual psychological state. The actor/director may very well see himself as a man who has been persecuted, wronged, even (metaphorically) scourged, and no doubt personal demons play a role here, but the mix of aggression and passivity in Gibson's psyche is secondary.

One is speaking of an embittered, troubled social type. The political tendency (in the broadest sense) he represents, which has relatively deep roots in the US and has become more pronounced in recent years, is associated with feelings of deep resentment and paranoia.

Such individuals and groupings on the right are deeply convinced that

Americans and Christians in particular form an endangered species and face an almost universally hostile world. To these forces, the planet is full of enemies, and the events of September 11 only confirmed this fact. This is a social milieu to which Bush's call for a crusade against the "axis of evil" came as both a vindication and a battle-cry. These elements are convinced "everyone is out to get" them. Operating with a great deal of self-delusion, and turning the world upside down, they see America—irony of ironies!—as the victim.

Gibson belongs to this class of marginal personalities who feel they and other Christian Americans have been hard done by, ignored, persecuted. For his father, this creates a conspiracy mania, a hatred of the Catholic hierarchy, for the Jews and for all the "traitors" to the true cause. One should recall that the son appeared in a film entitled *Conspiracy Theory*, in which he spoke the line, "Somebody has to lift the scab...the festering scab that is the Vatican."

Of course, Gibson's film has an appeal beyond these most paranoid elements, in the first place to wider layers of fundamentalist Christians. But what does the growth of evangelical Christianity (and its specific Catholic variant) represent, if not primarily a concentrated ideological expression of the increased confusion and disorientation of considerable numbers of people in the US?

And such a phenomenon is not so difficult to understand. One only has to consider the massive changes that have occurred in American society over the past several decades. In the first place, the economic transformations: the wholesale destruction or decline of entire industries and regions, the changes associated with globalization and computerization, the virtual disappearance of traditional rural and even small-town America. Along with these, the demographic changes in family structure, religious affiliation, in union membership—in general, every old allegiance has been loosened or broken.

Momentous decisions are taken—to go to war or prepare for new ones, to eliminate the social-welfare state, to deregulate or scrap essential services—entirely behind the back of the population. All the while, official society discards its liberal consensus, lurches to the right and promotes every form of backwardness, including religious superstition and bigotry.

And all this goes undiscussed, undebated! American political life seems entirely barren to masses of people, something distant, alien and hostile. The two-party system, a corpse from the point of view of history, crushes the living with its enormous, apparently immovable weight.

Is it any wonder that wide layers of the population feel powerless, marginalized, even beaten and scourged? There are millions of tortured, anguished souls in America, who feel abandoned, betrayed, at the mercy of persecutors. Unable to associate itself with any broad-based progressive social movement, this mass desperation finds expression at present in a variety of forms, many of them unattractive and even anti-social. To misdiagnose or turn a blind eye to this reality is to underestimate the depth of the crisis of American society.

One feels safe in predicting that *The Passion* will not encounter precisely the same response in western Europe, and not because Americans are inherently vulnerable to religious mania, although there are ideological difficulties deriving from US history. Nowhere else in the advanced industrial world have the ruling elites been so successful as in the US, with the indispensable assistance of the trade union bureaucracy, at destroying social programs, reducing living standards in the interests of profit, and paralyzing opposition and resistance.

Gibson is not oppressed. He is a multimillionaire. The "sigh of the oppressed," as Marx termed the religious impulse, is not present in his film. But something of the "sigh of the oppressed" is present in the response to the film. *The Passion of the Christ* is a reactionary film, but one ought not draw the conclusion that the majority of those attending it, probably overwhelmingly drawn from the lower middle class and working class, are reactionary. This is not a film with an overt social message. If

Gibson, or those he now associates with, in and around the Bush administration, put forward their misanthropic, right-wing political agenda in a film, masses of people would not turn out.

Trotsky once pointed out that a political leader “is always a relation between people, the individual supply to meet the collective demand.” Gibson is not a political leader, but one might say that every major cultural phenomenon, even the most retrograde, is also “a relation between people,” the response to a social demand. Here the demand, however, is very diffuse, confused, composed of disparate elements.

Those seeing *The Passion* are reading all sorts of things into it. Its appeal, under the present confused ideological conditions, extends into different and even opposed social layers. As noted above, there are distinctly ultra-right, if not fascistic elements, who respond to its fascination with violence, its paranoia and bitterness, who see America as whipped and persecuted, by Arab and other “terrorists,” by the ungrateful, vengeful, Pharisee-like French and Germans! Reactionary forces who also want Americans to get used to making their own “sacrifices.”

But the film also attracts the genuinely oppressed, who are valiantly, often futilely trying to “embrace their cross” of everyday life at this point. They take consolation in Jesus’ suffering as a means of coming to grips with their own. This is by no means an ignoble effort. This same response, however, has another, debilitating meaning, as an expression of the doctrine of passivity and resignation to one’s fate. These are people who largely have no insight yet into their own problems and circumstances.

The Passion of the Christ is a reprehensible work. Those who praise the film, or downplay its reactionary character, or remain silent for fear of drawing fire from the fundamentalist right, serve political reaction themselves.

However, the film, artistically and intellectually negligible, has provoked a response that points far beyond itself and its director. 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.



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