

Gibson's polarizing 'Passion'

By David Elcott, 2/12/2004

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I was invited as a guest of Willow Creek Church in Illinois to its viewing of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. I hoped to be inspired, yet I left disheartened.

The movie is not anti-Semitic, at least not directly. Yes, the movie uses telltale images that historically have been used to attack Jews -- the hysterical rabble of Jews calling for Jesus' death, a naive and innocent Pontius Pilate who tries and fails to save Jesus, vicious temple guards sent by a beady-eyed high priest to arrest Jesus. But the real concern is that the movie pits Jesus and his immediate followers against everyone else, perfect goodness against satanic evil. In so doing, "The Passion" has the potential to challenge the core values of democratic pluralism and mutual religious respect that undergird our country.

The Passion of the Christ is an R-rated, harsh, and violent account of the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. In frame after frame, Gibson chooses to focus on a world filled with hateful, cruel human beings. The movie features a dark-cloaked, strange human form found nowhere in the Gospels that Gibson later described as satanic. It would be hard not to experience this as a warning that we are either one of the followers or an insidious enemy. At the end of the screening, Gibson spoke to the audience of thousands. His words reinforced the movie's fundamental point: not that Jesus was a great teacher or moral leader, but that the world is divided between those who believe and those who deny. The opponents of Jesus are dupes of Satan, Gibson said. This personal read of the Passion by Gibson could now become gospel to millions around the world.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, the movie has already provoked people to align themselves along lines of "them versus us," forces of good versus forces of evil. Instead of promoting respectful dialogue, this film may encourage people to delegitimize alternative viewpoints and in so doing call up hateful stereotypes. A devoutly Catholic columnist who challenged the movie received threatening calls, including many attacking him as a "dirty Jew." On Christian talk radio shows, people call in and equate modern-day Jews with Christ killers, asking a question not heard publicly in decades: "Why do they hate our Lord?" My Catholic and Protestant colleagues who question the accuracy of the movie are assaulted on websites, in print, and on the radio.

Viewers may legitimately be moved when viewing the movie and its description of the gift of Jesus' death that redeems the world from sin. But this teaching does not require that the world be divided between us and them, that ugly stereotypes be reintroduced, or that those who challenge the movie are dupes of Satan. As a result of these unnecessary and hurtful choices, this movie has unleashed gratuitous conflict for which its promoters must take responsibility.

For the past 50 years, religious Americans of good will have reached out to each other in an unparalleled ecumenical spirit, countering centuries of antagonism to build relationships and building on those connections to alleviate injustice and fight for the human and civil rights of all peoples. This sense of partnership and respect is now under attack here and abroad. Murder in the name of God and terror and bigotry in the name of religious absolutes travel infectiously from continent to continent. The blessings of technology and mass media have too often been hijacked to foment hatred between and among people of faith. People of good will must be more vigilant than ever to ensure that the words they preach and the images they offer in the name of God not be used, even inadvertently, toward destructive ends.

The concern I voice, then, is not just about a movie. It is about unwarranted polarization that has the potential to turn back the clock on interreligious understanding. We are united by shared American values: a commitment to democracy, freedom, and human rights, and a respect for other religious traditions. The last thing we can afford at this time is to allow ourselves to be divided by religion or, in other cases, by ethnicity, race, or nationality. If we do not mobilize on behalf of pluralism and mutual respect, we imperil our future. The hatred and suffering we engender will be on our heads and on those of our children.

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