



The Passion of the Christ by Mel Gibson: Reflections on a Heated Controversy

You always feel embarrassed when you manifest your enthusiasm for something you like, and later, you discover that a dear friend hates it, especially if that friend is a person you hold in high regard and to whose opinion you attach great importance.

Rino Cammilleri

Seen by millions of viewers throughout the world between February and April 2004, a huge box office success, defined as “the most notable and most important cinematic phenomenon of the early twenty-first century,”¹ the controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson was released in DVD last August 31st. It sold 2.4 million copies in 12 hours only on the West Coast. That news did not receive much coverage by the media. Seemingly, the emotional surge raised by the movie has flowed back, and the polemics have faded away. Perhaps, now, it can be examined with greater detachment.

The discordant judgments of the critics

The judgments of the critics have been discordant. *Movies.com*, a USA movie Web site, examines the votes of 15 critics and 272 readers and ascribes an average critic review score of 2.33/5 and an average reader rating of 4.24/5.² The most favourable review was by Sean O’Connell of *FilmCritic.com*, who considers it “an exquisite spiritual masterpiece . . . that should outlast the controversy and trigger constructive dialogue for years to come.”³ The most negative was by Peter Rainer, president of the *National Society of Film Critics*, who describes it as a mixture of

2005, unpublished.

¹ Uri Klein, “Cross Purposes,” *Haaretz*, 26 March 2004.

² “The Passion of the Christ. Critic reviews,” *Movies.com*, <http://movies.go.com/moviesdynamic/movies/movie?id=612693>.

³ Sean O’Connell, “The Passion of the Christ,” *Filmcritic.com*, <http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/0/3bc49bb50910b20388256e44001ac7ea?OpenDocument>.

“somasochism . . . creepy-Gothic Sturm und Drang . . . [and] religioso Wrestle-Mania smackdown.”⁴ Some critics say that it is difficult to objectively judge this movie because it deals with something “for which individuals have given their lives—both willingly and unwillingly,”⁵ and that one’s judgment depends on one’s “stand . . . as a secularist, a believer, a believer of another cult.”⁶ Therefore, this film will “move and involve . . . [only] strong Christians who live the mysteries of the Passion within the context of the deep mystery of Christ.”⁷ However, according to other critics, these people will be moved because “they bring their own deep feelings to the theater with them . . . supplying from their hearts the authentic spirituality that is missing in . . . [Gibson’s] jamboree of bloody beefcake.”⁸

All critics agree that *The Passion* is quite different from such old American colossal kitsch works as *The Robe* (1953) or *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), “palatable . . . Sunday school homilies designed to soothe the audience rather than to terrify or inflame it.”⁹ Some of them think that whereas “the great modernist artists, aware of the danger of kitsch and the fascination of sado-masochism, have largely withdrawn into austerity and awed abstraction or into fervent humanism, as in Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988),” Gibson’s *Passion* is “a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony,”¹⁰ very far from either “the measure and . . . intensity of Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [1964],” or the “didactic sobriety of Rossellini’s *The Messiah* [1975].”¹¹ Others consider it “the only religious movie . . . with the

⁴ Peter Rainer, “Passion Ploy. Mel Gibson’s imagining of Jesus’ last hours is a gory bloodbath worthy of a Jacobean revenge tragedy,” *New York Magazine*, 1st March 2004.

⁵ Kenneth Turan, “The Passion of the Christ. A narrow vision and staggering violence make this a film that will separate people rather than bring them together,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

⁶ Andrea Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò che piovve [Big thunder, little rain],” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/recens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

⁷ Antonio Spadaro, “‘La Passione di Cristo’ di Mel Gibson [Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’],” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 15 May 2004.

⁸ Frank Rich, “Mel Gibson Forgives Us for His Sins,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2004.

⁹ A. O. Scott, “Good and Evil Locked in Violent Showdown,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004.

¹⁰ David Denby, “Nailed, Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

¹¹ Roberto Nepoti, “Questa storia di Cristo è un western alla Leone [This story of Christ is a Leone’s Western],” *La Repubblica*, 9 April 2004.

exception of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* by Pasolini, that really seems to deal with what actually happened’.”¹²

As to photography, some reviewers consider the movie “an ideal religious gallery,”¹³ “a cinematic portal through which the moviegoer can pass to some of the greatest artistic imagery in the history of Western culture.”¹⁴ Gibson refers to Caravaggio [1573-1610], whose work he admires because it is “‘beautiful . . . violent . . . dark . . . spiritual . . . real-looking’,” whimsical,¹⁵ “‘kinetic’” and for its unique “‘sense of light’.”¹⁶ Caravaggio’s colours, beige, brown and black, were adopted by the costume designer, Maurizio Millenotti and his lighting and composition were reproduced by Caleb Deschanel, the director of photography. Gibson also mentions Mantegna, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca.¹⁷ Caleb cites Géricault, especially *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), Raphael and Dalí.¹⁸ Joseph Phelan, features editor of the fine art search engine *Artcyclopedia*, remarks on the influence of “Rembrandt’s great etching of the *Ecce Homo* [1636], especially concerning the scenes where Jesus is before the crowds . . . [and to] the faces of the Jewish priests.”¹⁹ Others suggest less rewarding references, such as “the gruesome Crucifixions and Pietas of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,”²⁰ the “artists of the gloomy German

¹² Roger Ebert, in “Two thumbs up for ‘The Passion’,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 February 2004.

¹³ Enrico Magrelli, “*La Passione di Cristo*, o meglio, ‘la passione di Gibson’ [*The Passion of the Christ*, or rather ‘Gibson’s passion’],” *Film TV*, 15, 11 April 2004, <http://www.filmmtv.it/recensione.php?film=26341#>.

¹⁴ Phelan, “The ‘Look’,” *Artcyclopedia*, <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2004-04.html>.

¹⁵ Mel Gibson, in Holly McClure, “A very violent ‘passion’,” *New York Daily News*, 26 January 2003.

¹⁶ Mel Gibson, in Raymond Arroyo, interview with Mel Gibson, Eternal World Television Network (EWTN), “The World Over: Live,” 23 January 2004, <http://www.tcrnews2.com/genarts.html>.

¹⁷ Mel Gibson, “Foreword,” in Jim Bolton *et al.*, eds., Ken Duncan, Philip Antonello, Photographers, *The Passion: Photography from the Movie The Passion of the Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004) v.

¹⁸ John Bailey and Stephen Pizzello, “A Savior’s Pain [an interview with Caleb Deschanel],” *American Cinematographer*, March 2004.

¹⁹ Joseph Phelan, “The ‘Look’ of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*,” *Artcyclopedia*, <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2004-04.html>.

²⁰ David Ansen, “So What’s the Good News? The debate over ‘The Passion’ may be less harsh than the film,” *Newsweek*, 1st March 2004.

Renaissance,”²¹ the *Crucifixion* of Isenheim by Grünewald (1510-1515), Hieronymus Bosch as to the “whirl of grotesques—Jewish and Roman—whose spiritual bankruptcy is written on their yellowing teeth and twisted faces,”²² “the bloody Pop representation of Jesus found in . . . a roadside shrine in Mexico,”²³ and even “such horror movies as *The Exorcist* [1973] and *Jacob’s Ladder* [1990].”²⁴

According to some critics, Gibson’s film script and direction give the actors “very few occasions to ‘act’”²⁵ and treat them as “simple onlookers of a gloomy and sacred story, modest instruments of a divine design, functions of a revealed truth.”²⁶ As to Jim Caviezel, whom Gibson said he chose because of a “‘glow about him, a childlike quality, an innocence that was necessary for the role’,”²⁷ some critics maintain that he is “perfect for his role”²⁸ and would “deserve an Oscar”²⁹ for his “inspired performance,”³⁰ “involving gaze . . . convincing presence,”³¹ and “fervent portrayal of Jesus.”³² Others say that he “looks like a bearded, beatific Sam Waterston before his wounds render him unrecognizable,”³³ offers “a bi-dimensional character who, prosaically, immolates himself as a mere static target of his executioners’

²¹ Natalia Aspesi, “Troppo sangue per una tragedia senza Dio e senza resurrezione [Too much blood for a tragedy without God and resurrection],” *La Repubblica*, 6 April 2004.

²² Maitland McDonagh, “Death Trip,” *TV Guide*, 25 February 2004.

²³ Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

²⁴ Ansen, “So What’s the Good News?,” *Newsweek*, 1st March 2004.

²⁵ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/recens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

²⁶ Magrelli, “*La Passione*,” *Film TV*, 15, 11 April 2004, <http://www.filmTV.it/recensione.php?film=26341#>.

²⁷ Mel Gibson, in Holly McClure, “The Passion of the Christ,” <http://www.hollymcclure.com/reviews.htm>.

²⁸ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/recens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

²⁹ Holly McClure, <http://www.hollymcclure.com/reviews.htm>.

³⁰ Lou Lumenick, “The Goriest Story Ever Told,” *New York Post*, 24 February 2004.

³¹ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

³² David Sterritt, “Gibson’s ‘Passion’ has little but suffering on its mind,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 25 February 2004.

³³ Rainer, “Passion Ploy,” *New York Magazine*, 1 March 2004.

blows and insults,”³⁴ and “does not embody Christ.”³⁵ About Maia Morgenstern, most critics say that she plays “magnificently (and nearly wordlessly),”³⁶ and some of them foretell that “it’s the face of . . . [her] stoic, grief-stricken Mary that will linger long after”³⁷ the controversy on this film has ended.

The declared intentions of the director

Gibson himself explained why he produced this movie. A “‘spiritual bankruptcy’”³⁸ led him to study the Gospel, particularly the Passion of Christ, “‘the biggest love-story of all time’.”³⁹ In the sacrifice of Christ, who, through his “‘complete forgetting of self for the sake of all others’,”⁴⁰ demonstrated “‘the greatest love one can have’”⁴¹ and reached “‘the height of heroism’,” he rediscovered the meaning of life, “‘faith, hope, love and forgiveness’.”⁴² Therefore, he decided to shoot a film on this theme, persuaded that its viewers would receive the same benefits as he did.

Gibson also wanted to tackle the issue of “the cosmic battle between good and evil . . . that is played out behind earthly scenes of violence against the innocent Jesus.” In his opinion, “we each need to personalize that fact” because this battle is also fought within “every human being . . . [who] resists God and good.” This struggle is the “spiritual warfare”⁴³ that each of us must fight so that we may make right

³⁴ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/re-cens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

³⁵ Magrelli, “*La Passione*,” *Film TV*, 15, 11 April 2004, <http://www.filmstv.it/recensione.php?film=26341#>.

³⁶ Scott Foundas, “Sacred Blood. Mel Gibson’s salutary if punishing iconography,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, 27 February – 4 March 2004.

³⁷ McDonagh, “Death Trip,” *TV Guide*, 25 February 2004.

³⁸ Diane Sawyer, “Pain and Passion, Mel Gibson Tackles Addiction, Recovery and the Controversies Over His New Film. Mel Gibson is interviewed by Diane Sawyer on *ABCNews*’ ‘Primetime’,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

³⁹ Mel Gibson, in “Christ’s Agony as You’ve Never Seen It,” *Zenit News Agency*, 6 March 2003.

⁴⁰ Mel Gibson, in Peggy Noonan, “Face to Face with Mel Gibson,” *Reader’s Digest* (United Kingdom Edition), March 2004.

⁴¹ Gibson, in “Christ’s Agony as You’ve Never Seen It,” *Zenit News Agency*, 6 March 2003.

⁴² Gibson, in Noonan, “Face to Face,” *Reader’s Digest* (UK Edition), March 2004.

⁴³ David Neff, “The Passion of Mel Gibson. Why evangelicals are cheering a movie with profoundly Catholic sensibilities,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, March 2004.

“‘choices’,” like Simon of Cyrene who, through his initially reluctant decision to help Jesus, “‘transcended any kind of selfconcern [sic] and became a true hero’.”⁴⁴

According to Gibson, “‘film . . . is visceral. It has the power to draw you in and have you experience something on an emotional level that you may not be able logically to explain’.”⁴⁵ Thus, since the meaning of the Passion is strictly associated with the bitterness of Christ’s ordeal to redeem humankind, his film should have been realistic so that the audience could personally reenact that terrible experience and receive a new life from it. Therefore, he produced a “shocking . . . extreme” movie that could “push the viewer over the edge” and demonstrate “that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness.”⁴⁶ To “‘lend even more authenticity and realism to the film’,”⁴⁷ he decided to adopt the languages spoken at those times, Aramaic and Latin.

Gibson’s sources were the Gospels, to which he did his best “‘to be as faithful as possible’” because they are “‘unchangeable’.”⁴⁸ However, he filled some narrative gaps, drawing from two other Catholic sources: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, describing the visions of the German stigmatic mystic Anna Catharina Emmerich (1774-1824) and *The Mystical City of God. The Divine History and Life of the Virgin Mother of God* describing the visions of Mary of Agreda (1602-1665), a Spanish nun who lived in New Mexico.

Gibson did not mean to do “a historical documentary,”⁴⁹ but “‘to create a lasting work of art’,”⁵⁰ “a contemplative [film] . . . in the sense that one is compelled to remember . . . in a spiritual way which cannot be articulated, only experienced.”⁵¹ Therefore, his movie presents his “‘version of what happened, according to the

⁴⁴ Mel Gibson, in “Transcript: Gibson on ‘The Passion’.” A partial transcript from *The O’Reilly Factor*, February 24, 2004 that has been edited for clarity,” *Fox News*, 25 February 2004.

⁴⁵ Mel Gibson, in David Neff e Jane Johnson Struck, “‘Dude, That Was Graphic.’ Mel Gibson talks about *The Passion of The Christ*,” *Christianity Today*, 23 February 2004.

⁴⁶ Gibson, in Sawyer, “Pain and Passion,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

⁴⁷ McClure, “A very violent ‘passion’,” *New York Daily News*, 26 January 2003.

⁴⁸ Gibson, in Neff and Johnson Struck, “‘Dude, That Was Graphic’,” *Christianity Today*, 23 February 2004.

⁴⁹ Gibson, “Foreword,” in Bolton *et al.*, *The Passion*.

⁵⁰ Mel Gibson, in Gabriel Snyder, “Gibson answers critics of ‘Passion’ The movie meant to inspire not offend,” *Variety*, 13 June 2003.

⁵¹ Gibson, “Foreword,” in Bolton *et al.*, *The Passion*.

gospels” and “the aspects of . . . [the Passion he] wanted to show’.”⁵² His film is not only for Christians but for everyone because Jesus’ story has a universal value, like Gandhi’s story, a “blockbuster hit . . . not just for Hindus’.”⁵³

Gibson seemed so immersed in his renewed religious feelings that while producing the film, he prayed every day and said he perceived the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saw prodigious events and a profound and personal effect exercised by the film on “most of the cast.”⁵⁴ He hopes his movie, “a testament to the infinite love of Jesus the Christ,”⁵⁵ may convey “a tremendous message of faith, hope, love, forgiveness . . . courage and sacrifice . . . [and] affect people on a very profound level and somehow change them’.”⁵⁶

The controversy about the film

Only a few people question the sincerity of the film, “a look inside . . . [the producer’s] heart and soul.”⁵⁷ Moreover, many viewers respond either with “the silence, the introspection, the realization, and the remembering”⁵⁸ that Gibson expected from them or simply saying that “he makes you look at things you’d rather not look at, and feel things you’d rather not feel. He’s a brute and a poet.”⁵⁹ Many others, however, react with indignant accusations. The heaviest charges concern extreme violence and anti-Semitism. The film is also blamed for being historically and philologically inaccurate, for lacking a proper context, for being unfaithful to the Gospels and drawing its inspiration from unreliable sources, for giving an incomplete presentation of the figure of Christ, for being exclusivist, ideologically factitious and Manichaeic, for hindering interreligious dialogue, for being untimely and last but not least commercial. The opinions of “normally equidistant and detached reliable critics” are sometimes declaredly motivated by a personal judgment on the artist’s

⁵² Gibson, in Sawyer, “Pain and Passion,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

⁵³ Gibson, in “Christ’s Agony,” *Zenit News Agency*, 6 March 2003,.

⁵⁴ Holly McClure, “First-Person: Mel Gibson’s “Passion” for Jesus,” *BP News* (the daily national news service of Southern Baptists), 24 February 2003.

⁵⁵ Gibson, “Foreword,” in Bolton *et al.*, *The Passion*.

⁵⁶ Mel Gibson, in McClure, “First-Person,” *BP News*, 24 February 2003.

⁵⁷ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

⁵⁸ Neff, “The Passion,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, March 2004.

⁵⁹ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Red-State Deicide: Crucifixion as bloodbath, Christ as action hero,” *New York Press*, 24 February 2004.

personal beliefs and often worded with such “passion . . . [and] involvement”⁶⁰ that the impression is gathered that *The Passion* has “pit Jews vs. Christians, liberals vs. conservatives, or secularists vs. religious people.”⁶¹

Extreme violence

Two well-known critics from New York define *The Passion* as “one of the cruelest movies in the history of the cinema”⁶² and “the Goriest Story Ever Told.”⁶³ Many worry about the effect that the violence of this film, R-rated in the United States, may have on children—a “paradoxical”⁶⁴ “betrayal of . . . [Jesus’] original message of special love for the children.”⁶⁵ Many also worry that such violence may, in general, arouse a bitter anger that will then be turned against “those portrayed so crudely on the screen in this film for two hours—the Jewish people.”⁶⁶

Its extreme violence is “the only point on which all the friends and all the foes of . . . [Gibson’s] film agree.”⁶⁷ However, the judgments on that violence are different. Some critics believe that such violence “ends up blotting out the meaning of the Passion and the essence of Christ’s person and message—love carried to its perfection by the voluntary giving of one’s self”⁶⁸ and feel “abused by a filmmaker intent

⁶⁰ Pino Farinotti, *Dizionario Farinotti* [Farinotti’s Dictionary], <http://www.mymovies.it/dizionario/recensione.asp?Id=34961>.

⁶¹ “ADL and Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’. Frequently Asked Questions,” http://www.adl.org/interfaith/gibson_qa.asp.

⁶² Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

⁶³ Lumenick, “The Goriest Story,” *New York Post*, 24 February 2004.

⁶⁴ The Conference of Bishops of France, Standing Committee for Information and Communication, “Statement,” March 31, 2004, http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson_whattheyaresaying.asp.

⁶⁵ Antimo Marandola, “I trenta denari di Mel Gibson [Mel Gibson’s thirty pieces of silver],” *Il Punto*, April 2004.

⁶⁶ Abraham H. Foxman, “Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’: Could It Trigger Anti-Semitism?», Palm Beach Florida, 6 February 2004, http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson_trigger.asp.

⁶⁷ Peter Steinfels, “Movie Misgivings,” *New York Times*, 28 February 2004.

⁶⁸ Conférence des évêques de France [Conference of the bishops of France], “Position du Comité permanent pour l’information et la communication sur le film ‘La Passion du Christ’ de Mel Gibson [The position of the Information and Communication Permanent Committee on Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ],” 30 March 2004, http://www.cef.fr/catho/actus/communiques/2004/commu20040330_passionduchrist.php.

on punishing an audience, for who knows what sins.”⁶⁹ Others define the film as a long “list . . . [of] vulgarities” and say that “those who believe . . . that esthetic and ethic are inseparable, consider it esthetically ignoble and unreligious in its wicked dolorism,”⁷⁰ “a homoerotic ‘exercise in lurid sadomasochism’ for those who ‘like seeing handsome young men stripped and flayed alive over a long period of time’,”⁷¹ “a porn movie”⁷² meant to appeal “to the gay Christian sado-masochistic community.”⁷³ Others compare it to such action movies as *Rambo* (1982), *Braveheart* (1995), and *Kill Bill* (2003) or *horror* movies, such as those by Dario Argento, with their “lurid style and . . . contempt for the moral sensitivities of ordinary people.”⁷⁴ While some critics justify that violence in the name of realism, others maintain that Gibson imprudently attempted to “render sensational a story that is immensely sensational in itself, even when it is told *sotto voce*”⁷⁵ and made “literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly,” therefore “the style and tone of *The Passion* . . . are far from what is ordinarily meant by realism.”⁷⁶ Last but not least, Gibson is blamed for having “no faith in audiences to feel Jesus’ pain without rubbing their noses in it.”⁷⁷

Other critics, on the contrary, justify the movie’s violence, which in their opinion, “‘is never gratuitous’,”⁷⁸ in the name of historical accuracy⁷⁹ or of the

⁶⁹ Ansen, “So What’s the Good News?,” *Newsweek*, 1st March 2004.

⁷⁰ Laura, Luisa and Morando Morandini, *Il Morandini. Dizionario dei film 2005* [The Morandini. A Movie Dictionary] (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2004), s.v. “La Passione di Cristo.”

⁷¹ Christopher Hitchens, in Rich, “Mel Gibson,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2004.

⁷² Rich, “Mel Gibson,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2004.

⁷³ Christopher Hitchens, “I detest this film... with a passion,” *mirrornews*, 27 February 2004, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/allnews/page.cfm?objectid=13993739&method=full&siteid=50143>.

⁷⁴ Leon Wieseltier, “Mel Gibson’s Lethal Weapon,” *The New Republic*, 26 February 2004.

⁷⁵ Elena Loewenthal, “L’enigma della Passione [The enigma of The Passion],” *La Stampa*, 20 March 2004.

⁷⁶ Scott, “Good and Evil,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004.

⁷⁷ Peter Travers, “The Passion of the Christ,” *Rolling Stone*, http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/_id/5949551.

⁷⁸ Augustine Di Noia, in “Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’: On Review at the Vatican. Exclusive Interview With Father Di Noia of the Doctrinal Congregation,” *Zenit.org*, 8 December 2003.

⁷⁹ Cf. Rino Cammilleri, “The Passion of the Christ di Mel Gibson,” *Antidoti*, 15 April 2004.

“importance of the shedding of blood in the Atonement”;⁸⁰ because of the power of the film that changes the words of the Gospels into powerful images of “flesh and blood, striking signs of love and hatred,”⁸¹ or of the clash between the sweetish love, imagined by “today’s spiritual seekers who are ‘into’ Asian religions,” and the true love of God, which is part of “forgotten Christian basics,” and is “harsh and dangerous,” since it “requires real transformation”;⁸² because of an attempt to re-sensitize the “audience to images of human suffering in a cinematic . . . era in which such images have become something of a lingua franca,”⁸³ or of the “heart-hardness of human beings of the third millennium,”⁸⁴ that have experienced “the atomic bomb . . . the extermination camps . . . [and] the shame of terrorism.”⁸⁵ These critics say that this violence “works powerfully for those who can endure it”⁸⁶ and provokes “the inertia of the Christians, who do away with their God.”⁸⁷ They expect that, once they have viewed the movie, several Christians will wonder: “How could we forget?”⁸⁸

Anti-Semitism

The Passion is described as “the most virulently anti-Semitic movie made since the German propaganda films of World War II,”⁸⁹ a product “of the same theology that gave rise to the Holocaust.”⁹⁰ Its main aspects quoted to demonstrate its anti-Semitism are the responsibility of Jesus’ death ascribed to the Jews, the Aramaic reference

⁸⁰ Neff, “The Passion,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, March 2004. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ¶ 613.

⁸¹ Vittorio Messori, “A Passion of Violence and Love,” <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259>.

⁸² Kenneth L. Woodward, “Is this the Jesus you had imagined? Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion,’” *International Herald Tribune*, 26 February 2004.

⁸³ Foundas, “Sacred Blood,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, 27 February – 4 March 2004.

⁸⁴ Andrea Piersanti, “Il film di Gibson [Gibson’s movie]: The Passion of the Christ,” *Il Foglio*, 26 February 2004.

⁸⁵ Gian Luigi Rondi, “La Passione di Cristo,” *Il Tempo*, 21 March 2004.

⁸⁶ Roger Ebert, “The Passion of the Christ,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 24 February 2004.

⁸⁷ Sergio Zavoli, “Quel Dio dimenticato sulla croce [That God forgotten on the cross],” *Il Resto del Carlino*, 11 April 2004.

⁸⁸ Piersanti, “Il film di Gibson,” *Il Foglio*, 26 February 2004.

⁸⁹ Jami Bernard, “Gore’s the crime of ‘Passion,’” *New York Daily News*, 23 February 2004.

⁹⁰ Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, vice president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns, in Melissa Radler, “Gibson’s ‘Passion’ opens in US,” *Jerusalem Post*, 26 February 2004.

to the Gospel's verse reporting the Jews as accepting blame for Jesus' death,⁹¹ the contrast between Pilate's humanness and the merciless determination of the Jewish priests and mob in their request that Jesus be put to death, the physical portrayals of the Jews, the figure of Satan moving among the Jewish crowd and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish children changed into demons.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), founded in 1913 in Chicago to stop the defamation of the Jewish people, manifests its concern that the film could fuel hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism, especially in "Europe, South America and the Middle East, places where anti-Semitism already exists."⁹² Many Christians also express the same concern as the Jews.⁹³ Mustafa Darwish, former president of the Egypt Censorship Authority, seems to substantiate their fears, stating that the Egyptian censorship authorities "'think the film is anti-Semitic. That is why they are giving it . . . [the] privilege'"⁹⁴ of being released in a Muslim country, an unusual exception to a ruling from Al Azhar University—the ultimate spiritual authority for Muslims worldwide—that forbids the depiction of prophets in movies.⁹⁵ An old Muslim lady who attended a pre-release screening in Cairo remarks that it "'shows that there is tolerance and tenderness in all religions . . . [It] shows Jews who sympathized with the Christ, while we Muslims also had a Christian person who helped the prophet Mohammed'."⁹⁶

As to the Christians, when the Vatican spokesman Joaquín Navarro-Valls is informed that Rome's Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, expects "'an official statement of the Church against Gibson's movie'," he answers: "'There are good reasons

⁹¹ Originally Gibson had explicitly quoted Matthew 27:25, whereby the Jewish crowd calling for Jesus' execution say: "His blood be on us, and on our children." Later on he accepted to eliminate this quotation out of respect toward the Jews. However, he did not cut the scene where these words are uttered in Aramaic, he simply removed their translation from the subtitles.

⁹² "Anti-Defamation League and Mel Gibson," http://www.adl.org/interfaith/gibson_qa.asp.

⁹³ ADL collect a good number of such statements of solidarity at http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson_whattheyaresaying.asp.

⁹⁴ Charles Levinson, "Arab censors giving 'Passion' wide latitude. Gibson film packs Mideast movie houses," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1st April 2004.

⁹⁵ Muslims consider Jesus a prophet.

⁹⁶ Levinson, "Arab censors," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1st April 2004. According to Islamic tradition, Waraqaah ibn-Nawfal, a Christian cousin of Khadijah, Muḥammad's first wife, helped the prophet to interpret his own revelations.

to think that there will be no statement or condemnation of the film . . . The film is the cinematic transcription of the Gospels . . . If the film were anti-Semitic, the Gospels would also be so’.”⁹⁷ Other Christians find several aspects of *The Passion* in favour of the Jews. For example: “During the process in the Sanhedrin, two priests disagree and protest against Jesus’ condemnation.”⁹⁸ “The Romans play the most obtuse and heinous role, whereas all those who grieve for the fate of Jesus of Nazareth are Jew,”⁹⁹ like Mary, the Magdalene, the Apostles, and “the women of Jerusalem, crying out in despair.”¹⁰⁰ “Simon helps Jesus to carry the cross, Veronica brings a cloth to wipe his face,”¹⁰¹ ““most of the Jews . . . are horrified by what they see’.”¹⁰² “To Caiaphas’ obstinacy in calling for the crucifixion . . . the unheard-of sadism makes more than abundant counterbalance of the Roman executioners.”¹⁰³ The film posits that the Jewish priests asked that Jesus be put to death because they were ““threatened by his assault on their establishment””¹⁰⁴ and that “Christ was railroaded through a corrupt judicial system and suffered only when religion and politics met at an unfortunate crossroads.”¹⁰⁵ Caiaphas, who was the high priest for eighteen years, was a “collaborator Sadducee who did not represent the Jewish people, but, rather was detested by them” and “the Talmud reserves terrible words for him.”¹⁰⁶ No one notices that superstition is one of the reasons why Pilate tries to absolve Jesus. His wife Claudia Procula has convinced him that should he condemn that “holy (*sanctus*)”¹⁰⁷ man he may draw the gods’ wrath upon himself.

⁹⁷ Joaquín Navarro-Valls, in Orazio Petrosillo, “Il portavoce del Vaticano [The Vatican spokesman],” *Il Messaggero*, 11 March 2004.

⁹⁸ Cammilleri, “The Passion,” *Antidoti*, 15 April 2004.

⁹⁹ Cammilleri, “The Passion,” *Antidoti*, 15 April 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Messori, “A Passion,” <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259>.

¹⁰¹ Ebert, “The Passion,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹⁰² Roger Ebert, in “Two thumbs up,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 February 2004.

¹⁰³ Messori, “A Passion,” <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259>.

¹⁰⁴ Ebert, in “Two thumbs up,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 February 2004.

¹⁰⁵ O’ Connell, “The Passion,” *Filmcritic.com*, <http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/0/3bc49bb50910b20388256e44001ac7ea?OpenDocument>.

¹⁰⁶ Messori, “A Passion,” <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259>.

¹⁰⁷ The connotations of the Latin word *sanctus* are: “established as inviolable . . . morally pure, good, innocent, pious, holy, just” (Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *sanc̄io, xi, ctum*).

Other critics think that Gibson could have filmed the Passion without hurting the Jews' feelings. First, he could follow the "existing Catholic pastoral instructions detailing the ways in which the faithful should dramatize or discuss the Passion" and advise to be cautious in representing "'passages that seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light'."¹⁰⁸ Second, he could include "the canonical line from John's gospel in which Caiaphas argues that it is better for one man to die for the people that the nation be saved,"¹⁰⁹ thus underscoring "the similarities between Caiaphas and Pilate."¹¹⁰ Third, he could show "the scene of the expulsion from the Temple," helping "the 'inexperienced'"¹¹¹ understand why the Jews were angry with Jesus.

Historical and philological inaccuracies

Historical inaccuracies are mentioned regarding the ascription of the responsibility of Jesus' death to the Jews. Others, however, remark that "Jewish tradition acknowledges that . . . [Jewish] leaders in 1st century Palestine played a role in Jesus' execution."¹¹² Jon Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek*, makes a long list of inaccuracies which contributed to creating the anti-Semitic image of *The Passion*. For example, it is unlikely that the Magdalene called "for help from Roman soldiers as Jesus is taken indoors to be interrogated by the priests," as if there were a "Jewish control over the situation." As to "the scene of a crowd of Jews crying out 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' before Pilate . . . it is very difficult to imagine Caesar's man being bullied by the people he usually handled roughly"; "it seems unlikely that a movement which threatened the whole capital would so quickly and so completely dwindle to a few disciples, sympathetic onlookers, Mary and Mary Magdalene,"¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Jon Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?," *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Steven D. Greydanus, "Beyond Bias: *The Passion of the Christ* and Anti-Semitism," *Decentfilms.com*, http://www.decentfilms.com/commentary/passion_issues.html. Cf. John 18:14.

¹¹⁰ Ebert, "The Passion," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹¹¹ Chirichelli, "Tanto tuonò," *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/re-cens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

¹¹² David Klinghoffer, "Study traditions, read texts to understand 'The Passion'," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 11 January 2004.

¹¹³ Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?," *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

a feature suggesting that Pilate had no reasons to consider Jesus dangerous and thus to condemn him to death.

As to philological inaccuracies, some critics say that the Aramaic of the film is “grammatically correct and risibly enunciated.”¹¹⁴ Others remark that Latin is “the language of the traditional Catholic Church, but not the spoken language of the Roman Empire in Jesus’s time”¹¹⁵ and that “Roman soldiers spoke a dialect of Greek.”¹¹⁶ Others, on the contrary, praise the use of Aramaic and Latin, which “dispenses with the stilted, awkward diction that afflicts so many biblical epics,”¹¹⁷ “gives the proceedings a reality and believability . . . they might not otherwise have,”¹¹⁸ and, together with its photography and music, creates “an unreal, almost arcane, atmosphere that projects us two thousand years ago.”¹¹⁹

Decontextualization

Some reviewers complain that the film makes “virtually no nod to critical analysis or context”¹²⁰ and remark that, since most Christians “believe that apostles were on the scene and simply wrote down everything they saw,”¹²¹ this flaw opens “the door to unchecked religious emotionalism . . . sadness, or anger, or any range of emotions.”¹²² Gibson should have somehow informed his audience that “the Middle East in biblical times was a Jewish community occupied against its will by the Roman Empire, and the message of Jesus was equally threatening to both sides: to the Romans, because he was a revolutionary, and to the establishment of Jewish priests, because he preached a new covenant and threatened the status quo.”¹²³ He should have also considered the opinion of some Biblical scholars, whereby the Evangelists wrote their texts several years after Jesus’ crucifixion, at a time when the Romans

¹¹⁴ Wieseltier, “Mel Gibson’s,” *The New Republic*, 26 February 2004.

¹¹⁵ Pamela Grace, “Sacred savagery: The Passion of the Christ,” *Cineaste*, 22 June 2004.

¹¹⁶ Hitchens, “I detest,” *mirrornews*, 27 February 2004, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/all-news/page.cfm?objectid=13993739&method=full&siteid=50143>.

¹¹⁷ Scott, “Good and Evil,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004.

¹¹⁸ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹¹⁹ Enrique Ochoa, “Anteprima The Passion of Christ,” *Tempi Moderni*, March 2004.

¹²⁰ Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

¹²¹ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹²² Lorenzo Albacete, “Facts of life,” *The New Republic*, 5 March 2004.

¹²³ Ebert, “The Passion,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 24 February 2004.

were quite powerful and therefore, they may have written them in such a way as to “downplay the Romans’ role in the Crucifixion,”¹²⁴ in order “to attract converts and make their young religion . . . attractive to as broad an audience as possible.”¹²⁵

Unfaithfulness to the Gospels

Some reviewers point out that the film is repeatedly unfaithful to the Gospels. For example, Gibson “does not mention the [Passover] feast . . . has Pilate saying words of scornful reproach to Caiaphas, when the latter one hands over Jesus . . . to him . . . [words which] cannot be found in the Gospels: ‘Do you always punish your prisoners before they’re judged?’,”¹²⁶ “the idea of a nighttime trial . . . is . . . problematic,” “nothing in the Gospel trial scenes supports the idea that Jesus” was accused of blasphemy, “Caiaphas . . . is depicted as a grim witness to the scourging and Crucifixion.”¹²⁷ “There is no scriptural source for the cross falling over so that Jesus falls on his face.”¹²⁸ An Italian critic remarks that the film is “a true manifesto of all the licences cinema can indulge in.”¹²⁹

However, other critics think that the film shows the “damages” of a “literal interpretation of the texts,”¹³⁰ which gives “most audiences a misleading picture of what probably happened in those epochal hours so long ago” and confirms “the roots of Christian anti-Semitism . . . [which] lie in overly literal readings—which are, in fact, misreadings—of many New Testament texts.”¹³¹ It is suggested that “an allegorical reading of the Gospels, similar to that recommended by many Christian exegetes for the Jewish Bible,” be adopted because “the literal interpretation of the Evangelists leads to inevitable, irreconcilable contradictions among the different

¹²⁴ Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

¹²⁵ Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

¹²⁶ Marco Ottolenghi, “Sul mito del deicidio [On the myth of the deicide],” *Le newsletter di Morasha.it* [an Italian Jewish website], 4 April 2004. Cf. John 1:13, 2:23, 6:4, 11:55, 12:1, 13:1. Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*, chap. 5, 37m:27s.

¹²⁷ Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

¹²⁸ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹²⁹ Farinotti, *Dizionario*, <http://www.mymovies.it/dizionario/recensione.asp?Id=34961>.

¹³⁰ Luigi Catalani, “La Passione di Cristo [The Passion of the Christ],” *Mymovies.it*, <http://www.mymovies.it/dizionario/recensione.asp?Id=12544&ut=2>.

¹³¹ Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

narrations of the same events.”¹³² However, most Catholics praise “the radical “Catholicity” of the film . . . in its refusal of every demythologization, in its taking the Gospels as precise chronicles”¹³³ and maintain that *The Passion* never distorts “although, in its different style, the letter of the Sacred Texts considered anti-Semitic only if they are misinterpreted.”¹³⁴

The interposition of other sources

The quotations from the books by Emmerich, “long accused of anti-Semitism”¹³⁵ for her “caricatured depictions of the Jewish crowds,”¹³⁶ and by Mary of Agreda are considered questionable outside of Christian circles. Other reviewers mention other possible sources: the “fourteen stations of the Cross,”¹³⁷ the “Apocryphal Gospels, as to many flashbacks and quotations about Satan,”¹³⁸ “the Holy Shroud” whose man “bore at least two hundred strokes,”¹³⁹ and to whose “visual image” “the look of Christ, and . . . even the casting of Jim Caviezel in the role, were inspired,”¹⁴⁰ and the mystic visions of the Italian seer Mary Valtorta (1897-1961), described in *The Poem of the Man-God*.¹⁴¹ These sources are also not acceptable outside of the Christian milieu.

¹³² Ottolenghi, “Sul mito,” *Le newsletter di Morasha.it*, 4 April 2004.

¹³³ Messori, “A Passion,” <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=49259>.

¹³⁴ Rondi, “La Passione,” *Il Tempo*, 21 March 2004.

¹³⁵ Lumenick, “The Goriest Story,” *New York Post*, 24 February 2004.

¹³⁶ Mario De Giglio-Bellemare, “The Passion of the Christ reviewed by Mario De Giglio-Bellemare,” *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004.

¹³⁷ Ebert, “The Passion,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹³⁸ Rondi, “La Passione,” *Il Tempo*, 21 March 2004. The Apocryphal Gospels are gospels outside the accepted canon of Scripture.

¹³⁹ Cammilleri, “The Passion,” *Antidoti*, 15 April 2004. The Holy Shroud or Shroud of Turin (Italy) is a centuries old linen cloth that bears the image of a crucified man. According to tradition this man is Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁴⁰ Phelan, “The ‘Look’,” *Artcyclopedia*, <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2004-04.html>.

¹⁴¹ Maria Valtorta said that she saw “the Cross, and Christ nailed to it, bounced around face down so that the nails may be hammered on the back” (Cammilleri, “The Passion,” *Antidoti*, 15 April 2004).

The incompleteness of its Christian message

Many reviewers say that “the choice to isolate the Passion from Christ’s life and preaching, on the one hand, and to be silent on the Resurrection, on the other, problematically diminishes the message of the Gospels.”¹⁴² According to some critics, the film “largely ignores Jesus’ heart-stopping eloquence, his startling ethical radicalism and personal radiance,”¹⁴³ “fosters a one-dimensional view of Jesus, reducing his entire life and world-transforming teachings to his sufferings, to the notion that he was exclusively someone who was willing to absorb unspeakable punishment for our sins,”¹⁴⁴ describe him as a “swarthy, macho rebel . . . one big, badass Jesus,”¹⁴⁵ whose “relations with the Father are hysterical and secularist . . . [similar to] those between Charlie Manson and Satan.”¹⁴⁶ But most of all it “never provides a clear sense of what all of this bloodshed was for, an inconclusiveness that is Mr. Gibson’s most serious artistic failure.”¹⁴⁷

Exclusivism

Many agree that Gibson assumes his audience to be “familiar with both the teachings and *dramatis personae* of the New Testament” and “steeped in Biblical arcane.”¹⁴⁸ Therefore, “no hypothetical viewer coming to this film absent any knowledge of Christianity would believe that this is the story that gave birth to one of the great transformative religions as well as countless works of timeless beauty.”¹⁴⁹ In this sense, this film portrays “[religious] identity as an absolute difference,” an identity that is quite different from that suggested by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which “inclined to hiding the differences and offering spiritual discipline as a universal value.”¹⁵⁰ Gibson has thus seemingly contributed to turn cinema, which

¹⁴² Francesco Cossiga, “Ho visto un film. . . [I saw a movie . . .],” *La Stampa*, 9 April 2004.

¹⁴³ Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Turan, “A Narrow Vision,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Sean Burns, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” *Philadelphia Weekly*, 25 February 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Umberto Eco, “Giù le mani da mio Figlio!, [Hands off my son!]” *L’Espresso*, 20 April 2004.

¹⁴⁷ Scott, “Good and Evil,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004.

¹⁴⁸ McDonagh, “Death Trip,” *TV Guide*, <http://www.tvguide.com/Movies/database/ShowMovie.asp?MI=44981>.

¹⁴⁹ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Giuliano Ferrara, “Mel Gibson, il nuovo evangelista [Mel Gibson, the new evangelist],” *Panorama*, 20 February 2004.

is “the most straightforward form of art, capable of speaking to each one . . . into one of the sundry, unfortunate reasons of exclusion and resentment.”¹⁵¹

Factiousness and Manichaeism

The movie is accused of political and religious factiousness. As to its political factiousness, it was written that “intentionally or not, the contentious rollout of ‘The Passion’ has resembled a political campaign,”¹⁵² conducted “in the midst of an escalating election-year culture war in which those of ‘faith’ are demonizing so-called secularists.”¹⁵³ It is also accused of absolving Roman imperialism, “a good power”¹⁵⁴ vs the fanaticism of the Jewish Sanhedrin, to justify a politic which they consider as modern American imperialism: “Pilate equal to Bush, Jews equal all the Saddams of the world.”¹⁵⁵ *The Passion* is thus viewed as “an imperial version of the passion story . . . one in which the imperial occupiers can continue to reign unimpeded and where the occupied are told to shoulder their crosses in sorrowful resignation.”¹⁵⁶ Others consider it a ““violent accusation against the aberrations of power’,”¹⁵⁷ “whose cold and impassive reason of State it lays bare: preserving the order as to the Romans, protecting their position of intellectual predominance as to the Pharisees, defending the privileges of a lascivious and immoderate court as to Herod.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵¹ Roberto Escobar, “Passione per sangue solo [Passion for Solo Blood],” *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore*, 18 April 2004.

¹⁵² Frank Rich, “Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’: publicity juggernaut,” *The New York Times*, 19 September 2003.

¹⁵³ Frank Rich, “‘Passion’ and the U.S. culture war,” *The New York Times*, 5 March 2004.

¹⁵⁴ Silvia Ronchey, “Il tormento di Pilato, il potere non è mai buono [Pilate’s torment, power is never good],” *La Stampa*, 7 April 2004.

¹⁵⁵ Goffredo Fofi, “Divisi dalla Passione [Divided by the Passion],” *Il Messaggero*, 6 April 2004.

¹⁵⁶ De Giglio-Bellemare, “The Passion,” *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004.

¹⁵⁷ Monica Bellucci, in Gloria Satta, “Passione atroce. A fin di bene [An atrocious passion. For good purposes],” *Il Messaggero*, 17 February 2004.

¹⁵⁸ Stefano Mereghetti, “La Passione di Cristo [The Passion of the Christ],” *Cine Teatro Agorà*, 20 March 2004, <http://www.cineteatroagora.it/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=536>.

As to its political factiousness, Gibson, “a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic,”¹⁵⁹ “a schismatic, according to strict canon law,”¹⁶⁰ is accused of trying “to promote the religious vision of the rabid Catholic traditionalist splinter group in which he grew up,”¹⁶¹ “against the corporate Catholicism of the Vatican.”¹⁶² His film is charged with being “a statement of atonement theology . . . serving the interests of the institutional church, which claims to have the power to forgive sin and baptize people into a saving relationship with Jesus”¹⁶³ and of offering “the most absurd images of Christian dolorism . . . a kind of spirituality that has been deployed within Christendom to keep the poor and marginalized in their place.”¹⁶⁴ Its integralist Catholic “religious agenda,” however, “has not prevented *The Passion* from resonating . . . with many evangelical Protestants,”¹⁶⁵ perhaps because of “a common belief that the larger secular world—including the mainstream media—is essentially hostile to Christianity.”¹⁶⁶

Last but not least, the film is blamed for presenting “a distortion of history . . . a superficial analysis of a simple and dramatically complex event” and for being “Manichaeian, all good people on one side, all the evil ones on the other.”¹⁶⁷

Hindering interreligious dialogue

The Passion is accused of sowing “religious conflict”¹⁶⁸ “because it exposes and accentuates the fissures in belief that otherwise might go unnoticed.”¹⁶⁹ In North

¹⁵⁹ Neff, “The Passion,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, March 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Grace, “Sacred savagery,” *Cineaste*, 22 June 2004.

¹⁶¹ Mike Davis, “Why Gibson’s Movie Deserves an Academy Award for Bigotry,” 8 March 2004, www.tomdispatch.com.

¹⁶² Luca Celada, “Il catechismo crudele del reverendo Gibson [The cruel catechism by the Reverend Gibson],” *Il Manifesto*, 15 February 2004.

¹⁶³ Grace, “Sacred savagery,” *Cineaste*, 22 June 2004.

¹⁶⁴ De Giglio-Bellemare, “The Passion,” *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004. Dolorism, from the Latin *dolor* (pain), is an expression used to define a spirituality of resignation to pain and sorrow.

¹⁶⁵ Scott, “Good and Evil,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2004.

¹⁶⁶ Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?,” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2004.

¹⁶⁷ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/re-cens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

¹⁶⁸ Frank Rich, “Mel Gibson’s Martyrdom Complex,” *The New York Times*, 3 August 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

America, the ADL and the American Jewish Committee, founded in 1906 to combat anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, write that the film “could set back, at least temporarily, the extraordinary advances in interreligious dialogue and cooperation that have taken place in recent decades.”¹⁷⁰ In Italy, Di Segni asks for the Church to “officially declare its aloofness from the film,”¹⁷¹ and members of Rome’s Jewish community stay against “the hypothesis of the Pope’s presence in the Synagogue during the feasts for the centenary of the building of the Great Synagogue in Rome.”¹⁷² In Israel, however, *The Passion* inspires “some curiosity, but little outrage” because “ultimately, it will be up to Christians to take what lesson they will from the film and to read their scriptures in a philo- or anti-Semitic light.”¹⁷³

Christians say that the Jews’ resentment is “unjustified, because nothing will be seen on the screen that was not already known”¹⁷⁴ and the film “does not differ significantly in content or ideology from the modern cinema’s other mainstream renderings of these events.”¹⁷⁵ In their opinion, *The Passion* “should serve as a springboard for bringing Jews and Christians closer together”¹⁷⁶ and foster “a deeper understanding of the drama of salvation and the magnitude of God’s love and forgiveness.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁰ David H. Harris, “The American Jewish Committee Statement on the Mel Gibson Film, *The Passion of the Christ*,” 25 February 2004, <http://www.ajc.org/InTheMedia/PressReleases.asp?did=1086>. Cf. Anti-Defamation League, in “ADL Concerned Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Could Fuel Anti-Semitism if Released in Present Form,” 11 August 2003, http://www.adl.org/PresRele/ASUS_12/4291_12.htm.

¹⁷¹ Riccardo Di Segni, in Gloria Satta, “Gli ebrei condannano la ‘Passione’ di Gibson [The Jews condemn Gibson’s ‘Passion’],” *Il Messaggero*, 11 March 2004.

¹⁷² Marandola, “I trenta denari,” *Il Punto*, April 2004.

¹⁷³ “Editorial: The Passions,” *Jerusalem Post*, 27 February 2004.

¹⁷⁴ Bellucci, in Satta, “Passione atroce,” *Il Messaggero*, 17 February 2004.

¹⁷⁵ Foundas, “Sacred Blood,” *Los Angeles Weekly*, 27 February – 4 March 2004.

¹⁷⁶ Greg Bonnell, Canadian Jews split on *Passion*,” *Toronto Star*, 24 February 2004.

¹⁷⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Passion,” <http://www.usccb.org/movies/p/thepassionofthechrist.htm>.

Untimeliness

The Passion is blamed for having been made “in an untimely historical period”:¹⁷⁸ in a time “when different systems of religious belief are causing tremendous violence and conflict . . . a film intended to inspire and invigorate those who believe they are the exclusive possessors of the truth about God is perhaps not the best way to make the world a more humane, a more livable, a more peaceful place.”¹⁷⁹ Others maintain that “in this era when ancient Christian antisemitic motifs are being recirculated widely because of international conflicts, any Christian producer of a dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus has a considerable moral responsibility.”¹⁸⁰ But, according to other critics, “in this historical time, when our Western culture, and our religion, are silent, bewildered and assailed, it is good reminding that also among us there is a strong mysticism and there is faith, if but you want to take an interest in it.”¹⁸¹

Marketing

This film is accused of being only “meant to make much money, through offering such gore and violence to its audience as to make *Pulp Fiction* appear as a cartoon for nursery school children.”¹⁸² These accusations are dismissed as coming from movie people who thought that *The Passion* would have been a fiasco and now are scared, offended and angry because it earned “huge profits for Gibson and his distribution partners.”¹⁸³ The filmmaker is also praised for putting “his artistry and fortune at the service of his conviction and belief.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ Aspesi, “Troppo sangue,” *La Repubblica*, 6 April 2004.

¹⁷⁹ Turan, “The Passion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2004.

¹⁸⁰ Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham, Lawrence E. Frizzell, John T. Pawlikowski, “Dramatizing the Death of Jesus, Issues that Have Surfaced in Media Reports about the Upcoming Film, *The Passion*,” 17 June 2003, http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/news/dramatizing_the_death_of_jesus.htm.

¹⁸¹ Farinotti, *Dizionario*, <http://www.mymovies.it/dizionario/recensione.asp?Id=34961>.

¹⁸² Eco, “Giù le mani,” *L'Espresso*, 20 April 2004.

¹⁸³ Richard Corliss, “Holy Hypocrisies. Opinion: The media take their moral outrage out of mothballs to attack Mel Gibson’s Jesus movie,” *Time*, 27 February 2004.

¹⁸⁴ Ebert, “The Passion,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 February 2004.

Gibson's response to the controversy

Gibson tells us that he expected a controversy because of the issue he dealt with. He also says that “‘it’s gone beyond what . . . [he] imagined it would’.”¹⁸⁵ Moreover, Bill O’Reilly, the host of the cable news show “The O’Reilly Factor,” remarks that some of the editorials on Gibson’s film are “the nastiest . . . [he has] ever seen.”¹⁸⁶ Gibson gives some answers to his accusers.

As to its violence, on the one hand, *The Passion* is violent because it is real: “‘we have gotten too used to seeing pretty crucifixes on the wall . . . we know that Jesus was scourged, that he carried his cross, that he had nails put through his hands and feet, but we rarely think about what this means’.”¹⁸⁷ “‘From many accounts I’ve read’,” Gibson adds, “‘I think it was actually more violent than what you’re going to see in this film’.”¹⁸⁸ On the other, that violence is also meant to remind the film’s viewers of Christ’s divine nature since no human being could have survived such an atrocious torture.¹⁸⁹

As to its anti-Semitism, Gibson states that anti-Semitism is “a sin that ‘goes against the tenets of . . . [his] faith’.”¹⁹⁰ His film, he explains, is “‘evenhanded as much as . . . [he] can make it’,” it is “‘not playing the blame game at all’,”¹⁹¹ and “‘is meant to inspire, not to offend’.”¹⁹² Its “actual message . . . is forgiveness.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁵ Mel Gibson, in Paul Fischer, “Gibson’s Passion,” *Filmmonthly*, 12 February 2004, <http://www.filmmonthly.com/Profiles/Articles/MGibsonPassionChrist/MGibsonPassionChrist.html> filmmonthly.

¹⁸⁶ O’Reilly, in “Transcript,” *Fox News*, 25 February 2004, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,112436,00.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Gibson, in “Christ’s Agony,” *Zenit News Agency*, 6 March 2003, <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=32328>. zenit.

¹⁸⁸ Gibson, in Noonan, “Face to Face,” *Reader’s Digest* (UK Edition), March 2004, <http://www.readersdigest.co.uk/magazine/melg.htm>.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Mel Gibson, in EWTN (Global Catholic Network), “Second interview with Mel Gibson regarding *The Passion of the Christ*,” 23 January 2004, <http://www.tcrnews2.com/genarts.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Sawyer, “Pain and Passion,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

¹⁹¹ Gibson, in “Transcript,” *Fox News*, 25 February 2004, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,112436,00.html>.

¹⁹² Gibson, in “Christ’s Agony,” *Zenit News Agency*, 6 March 2003, at <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=32328>.

¹⁹³ Mel Gibson, in Andrea Tornielli, *La Passione. I Vangeli e il film di Gibson* [The Passion. The Gospels and Gibson’s movie] (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme, 2004) 96.

To those who blame him because he depicted a positive Pilate, he answers: ““He actually condemned a man to death who he had proclaimed he thought was innocent . . . He’s a monster’.”¹⁹⁴

As to those who accuse the film of being religiously factious, Gibson openly admits: “My new hope is that *The Passion of the Christ* will help many more people recognize the power of His love and let Him help them to save their own lives.”¹⁹⁵

As to those who say the film is exclusivist and represents an obstacle for interreligious dialogue, Gibson answers that he meant to ““engender serious thought among audiences of diverse faith backgrounds’,”¹⁹⁶ and suggests: ““Let’s get this out on the table and talk about it . . . People are asking questions about things that have been buried a long time.””¹⁹⁷

As to those who blame him because he shot his film in the wrong historical moment, he answers: ““There’s genocide happening in places that we rarely even focus on . . . [*The Passion*] displays the remedy for it . . . Faith, hope, love and forgiveness . . . faith . . . is like slapping a seat belt on . . . [it helps] to transcend the madness by appealing to a higher power’.”¹⁹⁸

As to marketing, he remarks that he staked his career on this film, which several producers refused, and that several journalists wondered whether the film was “an attempt to commit career suicide.”¹⁹⁹

As to all the other charges, he answers: ““critics who have a problem with me . . . in this film . . . have a problem with the four Gospels.””²⁰⁰

Some of the reasons for the controversy

Gibson’s film is provocative, not only because it is incredibly violent, but also because, in a very delicate time for religion, it focuses on such delicate questions as:

¹⁹⁴ Gibson, in “Transcript,” *Fox News*, 25 February 2004, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,112436,00.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Gibson, “Foreword,” in Bolton *et al.*, *The Passion*.

¹⁹⁶ Gibson, in Snyder, “Gibson answers,” *Variety*, 13 June 2003.

¹⁹⁷ Gibson, in Sawyer, “Pain and Passion,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

¹⁹⁸ Gibson, in Noonan, “Face to Face,” *Reader’s Digest* (UK Edition), March 2004, <http://www.readersdigest.co.uk/magazine/melg.htm>.

¹⁹⁹ McClure, “A very violent ‘passion’,” *New York Daily News*, 26 January 2003.

²⁰⁰ Gibson, in Sawyer, “Pain and Passion,” *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

What is the meaning of Jesus' life and death? How was it that his message of love and forgiveness came to be used as an instrument of war and persecution? What influence do religious feelings have on the lives of people and society? What are the limitations of an artist's freedom of expression in a multicultural world? Are Christians right when they say that love and forgiveness are enough to solve the present complex problems of the world? The controversy raised by this film denotes that it is not easy to talk about these issues in such a way as not to hurt the feelings of other people because religious prejudices are still rampant in our society.

Religious prejudice—the persuasion that whoever does not follow a specific religion is entirely or partially wrong—has always been a cause of conflict because it forbids a symmetrical relation. For, as tolerant toward his interlocutor, anyone who is prey to this prejudice may be, he still believes in having something more than him, that is, his faith in the “true” religion. This prejudice does not exclude secularists. The most tolerant secularist may think that he has something more than a believer: his secularism. And he may be so enthusiastic in his persuasion that he becomes fanatical. Religious prejudice seems deeply felt because faith affairs, whatever their object, are always connected to the emotional sphere. And emotionality quickly inflames people. In this case, the responses were deeply visceral because of the declared intentions of the director, who meant to produce a visceral film. Each viewer responded based on his personal belief, often conditioned by past experiences of wrongs done or received, either because of misreadings of the Passion or in the name of the kind of faith defended by Gibson. It would be interesting to conduct a comparative survey of the comments on this film and Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* to discover whether the judgments of those who do not appreciate Gibson's “God-man who is much more God-like than human”²⁰¹—cherished among the Christians—are symmetrical to the judgments of those who praise “the human Christ who had to struggle with fleshly desires and limitations”²⁰²—cherished among non-Christians and secularists, but not among Christians.

²⁰¹ De Giglio-Bellemare, “The Passion,” *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004.

²⁰² Carol Iannone, “The Last Temptation Reconsidered,” *First Things* 60 (February 1996): 50-54.

Its extreme violence: an explanation

The violence in Gibson's movie is breathtaking, even in our violent times. However, for those who can endure it, it also highlights the courage and dignity with which Jesus met the cruelty of his opponents. All that brutality flaunted in front of us shows all the difficulties of the path of courage and dignity and reserves only a few moments for its beauty. However, that beauty may seem even more significant and attractive in this imbalance. Beyond any immoderate, positive or negative statement on this specific issue, we may imagine that the viewers may have been sometimes disturbed and sometimes encouraged. They may have been disturbed whenever they became aware of not having the courage to prefer the stern morality taught by Jesus' words and life to the comfy roads of our modern morality. They may have been encouraged whenever their hearts have caught a glimpse of the good human beings can do, whenever they consciously respond to the love of exaltation that sometimes all of them feel. But if they have realized that all that violence depends on the fact that its perpetrators were far from God, the clash between that violence and the peace of the nearness to God, a glimpse of which they have caught in the flashbacks, may also make them want to fly away from the former and to take refuge in the shelter of the latter.

As to those who fear that the movie's violence may arouse other violence, Gibson has remarked that "despite a lot of people who said the film was going to cause violence, first in the US and then in Europe . . . it hasn't happened."²⁰³ His opponents could object that his observation is simplistic. Indeed, his film has already caused much conflict, at least among its blamers and its defenders. It is surprising that immoderate responses also came from a number of those secularists who feared fanatical responses from people they call "of 'faith'."²⁰⁴ In this regard, an American film critic remarks: "Liberals . . . can be a pretty funny bunch. When we are sympathetic to a controversial work of pop culture, we invoke the artist's right to create in a climate of total freedom, whatever feelings of outrage the work may stoke among

²⁰³ "Mel Gibson Talks About the DVD and Video Release of The Passion of the Christ in Third Exclusive Interview with EWTN's Raymond Arroyo," *Veritas – Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, 27 agosto 2004, at http://www.veritas.com.hr/observer/interview_mel_gibson.php. Arroyo 27.08.2004.

²⁰⁴ Rich, "'Passion'," *New York Times*, 5 marzo 2004.

the *ignorati*. (That is, other people.) When we disapprove, we talk about his responsibility to the sensitivities and sensibilities of good people. (That is: us.).”²⁰⁵

Anti-Semitism: a delicate matter

A realistic film on the Passion, as meaningful as it may be for Christians, cannot but disturb the Jews. For them, “it is a flashback into history,”²⁰⁶ into hard times when “Christians who saw or heard the Passion, especially during the Holy Week before Easter . . . reacted violently against the nearest Jews . . . [and] some Christian rulers . . . warned the local Jews to stay indoors on Good Friday in order to protect them from violence.”²⁰⁷ Without those bad remembrances, no Jew would probably feel hurt by Gibson’s film, as no child of modern Rome felt hurt because Gibson exhibited the ferocity of the Roman legionaries, whose descendants they should be. In fact, they were not persecuted because of their former behaviour since they embraced the Christian faith and “history rescued . . . [them] from eternal blame” and made them victorious, “while the Jews were cast into darkness and, one might conclude from this movie, deserved what they got.”²⁰⁸ It is useless saying, on the one hand, that if we see this film through non-Jewish eyes, it does not seem to condemn all the Jews and to absolve all the Romans and, on the other, that it is not easy to illustrate the Passion without exposing at least the dullness of those who underestimated the potentialities of Jesus’ message. The fact remains that this film may “give aid and comfort to anti-Semites everywhere.”²⁰⁹ The film would deserve a statement similar to that suggested by the President of ADL:

This is a film of love. This is a passion of love . . . Jesus suffered for all mankind and all mankind has a responsibility and a guilt for his suffering . . . But there

²⁰⁵ Corliss, “Holy Hypocrisies,” *Time*, 27 February 2004.

²⁰⁶ Foxman, “Mel Gibson’s,” Palm Beach Florida, 6 February 2004.

²⁰⁷ The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, “Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus’ Passion and Its Portrayal. A Study Guide for Viewers and Reviewers,” Jewish-Christian Relations, <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=2169>.

²⁰⁸ Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

²⁰⁹ Paula Fredriksen, “Pain Principle,” *The New Republic Online*, 27 February 2004, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=express&s=fredriksen022704>.

are those out there who would blame the Jews as they have in history. Don't do that, for that would convert this passion of love to a passion of hate.²¹⁰

Reflections on its historical inaccuracy

It seems complicated to speak of historical accuracy regarding Jesus's life. According to modern historians, "the Gospels are not clear and reliable historical documents,"²¹¹ and accepted sources are scanty. Critical studies of the New Testament have not yet reached consensual conclusions. The hypothesis was suggested that the Gospels were written in such a way as to free the powerful Romans from the guilt of deicide and to shift it onto the innocent Jews. However, this secularist hypothesis, which considers the Gospels as any other "religious propaganda"²¹² text, disregards the fact that, according to the Christians, those books are sacred and meant to hand down Jesus' teachings faithfully and to narrate the episodes of his life required to understand his station. Any ascription to the Evangelists of such ignoble intentions as winning the favour of the mighty Romans while wickedly accusing innocent people clashes with the Christian idea of the nature of the Gospels. Besides, the bitter persecutions endured by the Christians through the Romans denote that they faced their persecutors with courage and were not subservient in front of them. While awaiting that more circumstantiated historical proof may, totally or partially, confirm or deny the Jews' responsibility, which seems in various measures upheld by the Gospels and by the Babylonian Talmud, a few general considerations may assist Gibson's audiences in viewing his movie in a different perspective.

In the first place, admitting that the ancient Jews had their share of responsibility for Jesus' death does not mean justifying anti-Semitism. Vengeance and the concept whereby children are responsible for the guilt of their fathers are not a part of Jesus' revelation. Thus, Christians who persecuted the Jews under the pretext of their "deicide" have violated the laws of Christ. Therefore, instead of asking Christians to challenge the Gospels—an unacceptable endeavour for them—they should be encouraged to try to understand the real reasons for anti-Semitism and do their utmost to uproot them. In the second place, Jesus' story, as told in the Gospels,

²¹⁰ Foxman, "Mel Gibson's," Palm Beach Florida, 6 February 2004.

²¹¹ Wieseltier, "Mel Gibson's," *The New Republic*, 26 February 2004.

²¹² David Remnick, "The Talk of the Town. Groves of Academe. Passions, Past and Present," *The New Yorker*, 8 March 2004.

moves from an *a priori* judgment: Jesus is the Jews' Messiah. While reading the Gospels, most Christians thought that Jesus' Messiahship was an obvious fact. Therefore, they wondered how the ancient Jews could not recognize him. However, if we want to understand them, we must try to look at those events through their eyes. Besides preaching and testifying to universal love, Jesus uttered iconoclastic statements, conflicting with venerable traditions deeply cherished by the Jews. Moreover, he did not fulfil the letter of their Messianic expectations. When Jesus died, only three pious women and eleven disciples were at the foot of the Cross. His Gospel had wide recognition in the Roman empire only after over two centuries. After two thousand years, millions of Jews are still sure that Jesus "is not son-god, is not a prophet, is not a master and, above all, is not the messiah."²¹³ These facts should convince the Christians that whoever was born and grew up outside of a context where Jesus' station is widely accepted is unlikely to acknowledge Jesus' Messianic station. This observation should make each Christian think that perhaps if he were one of those Jews who met Jesus, he would not have recognized his Messiah in that Galilean carpenter. Thus, he would have thought, as the majority of his fellow believers, that Jesus had broken the Torah's laws and thus should be sentenced to death according to the law.

Reflections on its faithfulness to the Gospels

Also, the issue of its faithfulness to the Gospels is quite complex. As to those who blamed Gibson because he was not faithful to the Gospels and added episodes taken from other sources or his imagination, they could be rebutted in the name of artistic freedom while perhaps admitting that the additional material did not do much good to the artistic and ethical quality of the final work. As to those who blamed him for his literal reading of the Gospels, some critics remarked that the Gospels were not seemingly written to be read in the letter. The narrative parts are never identical, not even in the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, the episode of the Passion is no exception. However, no one has thought that as one may read the Gospels in a different way

²¹³ Gherush92, "Ancora su 'The Passion' [Something more on 'The Passion'],” *L'Unità*, 17 April 2004. Gerush92 is a Committee against Christian, secularist, Islamic, left wing and right wing anti-Semitism.

than Gibson's Catholic fundamentalism, one may read Gibson's film, which is meant to be the Gospels' cinematographic recounting, differently as well.

Some considerations on the meaning of Jesus' Passion, outside of the contested Christian concept of Atonement, may assist us to get out of "the traps of literal-mindedness."²¹⁴ The main reason why this event is interpreted in so many different ways is that there is no agreement on who Jesus was. There are three well-known opinions. The Catholic opinion: Jesus is the Son of God who came on earth to redeem humankind from its original sin, and also the Jews' Messiah. The opinion of the Jews: Jesus is one of their numerous self-proclaimed messiahs. The secularist opinion: Jesus is a historical person whose nature was human and whose teaching greatly influenced the history of humankind. There are two other opinions that are less well-known in the West. The Muslim opinion: Jesus is the Spirit of God, an apostle sent by God for the right guidance of humankind, as were Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, and other personages mentioned in the Bible and the Koran. The Bahá'í opinion: Jesus was a Manifestation of God, one of those Perfect Men, periodically sent by God into the world to educate humankind for personal and collective perfection, as were Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Muhammad, the Báb (Bahá'u'lláh's Herald), and Bahá'u'lláh. In light of the Bahá'í opinion, Jesus' Passion is the model of the treatment always meted out to the Manifestations of God by their fellow citizens, that is, "denials . . . repudiation, and . . . vehement opposition."²¹⁵ The Manifestations of God announce innovatory verities that disturb the establishment and kindle the fears of those who, for various reasons, are against change. Frightened by the destabilizing potentialities of the new ideas, they persecuted their announcer and his early followers. Abraham and Moses, the great Jewish patriarchs, were exposed to their brethren's fiercest attacks. Christians may object that no Manifestation of God endured such atrocious pain as Jesus did. However, perhaps they overestimate the meaning of Jesus' physical pain and undervalue the importance of his moral and spiritual anguish. Those who scourged and crucified him, those who invoked his death, and those who were deaf to his message were afflicted by spiritual imperfections such as "indifference to God . . . falsehood,

²¹⁴ Denby, "Nailed," *The New Yorker*, 1st March 2004.

²¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán. The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 18.

cruelty and treachery,” that are a subtler kind of torment than “penalties, imprisonment, beating, expulsion and banishment.”²¹⁶ Seeing those blind and wayward human beings afflicted Jesus with a much greater sorrow than his physical tortures because he loved them with divine love and was fully aware of the consequences of their refusal: injustice, destruction and death. All the Manifestations of God shared this kind of ordeal. Being informed of this aspect of the lives of the Manifestations of God means understanding how mean humans are, how great the love of the Manifestations of God is, and how difficult it is to recognize the importance of their renewing message. Therefore, if we read Jesus’ Passion from this perspective, we will also see Gibson’s film from a different perspective.

Reflections on the incompleteness of the Christian message

It was said that this film does not convey the Christian message in its wholeness. However, if we try to catch the spirit of the events described by Gibson, we will not see its 16 flashbacks as “frustratingly fleeting”²¹⁷ and “cryptic”²¹⁸ images that only the initiated may perceive as “subliminal echoes of old familiar tales,”²¹⁹ but as the “most original parts of the film,”²²⁰ “‘little places of respite . . . where you can escape from the violence and find lyricism and beauty’.”²²¹ Completed by the words Jesus uttered in the hours of his Passion, those flashbacks will remind us of the most important aspects of his preaching. The essential message is that human beings were not created and then abandoned to themselves in front of the complex dilemmas of their lives. A loving Father-God shows to them, in a form that they can understand, “the way, the truth, and the life.”²²² He teaches them how to ordain themselves toward a higher dimension of existence, in this case, “the Kingdom of God,” whose

²¹⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, ed. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981) 265.

²¹⁷ Robert Wilonsky, “God Awful. Mel Gibson’s passionate about getting into heaven,” *Dallas Observer*, 26 February 2004.

²¹⁸ Rich, “‘Passion’,” *New York Times*, 5 March 2004.

²¹⁹ Burns, “Jesus Christ Superstar,” *Philadelphia Weekly*, 25 February 2004.

²²⁰ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/re-cens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

²²¹ Gibson, in Noonan, “Face to Face,” Reader’s Digest (United Kingdom Edition), March 2004, <http://www.readersdigest.co.uk/magazine/melg.htm>.

²²² John 14: 6, KJB, Gibson, *The Passion*, chap. 13, 1h:32m:51s (fourteenth flashback).

sovereigns are love,²²³ forgiveness²²⁴ and the spirit of service,²²⁵ and to remain faithful to that free choice at any price.²²⁶ He informs them that his teachings are meant to “make all things new.”²²⁷ He warns them that this renewal may require sacrifice and lead to sorrow²²⁸ and offers his example of total surrender to the Will of God as a supreme model of love to conform with. He discloses in front of them a future of hope: their Father will speak again and bring them closer to truth.²²⁹ Also, the various flashbacks showing Jesus among his disciples, especially the completely silent sixth and eleventh flashbacks, intensely convey, in their sobriety, the pervading warmth of that friendship and love.²³⁰ That friendship and love seem even more remarkable because—except for Mary, seemingly aware of the meaning of the events—also the positive figures, that is, the dissenting members of the Sanhedrin, Simon of Cyrene, the apostles, the Magdalene, Veronica, and Claudia Procula, are unaware bystanders, different from the others only for their compassion or, at most, for their attachment to their Master. Thus, they are unworthy of such a great love. Last but not least, it does not seem that the movie does not express the Christian dimension of forgiveness. The words uttered by Christ on the cross are even more convincing because they resound in the middle of such horrifying violence. If the number of flashbacks had been greater, the film would have been less violent. However, that was not the director’s intention.

Many scenes present “gruesome and sardonic . . . apparitions”²³¹ of the devil, considered, on the one hand, as the best parts of the film and, on the other, as “escapes from a David Lynch film.”²³² Aside from the director’s declared intentions

²²³ Gibson, *The Passion*, chap. 12, 1h:25m:49s (ninth flashback), and chap. 13, 1h:31m:10s (twelfth flashback).

²²⁴ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 8, 1h:03m:4s (fifth flashback).

²²⁵ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 7, 59m:39s (fourth flashback).

²²⁶ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 12, 1h:27m:14s (tenth flashback) e chap. 13, 1h:31m:10s (twelfth flashback).

²²⁷ cf. Revelation 21:5, Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 11, 1h, 15m, 10s.

²²⁸ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 7, 59m:37s (fourth flashback).

²²⁹ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 7, 59m:37s (fourth flashback).

²³⁰ Gibson, *Passion*, chap. 9, 1h:08m:19s and chap. 13, 01h:30m:16s.

²³¹ Chirichelli, “Tanto tuonò,” *Mymovies.it*, http://www.Mymovies.it/dizionario/recens_ut.asp?Id=12203.

²³² Wilonsky, “God Awful,” *Dallas Observer*, 26 February 2004.

for recording this presence, if we are not inclined to ascribe an ontological existence to the devil, we may interpret this perturbing personage as a symbol of our material nature. This nature binds us to the earthly dimension of existence, which Jesus' and any other religion's message urges us to subordinate to the transcendent dimension that deserves all our love. The devil is thus an aspect of human life, of whose presence we should be aware so that we may be as determined while struggling to defeat its grip as Gibson's Jesus is while crushing the head of the little snake crawling toward him, as he is praying in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' vicissitudes and his submission to his lot, like any frail human, teach that everyone can win that battle.

As to the fact that Gibson devoted only a few minutes to Jesus' resurrection, this is useful to people outside of the Christian agape who do not read the words of the Gospels in the letter. The hope of those who love Christ outside of Christianity is not born of their faith in the resurrection of a body, emerged from physical death and ascended into an unknown dimension of the universe, but from their recognition of the spiritual victories that faith in Jesus' Gospel bestowed, and bestows, upon them who, known or unknown, practice it with pure intentions. In the eyes of many non-Christians, after Jesus' Crucifixion, it was not a body that was resurrected, but a quickening religious message, dead and buried for forty days in the sepulchre of the human fears of that scanty group of loyal followers, who mourned their divine Master at the foot of the Cross.

Last, the critics of Jesus emerging from Gibson's film deserve a comment. A reviewer remarks that "the role of the carpenter from Nazareth probably comes with more baggage, expectations, and preconceptions than any other in Western drama" and that "the Jesus in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* is played . . . as divine victim, which reflects either the anxieties of the current era, or of the film's director."²³³ These reflections also apply to all the ancient works of art. Although they portray Jesus in a spirit of reverence and love, their images still reflect all the limitations of their artists and their times. Thus, they do not correctly portray a man who represents the deity on earth. Perhaps Gibson's film is an encouragement to reflect on the risks "of representing, in any human form, whether pictorially, in sculpture

²³³ Sian Gibby, "Ecce Homo? The new celluloid Jesus doesn't seem real," *Slate*, 26 February 2004, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2096185/>.

or dramatic representation, the Person of God's Manifestations,"²³⁴ fully recognized by religions such as Islam and the Bahá'í Faith.

Reflections on its factiousness and exclusivism

To say that Gibson may have willingly suggested a comparison between the Roman empire and its legionaries, on the one hand, and the American empire and its soldiers, on the other, seems a strained interpretation. No one would want his people to be similar to those brutish individuals, who certainly do not seem "benign foreign occupiers,"²³⁵ or to that superstitious and cowardly procurator, who certainly does not seem "a sensitive, kind-hearted soul."²³⁶ The opposition between good and evil is not between the good Romans and the wicked Jews but between the good tidings brought by Jesus and the blindness of human nature unable to understand it. Charging this film with other, subtler, political aims would imply accusing its director of perpetuating past horrible misuses of Christ's message and thus of being guilty of such a grave spiritual offence as to create a much deeper feeling of horror than that raised by the display of the violence inflicted to Jesus' body to which we are exposed while viewing his film.

As to religious factiousness, the issue is very delicate. On the one hand, no one has the right to pretend that a soul, convinced of the loftiness of his ideal (and the message of the Gospel is undoubtedly lofty), should renounce to present it to others in the form that he considers the most attractive. On the other, it was clear from the beginning that this film would have been seen by "more people . . . than all the Passion Plays from the Middle Ages to today"²³⁷ and that many among them would have been non-Christians. Gibson ignored this fact and excluded images and words which could have made his film more understandable for wider non-Christian audiences. *The Passion* is having "a success of epic proportions,"²³⁸ but its exclusivist aspects restrict its beneficial influence on the Christian fellowship.

²³⁴ On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, March 9, 1977, in *Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Research Department of The Universal House of Justice, vol. 3 (Ingleside, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2000) 34-5.

²³⁵ De Giglio-Bellemare, "The Passion," *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004.

²³⁶ Bernard, "Gore's the crime," *New York Daily News*, 23 February 2004

²³⁷ "ADL and Mel Gibson," http://www.adl.org/interfaith/gibson_qa.asp.

²³⁸ Klein, "Cross purposes," *Haaretz*, 26 March 2004.

Reflections on interreligious dialogue

Confronted with the accusation of hindering interreligious dialogue, Gibson said that his film teaches love, and love means that ““you have to love everybody including your enemies because if you just like people who like you, what good is that?””²³⁹ However, he did not think that, whereas in the past, each culture could use an “exclusivist” language within its boundaries and expect not to raise significant opposition because it addressed a mostly mono-cultural world, things have changed today. The increasing habit of using politically correct language denotes an increasing willingness to respect other people’s feelings. This willingness is also reflected in the message of the Interreligious Assembly, held in the Vatican on 24–28 October 1999, whose compilers committed themselves to “promote reconciliation where the painful experiences of the past have brought divisiveness and hatred and not let the past stand in the way of mutual appreciation and love.”²⁴⁰ As the followers of all religions will increasingly conform to these criteria, there will also be a more profound understanding among them. The President of the ADL has already said that he is sure that Gibson “will learn to understand what it is that hurts . . . [the Jews]. And when he does . . . he will be a voice for sensitivity and understanding.”²⁴¹

Reflections on its untimeliness

Gibson wants to promote Christianity, particularly Catholicism, and, more specifically, a form of Catholic fundamentalism. It is his right. However, in a time when all the world’s religions seem seriously engaged in the promotion of interfaith dialogue, whereas cultural and religious tensions remain dangerously high, the subject he chose to realize his purpose is insidious. The Evangelists, wrongly or rightly, state that the Jews refused their Messiah. It seems almost impossible to illustrate the Passion of Christ without mentioning this issue and thus without running the risk of the Jews being put in a bad light in front not only of the anti-Semitic fringes still present

²³⁹ Gibson in Fischer, “Gibson’s Passion,” *Filmmonthly*, 12 February 2004, <http://www.filmmonthly.com/Profiles/Articles/MGibsonPassionChrist/MGibsonPassionChrist.htm>.

²⁴⁰ “II Messaggio dell’Assemblea Interreligiosa [The message of the Interreligious Assembly],” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 30 October 1999.

²⁴¹ Abraham H. Foxman, “Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ’: Could It Trigger Anti-Semitism?,” Palm Beach Florida, 6 February 2004.

among the Christians but also of the Islamic world, which considers Jesus as one of its prophets and has always blamed the Jews for not having recognized his Prophethood. The fact that previous movies on the same subject did not solicit the same objections depends not only on their different approach but also on the changed conditions of the world and the different mental attitudes of people. The Western world has gone very far in its process of secularization. If, in former times, very few Westerners ignored the fundamentals of the Christian faith, their numbers have increased today. Also, the number of those considering peace the most prominent among human values and sensitive to attitudes that may endanger peace has considerably increased. In this context, several people wonder whether it is ethically appropriate to promote a spiritual message, as noble as it may be, when its promotion may jeopardize other people's peace.

Problems with the Gospels?

As to Gibson's idea that those who criticize his film "have a problem with the four Gospels'," ²⁴² or "are persecuting him," ²⁴³ Gibson may be wrong. Indeed, most of those people seem to have a problem with the "'statement' of outward and programmatic truth" ²⁴⁴ advanced by his film, that is, with the traditional literal interpretations of the Gospels suggested by most Christians, from which very few, either Christian or non-Christian people, seem willing to depart. In particular, three aspects of Gibson's religiosity are criticized. First, the "theology of expiatory satisfaction," coming out of Emerich's theology, whereby "through voluntary suffering Christ makes satisfaction to God, whose honour has been violated by humanity's sinfulness," ²⁴⁵. Second, *dolorismo*, "the glorification of suffering for its own sake," ²⁴⁶ with its attending philosophy of forgiveness, that, as desirable as it may be at the personal level, could sanction the perpetuation of old conflicts at the social level whenever it is not balanced by an abiding and determined commitment to the resolution of the iniquities

²⁴² Gibson, in Sawyer, "Pain and Passion," *ABCNews.com*, 17 February 2004.

²⁴³ Rich, "'Passion'," *New York Times*, 5 March 2004.

²⁴⁴ Escobar, "Passione," *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore*, 18 April 2004.

²⁴⁵ De Giglio-Bellemare, "The Passion," *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 1st April 2004.

²⁴⁶ N. Bedford, "La Misión en el Sufrimiento y ante el Sufrimiento," *Bases Bíblicas De La Misión: Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, Ed. C. Rene Padilla (Nueva Creacion, Buenos Aires; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mi, 1998) 385.

which are at their root. Third, his exclusivism. Gibson uses such a powerful mass media as cinema, which “appeals widely to many peoples and cultures and . . . is extremely important in transmitting ideas, shaping opinions, and influencing actions.”²⁴⁷ and talks a language that is fully comprehensible only in the Christian world. Moreover, he produced a film, which “there is no way to see . . . without experiencing a visceral reaction.”²⁴⁸ His audience has responded in the same tone, that is, viscerally. Whoever felt included in this great exclusive message responded with enthusiasm. However, all the others who felt excluded responded with frustration, annoyance, and even anger.

The beauty of the present time is that the followers of the various religions of the world are beginning to learn how to avoid exclusivist languages that put religions against one another as if they were fighting nations. However, religions should become even closer. In the heyday of European nationalistic passion, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), one of the leading figures of the Italian *Risorgimento* or resurgence, wrote these ground-breaking words: “Country is not only a mere zone of territory. The true Country is the Idea to which it gives birth; it is the Thought of love, the sense of communion which unites in one all the sons of that territory.”²⁴⁹ Therefore, he added, “whoever loves one’s country loves all countries.” Today, the importance of this thought has become evident as a foundation of a new world order, wherein the same Charter of Human Rights may equally protect all the world’s people. We may well paraphrase Mazzini’s words and say: “Religion is not only a form to which we willingly adhere in our daily lives, which unites us to all those who adhere to it. Religion also is the love that leads us to adhere to that form. This love is the same, independently of the form we adhere to.” Thus, we may also say: “Whoever loves one’s religion loves all religions.” Such an attitude could represent a significant step forward in interreligious dialogue.

A few concluding remarks

The controversy over this film demonstrates how difficult it is, on the one hand, to distract one’s attention from ingrained prejudices that have already produced

²⁴⁷ “Cinema and Literacy of the Eyes, Ears, and Heart,” *World Order* 35.2 (2003-04): 2.

²⁴⁸ Wilonsky, “God Awful,” *Dallas Observer*, 26 February 2004.

²⁴⁹ Joseph Mazzini, *An Essay On the Duties of Man Addressed to Workingmen* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1898) 62.

significant damage and from never-ending disquisitions that brought nowhere and, on the other, to state the verities in which we believe in a language suited to a multicultural world. It also demonstrates that the most profound meanings of Jesus' life narrated in the Gospels are considered of minor importance by many people, who either uphold ancient interpretations or are distracted by other interests, which they consider preeminent. In this respect, it is not a surprise that the character of Pilate, a "secularist and tolerant"²⁵⁰ man, has impressed so many critics. "His agonized hesitations and his philosophical questions—such as 'What is truth?'—make him the most modern figure in the film," writes the *Haaretz* film critic Uri Klein. Indeed, Pilate seems the embodiment of all those for whom, then, as nowadays, the word "truth" can be ascribed only a pragmatic value related to everyday life, which they like to describe in a "sceptical, derisive and gross"²⁵¹ tone. However, while so doing, these people renounce, as Pilate did, to take part, in the good or in the evil, in "the history that comes into being before . . . [their] eyes."²⁵² They still follow the example of Voltaire (1694-1778), who "taking as his criterion the omissions and commissions of the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic religion, and the intrigues and quarrels of the spiritual leaders of Christendom . . . caviled at" Jesus and, since the French philosopher *a priori* renounced to rationally and objectively examine Jesus' words, he "failed to grasp the true significance of the sacred Scriptures."²⁵³

The enormity of the physical or moral pain accepted by Jesus and described by Gibson may well evoke the theology of expiatory satisfaction, or Catholic *dolorismo*, or "the sadomasochistic burdens which Christian religion took upon itself for many centuries,"²⁵⁴ or even, if you will, "the millions of people—victims of crusades, inquisitions, colonial conquests, the slave trade, political terror, and genocide—who have been tortured and killed in Christ's name."²⁵⁵ However, if one

²⁵⁰ Ronchey, "Il tormento," *La Stampa*, 7 April 2004.

²⁵¹ Corliss, "Holy Hypocrisies," *Time*, 27 February 2004.

²⁵² Klein, "Cross purposes," *Haaretz*, 26 March 2004.

²⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957) 72-3.

²⁵⁴ Bruno Borsetti, "La passione di Gibson [Gibson's passion]," *Cinemind. Filosofie dello sguardo*, 16 April 2004, <http://cinemind.splinder.com/archive/2004-04>.

²⁵⁵ Jim Hoberman, "Flogged to Death. Muscular action, cosmetic wonders: Mel gives the Christ story a fantasy-epic makeover," *The Village Voice*, 25 February 2004.

forgets all those human adjuncts, in the first place, that pain is the hallmark of Jesus' teachings, which he summarized when to a learned Pharisee who asked him, "which is the great commandment in the law," he answered:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind (cf. Deuteronomy 5:5). This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (see Leviticus 19:18). On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.²⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Gibson did not quote another sentence uttered by Jesus: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (Greek ἐν ἀλλήλοις, Latin *ad invicem*)."²⁵⁷ This sentence emphasizes the importance of reciprocity in love if one wants to deserve the title of disciple of Christ. It seems that the great commandment requires not only that we love others but also that we create the conditions for reciprocity, the conditions for the others to respond to our love, that is, that we realize a "complete spirituality."²⁵⁸ Therefore, to be disciples of Christ means "to embody every excellence there is."²⁵⁹ Today, after two thousand years, when all geographical barriers between peoples and cultures have fallen, and the ancient religions have understood that they should learn how to live peacefully all together in the world, these words, which underline that reciprocity and unity in love should be given priority over any other consideration, take on a global meaning. In this respect, the Christian message keeps its relevance to the present day because it has in itself the necessary premises for inspiring its followers with the willingness to renounce "those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's

²⁵⁶ Matthew 35:40, KJB.

²⁵⁷ John 13:35, KJB, *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd edition (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio, Evangelium secundum Ioannem. The two locutions ἐν ἀλλήλοις and *ad invicem* are used in Greek and Latin respectively to denote reciprocity.

²⁵⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret* 82.

²⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings*, comp. the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. a Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, Roma, 1978) 30.

inhabitants”²⁶⁰ and thus for enabling them to pay an important contribution to the spiritual progress of the world beyond any purely confessional interest.

Beyond any other consideration, this is the main subject of *The Passion*. It shows Jesus’ sufferings, while many other innocent victims continue suffering because of our disregard of “the great commandment in the law” that he came to recall and reconfirm. The horror of the brutality shown in the film should not make us cavil about historical, theological, doctrinal, or political issues of far minor importance. It should awaken all religionists—all people, indeed—to their responsibility for using the power of the message of oneness and love announced by Jesus, as well as by all religions, for the paramount purpose of promoting the spiritual progress of humankind beyond the specific interests of any religious confession, so that the numerous iniquitous brutalities that are the result of a common, persistent contempt of that ancient, eternal commandment of God may be stopped.

²⁶⁰ The Universal House of Justice, “To the World’s Religious Leaders,” *The Bahá’í World 2002-2003* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 2004) 92.