

A Question of Power

Movies come and movies go, but probably never in the history of American film has more controversy greeted any movie than that which met Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* before and after its debut on Ash Wednesday. We all know what the controversy was about. It had nothing to do with the qualities of the film as film (it was average, as are all of Mr. Gibson's movies), the acting (with the possible but minor exception of the fellow who played Pontius Pilate, there was no acting to speak of), the dialogue (who can possibly tell, except the handful of philologists who could follow the Latin and Aramaic?), or the plot (depending on your religious views, either there was none or it was the Greatest Story Ever Told). The controversy had to do with whether Gibson's film was really antisemitic, and, while a good many Christians and gentiles said it was, the principal accusers along these lines were Jewish.

The Jewish attacks on *The Passion* were (no pun intended) catholic in their universality—they included Jews of the political left and Jews of the political right (or the neoconservatism that nowadays is called "right-wing"), devout Jews and secular Jews, religiously liberal Jews and religiously Orthodox Jews. One of the principal authors of the attacks was Abe Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, which is about as close to Orwell's Thought Police as anything that currently exists in this country. Mr. Foxman, to whom a script of the Gibson film was leaked long before it appeared in theaters, and who actually sneaked into a showing under false pretenses, was undoubtedly the movie's biggest enemy and played a major role in instigating other attacks. Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, who found the film "fascistic" (as well as "anti-Semitic"; Mr. Cohen may not make the distinction, but Mussolini certainly did), assured his readers that he really did not want to see it at all, but "I went to see it only as part of my job, wishing that the Anti-Defamation League and other critics had simply ignored it." Apparently, Mr. Cohen believes his job includes doing what the ADL tells him to do. He is certainly not

the only one.

The level of attacks was such that Sharon Waxman, the *New York Times* film reporter, ran a piece with the headline, "New Film May Harm Gibson's Career" on February 26, the day after the movie opened, and she quoted Jewish movie bigs David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg of DreamWorks as telling her (each refused to speak for attribution), "It doesn't matter what I do. I will do something. I won't hire [Gibson]. I won't support anything he's part of. Personally that's all I can do." In Hollywood, of course, such modest efforts by major producers are more than enough to assist world-famous stars in making quick career transitions to working as pizza delivery boys.

Whatever the threats to Gibson's future employment by Mr. Geffen and/or Mr. Katzenberg, the debut of the film did not help much. Mr. Cohen was by no means the only Jewish critic who became what he called "uneasy" when he actually worked up the guts to go see it. "Dangerous," an editorial in the *New York Daily News* shuddered. "Unambiguously contrived to vilify Jews," Frank Rich wrote in the *New York Times*. Gibson "has chosen to give millions of people the impression that Jews are culpable for the death of Jesus," Leon Wieseltier concluded in the *New Republic*, while William Safire moaned about "Gibson's medieval version of the suffering of Jesus, reveling in savagery to provoke outrage and cast blame." Neoconservative Charles Krauthammer shrieked about "Gibson's Blood Libel" and found proof of the film's demonization of Jews in the lurking presence of the figure of Satan "merging with, indeed, defining the murderous Jewish crowd." Of course, as anyone who has seen the film knows, Satan is also "merging" with Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane during the film's opening scenes, trying to prevent Him from going through with the crucifixion at all. The point is that Satan does not want God's Son to sacrifice Himself for mankind's sins, and, when Christ dies, Satan screams in rage and agony. In any case, who exactly would you expect Satan to be lurking among in downtown Jerusalem? They just didn't have too many



Palestinians back then.

Almost all of the commentary about *The Passion of the Christ's* supposed vilification of Jews was on the same sophomoric and transparently false level. Jami Bernard, film critic for the *New York Daily News*, opened her review of February 24 with the line, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is the most virulently anti-Semitic movie made since the German propaganda films of World War II" and, a week later, was complaining about the "week of real hatred" she had endured from all the antisemitic Christians who wrote her what she called "nasty and unprintable letters."

If the nasty and unprintable attacks that critics such as Miss Bernard launched did not muzzle the movie, maybe the cops could do it. By early March, the *New York Post* reported, the head of the NYPD's "Hate Crimes Unit" ordered his squad to go see the film just in case, and, a few days later, a "Jewish advocacy group" calling itself the "Messiah Truth Project" asked the U.S. Department of Justice to "utilize civil, criminal, and federal hate crime laws" against the film. And you thought I was joking about the Thought Police.

There were, of course, eminent Jewish writers and critics who defended the movie, such as Rabbi Daniel Lapin, founder of Toward Tradition, a politically conservative Jewish organization, and Orthodox Jewish film critic Michael Medved; by far, however, the overwhelming response from Jewish journalists, film critics, Hollywood powerhouses, and the leaders and spokesmen of the organized Jewish community was, to put it mildly, negative.

It is not my purpose here to discuss in any detail the merits or flaws of their attacks. Not only Lapin and Medved but any number of Christian writers (Pat Buchanan, Joe Sobran, and Cal Thom-

as, among others) have already done that. The essence of the Jewish attacks is that Gibson's movie recapitulates the "blood libel" that "the Jews murdered Christ" and that Jews today are morally culpable, a doctrine most Jewish writers insist has led to Christian persecution of Jews for centuries and helped shaped German National Socialist views of the Jews but which the Catholic Church repudiated in 1965.

In fact, there is nothing in the Gibson movie that states or even suggests that "all Jews" were responsible for the execution of Jesus. The film does show the Jewish priesthood of the day engineering the execution for their own doctrinal and political reasons and badgering, cajoling, and implicitly threatening Pilate to carry it out. That is perfectly consistent with the only historical source we have about the events and with Pope Paul VI's 1965 *Nostra aetate*, which explicitly stated, "The Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ."

As for the "blood libel" itself, whatever its historical sources, it was hardly the only reason for medieval antisemitism (let alone any cause at all of the long history of anti-Jewish violence among the Greeks, Romans, and other pre-Christian nations), nor does it find any expression in Gibson's film, the emphasis of which is explicitly on Christ's forgiveness of His killers and the responsibility of all humans for His death. Despite the claims of writers such as Krauthammer that Gibson "openly rejects the Vatican II teaching" that the Jews had nothing to do with the execution, there is nothing in the movie that contradicts the pope's statement that "what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today."

That, of course, is the point that Safire (along with most other Jewish critics) missed. Safire wrote in his column that

The villains at whom the audience's outrage is directed are the actors playing bloodthirsty rabbis and their rabid Jewish followers. This is the essence of the medieval "passion play," preserved in pre-Hitler Germany at Oberammergau, a source of the hatred of all Jews as "Christ killers."

Aside from the questionable claim that the audience's "outrage" is "directed" at

anyone and the dubious assumption that the Nazis were really influenced by a medieval Christian drama, Mr. Safire's central boo-boo is his confusion of the historical role of a particular group of Jewish leaders (a role no one really denies and which there is no good reason to deny, assuming we accept even generally the New Testament account) with the supposed theological and ethical guilt that is said to have caused or shaped or influenced antisemitic violence through the ages. Mr. Safire and most other Jewish critics are arguing that you cannot accept the one without implying or embracing the other, and that is simply false. It is like saying that, if you note that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and several other communist spies of the 1940's were Jews, you are accusing Jews today or all Jews of being communist spies.

Fallaciously lumping the historic guilt of specific persons 2,000 years ago with a universal moral culpability today, which is what Safire and most other Jewish critics of the Gibson movie did, leads to a further inference—perfectly logical—that the New Testament account, and therefore the heart of Christianity itself, is antisemitic and must be excised or expurgated. In this kind of thinking, it is not just Mr. Gibson's movie that is likely to get a visit from the Hate Crimes Squad but your local Sunday school.

That is precisely the burden of a claim made by a rabbi whom Rabbi Lapin debated over the film:

We have a responsibility as Jews, as thinking Jews, as people of theology, to respond to our Christian brothers and to engage them, be it Protestants, be it Catholics, and say, look, this is not your history, this is not your theology, this does not represent what you believe in.

It is the responsibility of Jews, in other words, to decide what Christians should believe about history and theology, and, if it offends Jews, it has to go.

The arrogance of that claim puts most of the invective heaped on Mel Gibson rather in the shade, but it is not very different from it, and it also points to a further inference about what is going on in the controversy surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*. An Orthodox Jewish friend of mine spotted it immediately in a comment he made to me soon after seeing the movie himself and dismissing the charges of antisemitism as preposterous. "It's all

a put on, isn't it?" he remarked. "None of the guys claiming it's antisemitic really believes that. It's really just a question of power. That's all."

It is indeed a question of power because entirely apart from the theological, historical, and aesthetic merits of the Gibson film is the question of controlling the public culture, the way of life that defines American society and establishes public standards by which behavior, discussion, and thought are regulated. You probably do not have to accept Christopher Dawson's view that "a living religion always aspires to be the centre round which the whole culture revolves" to grasp that religion is invariably a powerful force in defining a culture and that it is no coincidence that the words *cult* and *culture* both derive from the Latin *cultus*. The religion a society accepts—publicly, regardless of what its members privately believe—is what defines its morals and its patterns of what is and is not legitimate.

The angry controversy about *The Passion* is about which *cultus* will define American culture, and the conflict over the movie is a struggle for cultural power, for what Antonio Gramsci called "cultural hegemony." Rabbi Jacob Neusner has remarked that Auschwitz has replaced Sinai in the religious sensibilities of many modern secularized Jews, and the bitter and hysterical war against Mel Gibson represents a further attempted displacement—that Auschwitz replace Calvary, that Christianity itself as Americans understand and accept it be defined and regulated by contemporary Jewish standards and those cultural hegemonies who enforce them.

Mel Gibson's answer to this demand, in effect, was *To hell with you. I'm going to offer this country and the world my own religion, and you have nothing to say about it.*

And that is what everybody is angry about. Gibson is directly challenging the Jewish claim to define—and the Jewish power to define—a Christianity and an American culture informed by it that is acceptable to Jews.

And since, by the time the Hate Crime Squads were about to show up at the theater doors, he had already raked in more than \$300 million from the film and some 64 percent of the American public had already seen and very much liked his movie or said they were planning to see it, his answer appears to have been one that an immense number of Americans found compelling.

Strictly Business

The other day, driving through North End Commons (a neighborhood a bit north of the *Chronicles* offices and to the west of our house), I noticed a florist, a friend of mine, out in front of another flower shop, chatting with the owner. The two businesses have coexisted now for over a year, though they stand barely a block apart. I suspect that, like me, most of their customers patronize one or the other exclusively, though I doubt that there are many people who would refuse to go to the other shop if their preferred one did not have what they wanted. Each store has its own look and feel, and, outside of the standard carnations and roses, each carries a distinctive stock. Their healthy competition has helped revive commerce in a neighborhood that, for many years, has been struggling.

This is the free market at its best: Two shopkeepers, each making a living doing something he enjoys, reinvesting much of his profit in a neighborhood that he cares about, and each able to chat amiably with his competitor—who, because of his shared love for the neighborhood, is also his collaborator. Granted, there are certain conditions that make this scene between two florists more likely than a similar one between, say, two discount computer resellers or even two grocers—higher margins, stock that has to be turned over very quickly, a distribution area that is limited by the nature of the product, etc. Still, the scene shows that markets do not always have to tend toward the monopoly model—maximizing profits and minimizing costs by eliminating competition—so beloved of the libertarians.

Rockford, however, does have its share of monopolies, and none is more obvious and more potentially damaging than the monopoly in the newspaper business. We are a Gannett town, and the local Gannett paper, the *Rockford Register Star*, is our only daily. There are weeklies—most notably Frank Schier's *Rock River Times* and Rock Valley Publishing's *Rockford Journal*—but for day to day news, the *Register Star* is it.

Most cities of Rockford's size are one-newspaper towns, and that paper is usually owned by one of the major chains—Gannett, Knight-Ridder, Hearst, Tribune

Newspapers, Newhouse. While consolidation has always been a fact of life in the newspaper business, throughout most of Rockford's history, the city usually had two, often three, and occasionally four papers vying for the public's attention. That competition was healthy, and, more importantly, it was local. Each newspaper represented the viewpoint of a segment of the community. Whose voice, however, is represented by a \$6.7-billion international company with headquarters in McLean, Va., and operations in 43 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Hong Kong?

The largest newspaper company (by circulation) in the United States, with 101 daily newspapers, Gannett has come under fire in the past for predatory advertising practices and disregard for antitrust laws. (The U.S. Justice Department began to investigate Gannett in early 1981, but the Reagan administration had little interest in pursuing antitrust actions against media giants, and the case was quickly shelved.) In *The Chain Gang: One Newspaper Versus the Gannett Empire*, journalist Richard McCord documents many of the battles that Gannett has waged against locally owned newspapers (including here in Rockford). McCord's book, however, also makes it obvious that the problem is not Gannett per se but the evolution—or devolution—of newspaper publishing from a local concern to a centralized industry. Massive national (and, increasingly, multinational—Gannett, according to the company's website, is “the second largest regional newspaper publisher in the United Kingdom”) corporations are almost structurally bound to view their “local” papers the way that Wal-Mart regards its “local” stores. “Success” and “failure” are measured in terms of monetary profit—advertising revenue even more than readers, who often are offered cut-rate subscriptions in order to boost the going rate of ads. In a limited market, advertising comes close to being a zero-sum game, which is why competition cannot be tolerated. Even if he has the best of intentions, the local publisher of a chain newspaper—who almost always was not born in the town he's sta-



tioned in and, please God and Gannett, will not die there—has little choice but to consider the impact on advertising revenue when deciding the long-term direction the paper will take.

What happens, however, when one newspaper already has a near-monopoly on advertising in its market? Part of Gannett's solution has been to lobby the Federal Communications Commission to relax restrictions on owning both a newspaper and a television station in the same market (since many businesses will advertise with both), and, under the Bush administration, they would likely have succeeded if Congress had not reined in the FCC. Another approach is to expand the newspaper's coverage into neighboring markets, increasing the pool of potential advertisers.

Under its most recent publisher, Fritz Jacobi, that seems to be the route that the *Register Star* is taking. On both its editorial and news pages, the paper constantly beats the drum of “regionalism” in the “Rock River Valley.” It has consistently supported the expansive efforts of the newly renamed Rockford Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Rockford Area Council of 100, a business group of which Jacobi is also chairman of the board. To be fair, the *Register Star*'s local coverage has taken a decided turn for the better under Jacobi, and the local commitment of some reporters, such as political editor Chuck Sweeny, is unquestionable. There is only so much room for news in each issue, however, and local manufacturers have privately expressed concern that coverage of issues that affect them is poor to nonexistent. But then, manufacturers tend not to need to advertise in their hometowns. That may not be the reason for the lack of coverage, but who could blame them for thinking that it is?

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