

Civil libertarians claim that Mel Gibson has a constitutionally protected right to make his movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, which will drive scores of individuals among the many millions of already existing anti-Semites into action. They ignore the difference between one's legal right to say horrible things, and the moral rightness of saying them. One can say that all African-Americans should be shipped back to where they came from, or that Hitler should have finished the job. But no decent human being will utter such awful words. Those who do should be treated the way *Hustler* magazine was and is: Its publication is not banned, but those who issue it and those who read it are treated as morally defective persons; they are people we do not wish to be associated with, have over for dinner, borrow a cup of sugar from or give the time of day.

Anyone who has seen the brief trailer of Gibson's new movie, set to open this Ash Wednesday in some 2,000 theaters- will quickly get a sense of what the furor ought to be about. The movie shows, in close-up, a Christ already beaten into a pulp by a group that must have used knives instead of fists, and being severely whipped. The movie itself focuses on the last 12 hours of Christ's life, choking on the cross, cobblestones drenched in blood as he is dragged over them, his head banging. And the Jews are made to be the culprit by Gibson, the son of a Holocaust denier.

It had long been a tenet of the Catholic Church that Jews killed Christ; this derives from a sentence in one Gospel, in which a Jewish crowd exclaims: "Let his blood be on us and our children." This became a line in the movie. Gibson says that, under pressure, he edited it out-from the subtitles. But he deliberately left it on the soundtrack in Aramaic, even though he easily could have eliminated it from there, too. Why did he leave it in?

This line has been a theme used by anti-Semites for generations to instigate bloody assaults on Jews, from the Crusades to the pogroms of the last century. Pope John XXIII tried to lay this canard to rest during the convening of the Second Vatican Council, where, among other reforms, it issued a declaration in 1965 under his successor Pope Paul VI known as the *Nostra Aetate*, stating that what happened to Christ cannot be charged against all of the Jews of today.

As a Traditionalist Catholic, Gibson explicitly rejects the reforms made by Vatican II and claims that his movie is an accurate portrayal of what happened. Religious scholars disagree. In 1988, the Interfaith Committee of the National Bishops Conference issued a list of criteria to be followed when dramatizing the Passion, warning against the caricaturing of Jews, which would "result almost inevitably in a violation" of the Second Vatican Council.

However, this has not stopped leading Catholics from welcoming and praising the movie, and several other Christian leaders who saw it gave it near-universal praise. Reverend Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, as well as James Dobson and Michael Novak, see it as a religiously inspiring film.

No way to fight fire with fire

There are those who hold that the best way to deal with offensive speech is counter speech. However in this case, counter speech will have little effect. All the intellectual arguments in op-ed pages and in learned discussions about historical accuracy will do nothing to squelch the emotional effects of the movie. Even if a counter movie is made that shows, say, the

crucifixion of Christ carried about by Roman soldiers without Jewish crowds egging them on, it will not diminish the impact of Gibson's rabble-rousing movie.

The only way to minimize the impact of the movie would be if many more people, from a variety of backgrounds, characterize the movie as deeply offensive, so that mainstream Americans will be reluctant to see it, or reluctant to admit that they did. It should become like reading *Hustler*: regular folk either know better than to do it or-if they do-they keep it to themselves.

In the past, Christian groups did not hesitate to condemn roundly movies that they found offensive to their faith even if they contain no threats to their members. Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was denounced by almost every Christian denomination because they felt it slandered their religion; Catholic groups protested the release of *Priest* for the same reasons. Jewish organizations had no difficulties roundly condemning the release of Disney's *Aladdin* because they considered it offensive-to Arabs. But so far, most have kept mum about Gibson's movie.

Although *Passion* has been made in a way that is highly inflammatory, no one should try to ban its release. Allowing such a movie is a cost a free country must, reluctantly, pay to remain free. However, the movie's deleterious effects could be greatly lessened if it is viewed as way beyond the pale of decency.

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