

MORE POWER TO MEL GIBSON “THE PASSION” IS AN ACT OF FAITH, NOT BIGOTRY

By Don Feder

Is Mel Gibson the intellectual heir of The Black Hundred (the notorious progromists of Czarist Russia) or is he merely indifferent to the fact that his cinematic project will “fuel and legitimize anti-Semitism?”

Gibson’s “The Passion of Christ” is scheduled to open in 2,000 theaters nationwide on Ash Wednesday, February 25.

From the outset, controversy has dogged the popular actor’s \$25-million project based on the Gospels’ account of the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus. In one scene, deleted from the final cut of the film, the High Priest Caiaphas says of the condemned Jesus, “His blood be on us and our children.”

This incensed Abraham Foxman -- national director of The Anti-Defamation League and the film’s most scathing critic. A movie Christian leaders are hailing as the greatest religious work of art since the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel “can fuel, trigger, stimulate, induce, rationalize, legitimize anti-Semitism,” warned the kosher Chicken Little.

Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a man I respect far more than Foxman, has been nearly as censorious.

Writing in *The Boston Globe*, James Carroll (one of those “Catholic scholars” whose stock in trade is denying the essence of Catholicism) claims, “Even a faithful repetition of the Gospel stories of the death of Jesus can do damage exactly because those sacred texts themselves carry the virus of Jew-hatred.” Which raises an intriguing question: How can a text both be sacred and carry the seeds of anti-Semitism?

Besides the deleted “his blood be on us” scene, Foxman charges the movie, in Aramaic and Latin with English subtitles, “unambiguously portrays Jewish authorities and the Jewish mob as the ones responsible for

the decision to crucify Jesus.” But it also unambiguously portrays Jesus, his mother (played by the daughter of Holocaust survivors), his disciples and his followers as Jewish.

Prominent Christians have come to the film’s defense. Evangelist Billy Graham says he was “moved to tears” at a private screening. The Crystal Cathedral’s Robert Schuller calls it a “powerful masterpiece.”

The film has been shown at the Vatican to rave reviews. James Dobson, whose Focus on the Family radio show reaches an estimated 9 million listeners each week, says “The Passion” is “easily the most heart-wrenching, powerful portrayal of Christ’s suffering that I have ever seen.”

Farther Augustine Di Noia, an under-secretary of the Church’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, declares, “Speaking as a Catholic theologian, I would be bound to condemn anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism in any recounting of the passion and death of Christ – and not just because of the terrible harm that has been done to Jewish people on these grounds, but also because...this represents a profound misreading of the passion narratives.”

Di Noia goes on to express what I believe to be the true Christian perspective -- that humanity itself is responsible for Christ’s suffering and death, and not just those involved in his trial and execution.

“It is always a serious misreading of the passion stories in the Gospel either to try to assign blame to one character or group in the story, or, more fatefully, to try to exempt oneself from blame,” says Di Noia. “The trouble with the last move is that, if I am not one of the blameworthy, then how can I be among those who share in the benefits of the cross?”

Critics have a serious problem. The script of Gibson’s movie comes directly – almost word for word -- from New Testament sources. If “The Passion” fuels, legitimizes and rationalizes Jew-hatred, then so does the Christian Bible.

At least Foxman has the intellectual honesty to follow his argument to its logical conclusion. “You know, the Gospels, if taken literally, can be very damaging, in the same way if you take the Old Testament literally,” the ADL leader observes. By the way, Abe, your Bible isn’t called the Old

Testament but the Torah, and – yes – there still are some Jews who take it quite literally, including the parts that make you uncomfortable.

So, if not literally, how are Christians to interpret their Scriptures – metaphorically, symbolically, allegorically? Why can't a Christian (one of the few in Hollywood) make a movie about his faith, which is true to his faith, without provoking charges of bigotry or insensitivity?

There's a major flaw in the reasoning of Foxman and Friends. If the movie and the Gospels on which it's based are anti-Semitic, then why are those Christians most faithful to the New Testament among the strongest supporters of Israel?

Most evangelical Christians are fervent defenders of the Jewish state. A decade ago, the term Christian Zionist was an oxymoron. Today, Christian Zionists outnumber their Jewish counterparts. Their organizations include Christians Israel Public Action Campaign, Christians for Israel, Religious Roundtable, Battalion of Deborah, Friends of Israel, Bridges for Peace, International Christian Zionist Center, International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem and National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel.

In October, 2002, the Christian Coalition – an organization whose founder was once reviled by Foxman – held a massive rally in support of Israel, which drew more than 10,000 to Washington, DC. I know, because I helped to organize it.

Christian fervor for Israel is based on the type of biblical literalism that Foxman considers a conduit to anti-Semitism. The evangelical perspective on Zion is also unambiguous: God gave the land to the Jews. God's promises are eternal. End of story.

Christian philo-Semitism goes beyond support for Israel. The most forceful opponents of the new anti-Semitism, which festers throughout the Islamic world and has spread to Europe, include Pat Robertson, Gary Bauer, Alan Keyes, Dr. Dobson, Joe Farah, Elwood McQuaid, Jan Willem Van der Hoeven, Janet Parshall, Earl Cox, Christian Coalition President Roberta Combs and D. James Kennedy.

They believe the same Bible which teaches that Jesus is their savior also tells them to honor and defend the Jewish people. This is a far cry from the Christianity of the Middle Ages.

The idea that “The Passion” is going to excite an American Kristallnacht is truly twisted.

Today, organized Anti-Semitism is almost exclusively a Moslem phenomenon. Hatred of Jews thrives in mosques and madrashes. It’s propagated by Islamic religious authorities, from mullahs to ayatollahs.

At last year’s Organization of the Islamic Conference summit, Mahathir Mohamad, then-prime minister of Malaysia, delivered an anti-Semitic rant that would have done Goebbels proud. Egyptian television produced a 41-part dramatization of the Czarist fraud “The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.” When John Paul II visited Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, the latter lectured the pope on the wickedness of the Jews, how they “corrupt all religions.” Only in the Middle East is the Medieval Blood Libel (the obscene belief that Jews use the blood of non-Jews in their rituals) still taken seriously.

A Jew can’t live in Saudi Arabia or own land in Jordan. The Saudis are particularly energetic in financing the anti-Jewish internationale. The schools they build from Indonesia to America teach Jewish conspiracy theories and the other intellectual baggage of anti-Semitism.

The Palestinian Authority has spent the past decade inculcating a virulent Jew hatred in the young. Suicide bombers don’t just happen; they are shaped and formed in a controlled environment.

Across Europe, mobs of Moslem youth burn synagogues, attack Jewish day schools and beat Jews in the streets. None of this is the result of reading the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 27.

In this world war, Christians are the natural allies of the Jewish people. Why insult them by condemning a tribute to their faith?

As a Jew, I take anti-Semitism very seriously. I was born the year after World War II ended. I’ve choked with emotion while walking through Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. I look at the faces in the

faded photographs and think: That could have been my aged mother. The children being herded into the gas chambers could have been mine. In a sense, they were.

As a columnist, I spent nearly 20 years exposing Nation of Islam fascism, Moslem fundamentalism and the anti-Semitism (in the guise of anti-Zionism) spreading on our college campuses.

Jesus isn't part of my religion. With all due respect to my Christian friends – who are legion – I do not believe that Jesus was God incarnate. (In the words of The Shema, I believe God is One.) I respect those who believe otherwise, as I hope they respect beliefs of mine with which they disagree.

Still, while disagreeing about His nature, Christians and Jews worship the same God. We share a moral code going back to Sinai, as well as the moral teachings of patriarchs and prophets.

I have been humbled by the acts of loving kindness I've seen Christians perform.

If all of this weren't enough, the same forces which would pull down the Cross also seek to smash the Star of David and trample the Torah under their bloody boots. If Christians and Jews do not unite in the face of this international jihad – and make common cause with Hindus and Buddhists as well – we are all lost.

With the raw sewage being pumped out of the open cesspool that calls itself a creative community – songs that celebrate rape and the degradation of women, films that glorify violence and legitimize perversion and sexual anarchy – it's ironic that some have chosen to attack a film that dramatizes sacrifice and redemption.

More power to Mel, say I. It's rare to see a man with such power and influence willing to stand up for his faith in the face of a hostile culture. Instead of opposing him, Jews should be looking for someone like him willing to propagate the wisdom, beauty and truth of Judaism.