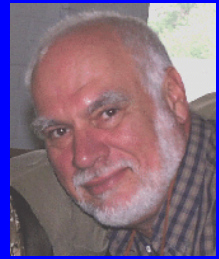


OUR PASSION FOR PASSION

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“Passion” as a word has migrated at some point from its original simple meaning of “suffering” to generally describe a deep desire for someone or something, a suffering with desire. Like most words that get used a lot, this mutated further into “passion lite”—a passion is something one likes to be engaged in, more often a delight rather than a longing and a suffering.

Mel Gibson’s *Passion*, is a return to the story that made this word a key to Western culture. The Passion, i.e., the suffering and execution of Jesus of Nazareth has set an indelible stamp on world history whether we are followers of the Nazarene or not. It is not “passion lite” or “violence lite.”

Not surprising, retelling this story is a highly controversial act. From the violence visited on one man who thought outside of the box and bucked the system we have inherited not only an enduring paradigm for compassion, freedom of thought, respect and concern for one’s neighbor, but depending on the end user’s needs and intentions, the man’s name and his story has become a lever for contemporary as well as historical violence. In his name (and against his name) come persecution, anti-Semitism, crusades and conquistadores, witch hunts, genocide and isms of all sorts.

For viewers and reviewers of the film, *Passion* became a touchstone for the good and bad, the gentle and the incendiary in their personal and collective memories. As these passions surge, it becomes harder and harder to view the Passion. Some find release and purpose in it, others find fuel for their angers.

I attempted to view the film without an axe to grind. I found it plausible, fair, and without an overlying agenda. It told its tale definitely from a believer’s point of view. It did not target anyone, but showed an assortment of fallible human beings, some Roman, some Jewish, some of JC’s followers. There were both cruel as well as dedicated military as one might find in any occupation force. There were also responsible people and protesters on all sides. Given the reviews I have seen, it appears that some went to the film with a need to see something that wasn’t there. Most rabbis who have reviewed it found it authentic and reasonable. That it gives just the simple story of the Gospels to an ahistorical generation that no longer reads about dead white men or much of anything and, for this reason, is probably a service to cultural literacy.

Many of the scenes looked like they were deliberately based on the old masters and religious art of the middle ages and renaissance (Pieta)—visual echoes. Yes lots of blood, but not more than you find on the crucifixes in the Spanish missions in California or in the medieval cathedrals.

It is important to remember the blood is the key of the redemption in the Christian story. It is so to speak the “red” thread that runs intentionally through the story. On the other hand,

bloody as it is, even this movie is sanitized and does not compare with real torture and passion for death that is alive and well today as we all know. The film's focus on passion and suffering is an antidote to big screen big bang violence. It takes us away from the vengeful *Kill Bill* and *Terminator* type gore. It lets us realize what happens via politics to innocent people and in particular to those who directly or indirectly challenge the system, today as yesterday.

The story was done with relatively good attention to the texts of the Gospels (not forgetting that these are also believers' stories), and to historical setting. Slightly less literal and more graphic than Pasolini's simple telling of the *Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, which some will recall (1965) was also controversial, perhaps more because the director was gay, Marxist and an atheist. There were few anachronisms—no Roman soldiers wearing Seikos. The film ended around a resurrection scene and no intimation whatever of revenge, though apparently some viewers seemed to project an echo of "Jesus is coming, and boy is he pissed off!" Certainly reactions are formed by the historical context in which viewers live: Pasolini was accused of making Christ a communist *avant la lettre*; Gibson is now seen by some as following a rightist fundamentalist zeitgeist.

Most importantly, there were no excursions into literary fantasy, such as that of Nikos Kazantzakis, which Martin Scorsese brought to the big screen in 1988, e.g., the obligatory "affair" between Jesus and Mary Magdalen, the "bathrobe" spectaculars or fictional intrigues that Hollywood is so famous for and which today has found a place in Dan Brown's page-turner, *the Davinci Code*.

Gibson chose to have the actors speak the languages of the time. Being a survivor of a classical education, I could understand the Latin without the subtitles and you get the feel of the Aramaic if you know a little bit of Hebrew. Fidelity to the story as the story is told seemed to be primary in the director's mind. And perhaps this allows the story to be not just another tinsel town drama but an occasion to examine violence and suffering in a relatively pure form as it touches us and observe what images, feelings, fears, judgments and it touches off in us. Art has this effect. It is about how we see ourselves and what we tend to project on others.

There is the issue of how you show the "bad guys." There were a lot of uglies on both sides (the Jews didn't invent the Roman nose!) and lots of "good looking" high priests, etc. There was a personification of Satan as a kind of androgynous character, perhaps with a gay feel, but who can tell. The major issue is who is made to be the baddie. This is not peculiar to Gibson's film but an issue in almost all films. Connecting ugly and bad is a looksism issue that seems to be insolvable in all forms of art, but particularly in cinema. We seem to have a need to give evil a face—as long as it is not ours. This has a lot to do with how we love or hate people, show them compassion or treat them with violence.

As the theme of this column is searching out the roots of violence in US culture, Gibson's film reminds us that we cannot forget that the Jesus story is implicated. How one views this story has consequences for how one chooses to live out perhaps one's faith or refusal of faith, but more importantly today at what level one subscribes to the civil religion of the USA that is so imbued with values from the religious refugees who colonized the land with their own sort of passion.