

## *The Passion* in the Culture Wars

Prepared for the Lenten Forum Series Part I:  
Panel and Discussion on Mel Gibson's  
*The Passion of the Christ*

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Gibson's resurrected Christ rises in the tomb with a steely glare, and then strides purposefully into the light, to the insistent beat of martial drums. With that, Gibson's Passion story, and perhaps even, the controversy that has attended it, became clear. Gibson had once said that he wasn't interested in making a religious movie, and in *The Passion* he hadn't. He was making a war movie.

Peter Boyer

### I. The Battlefield Today

America today is experiencing an extended crisis of public identity. The name given this crisis, with admitted hyperbole, is "the culture wars." We are not shooting at each other, but the energy and antipathy of the partisans is substantial. The conflict differs from political conflicts in that the issues seem beyond compromise. The sense of cultural crisis is intensified and aggravated by the way the issues are presented in public discourse. According to a prominent authority of the culture wars, the personal differences are perhaps irreconcilable (Hunter, J. 1991, 34)

The cultural conflict can be understood as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of understanding" and constituting a struggle for the "domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all the others" (Hunter, 42) In this war, we see passionate conflicts over fundamental concepts of right, wrong, and what it means to be an American, including

- ◆ What should public schools teach our children?
- ◆ How should love and sexuality properly be expressed?
- ◆ Do women and minorities need public action to help them achieve social equality?
- ◆ Who deserves the privileges of citizenship?
- ◆ What is the proper balance between the needs of liberty and security?
- ◆ Should we restrict consumption to fight materialism and protect the environment?
- ◆ What is our obligation toward new immigrants, legal and illegal?
- ◆ Should we use our superior power to police the world?
- ◆ How should we encourage other nations to become democratic?

But, as a people, we have not developed the conceptual or analytical tools for understanding cultural conflict (34) and the concept of the present culture war in the US tends to be underestimated and misunderstood.

We *are* familiar with religious and cultural hostilities seen in other parts of the globe – the Muslim Chechens against Russians, Tamils against Sinhalese Buddhists, the Sikh nationalists against Hindus, the Kurdish minorities against Muslims – but despite a long history of cultural conflict in the United States, we don't recognize the seriousness of our present situation (36)

In the American past, cultural **conflict tended to occur within a religious context** – nativists opposed to Catholic immigrants, persecutions of Mormons, substantial anti-Jewish discrimination up through the mid-twentieth century. (37-39)

Public opinion survey research reveals that this kind of **inter-denominational hostility gradually waned** after the Second World War. For instance, with respect to anti-Jewish sentiments, by the late 1980s surveys showed that 90 percent of the US population would be willing to vote for a Jewish presidential candidate, other things being equal, and 90 percent of Evangelical Christians disagreed with a survey statement that read "Christians are justified in holding negative attitudes toward Jews" because of their role in the Crucifixion. Further, "there is some evidence to suggest that Evangelical Christians may have more positive attitudes toward Jews than [toward] other non-Christians because of the interrelationship between the Christian and Jewish tradition throughout the Old and New Testaments." (Poll results cited in Hunter, 40) \*

In other words, there has been an important and substantial **lessening of old cultural hostilities**. The lessening of hostilities on that front has made us unprepared for the present culture wars, which arranges itself along new lines of conflict, demarcating a social and political landscape with an irregular but nevertheless wide chasm between the opposing sides. (Hunter, 43).

In popular discourse, these opponents are commonly labeled conservative/traditional and liberal/progressive. These labels are probably inadequate because traditional right-left oppositions have concerned conflicts over distributive and redistributive rights, "who gets what," in society. Our present conflict is more about values; which and whose values shall prevail and shall become embedded in the laws and policies of our nation, thereby ensuring their continuing propagation. Conflicts over the nature of values and

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\*Orthodox Rabbi Daniel Lapin, a supporter of the Gibson film and a critic of the Anti-Defamation League because its ADL's criticisms of the film has said, in a similar vein, that the main divide in American culture and politics is between religious believers and secular liberals (Witham, September 13, 2000, p. A2).

the process of valorization itself are the defining characteristics of the culture wars.

Necessarily compressed and oversimplified, the differences between these opposing camps are this: the conservatives or traditionalists believe that truth and moral authority comes from above and for all time (which tends to leave little room for discussion).<sup>\*</sup> Liberals, on the other hand, see "truth" as a process, which is ongoing. Those liberals who embrace a specific religious affiliation tend believe that the meaning of scripture is complex, not transparent, and often welcome the assistance of literary or historical scholarship to arrive at an "understanding" biblical texts. There are many, perhaps a majority, of liberals who do not subscribe to the tenets of any religious faith, yet share equally strong commitments to a vision of "the good society" (which entails a vision of the requisite public culture needed to bring that about.)

What this adds up to is a situation wherein "our national identity and purpose has not been more a source of contention since the Civil War." <sup>\*\*</sup> The key institutions of American society are at the center of this contest and will be affected by the outcome: the family, public education, the mass media, our laws, and our political system. (Hunter 50-51)

## II. Why now?

Events since the 1960s have resulted in many changes to the cultural landscape, increasing a sense of uncertainty about the future. Post-industrialism transformed the economy and the nature of work, creating rust belts in the Northeast, and restructuring jobs and opportunities. Service jobs, often at lower pay, took the place manufacturing positions, and the phenomena of downsizing and globalization made the middle classes feel similarly insecure about their positions. Knowledge workers are more in demand and more people than ever enter the university, part of the "third industrial revolution" in communications technology. When they arrive they find the classrooms have been transformed by academic trends like postmodernism and deconstructionism, which render the university a confusing place for young persons searching for moral clarity. Advances in the biological sciences pose new moral questions about genetics and reproduction, while the appearances of AIDS raises new ethical questions about human sexuality.

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<sup>\*</sup> Some conservatives (and particularly, neo-conservatives) tend to hold secular beliefs yet "are drawn to the orthodox impulse" because a commitment to "natural law" and reason serve as the functional equivalent of a religious transcendent authority. (Hunter 45)

<sup>\*\*</sup> For a contrary view critical of the notion of culture war, see Rieff, 1998.

In addition, an American consensus on foreign policy began to break down during the Vietnam War, and foreign policy questions are hotly debated today. Following the "victory" of the West over communism in 1991, and at least until 2001, the U.S. had no coherent, programmatic foreign policy. The Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war, along with related statements and efforts to establish democracy in Iraq, shows that the present administration is attempting to remedy that lack, but finds that these policies, embodying a belief in the appropriateness of American norms and values for the rest of the world, themselves become part and parcel of the culture wars.\*

In these times of "social fluctuation and cultural uncertainty" the culture wars engender a sense of cohesiveness in the act of opposing an adversary, whether real or manufactured. In Hunter's words, "In the act of opposing an adversary. . .the community expresses a common moral indignation and asserts its moral authority anew," which provides a "ritual reaffirmation of the community's identity" in the face of possible internal disintegration. It was under similar social stress that the Spanish prosecuted the Inquisition against Jews and Moors, that the Puritans burned witches, that the Nazis murdered millions of Jews, and the Maoists launched the "cultural revolution" in China in the sixties. (Hunter, 156)

### III. How is the war being fought?

How is the culture war being fought? Like candidates for political office, both sides tend to give lip service to the value of civility and reason in adversarial contests, but quickly resort to mudslinging. The nature of the differences between the camps suggests a reason. If each side begins with diametrically different premises and fundamentally conflicting views of truth and moral logic, then there is little likelihood of one side being able to convince the other to abandon its premises and embrace the opposite view. What is more likely to be effective is a campaign to discredit the opposition. As we have seen, our public discourse has become polemical, filled with "name calling, denunciation, and . . .outright intolerance." (Hunter 136) In this "take no prisoners" atmosphere, "the contemporary culture war has become a contest that will determine "not who is right but who is left." (Hunter 136)

Not surprisingly, both sides portray each other as extremists acting outside the mainstream of American culture. The left first elaborated centrist/extremist theory to analyze trends like the anti-communist crusades of the 1950s (McCarthyism) and groups like the Ku Klux Klan. These theories tended to oversimplify and to a large extent "demonize" such activities by ignoring any

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\* At least one foreign policy analyst proposed making "culture war" itself the keystone of U.S. foreign policy priority. See William S. Lind, "Defending Western Culture," Foreign Policy 84 (Fall 1991): 40-50

rational, concrete interests embodied by such movements, and by ignoring the role that elites often played (Bertlet, Section 2).<sup>\*</sup> In criticizing the conservatives, liberals often use labels like "fanatics," "zealots," "homophobes," "demagogues," "militants," "witch hunters," and other similarly loaded terms. Cultural conservatives use a parallel language calling liberals "amoral," "anti-Christian," "insidious," "forces of the anti-Christ," "godless," "anti-American," and so on. (Hunter 144-148).

The result, according to Hunter, is a "symmetry in antipathy" (156), which is readily confirmed by a cursory glance at the titles of many of the books for sale at Barnes and Noble, by listening to the radio, or by surfing the Internet. The culture war continues, overheated, and here comes the Gibson movie.

#### IV. But it's only a movie, right? Why the fuss?

The movie becomes a hot button, a "condensation symbol"<sup>\*\*</sup> for the culture wars because the media are positioned in an important cultural location for influencing the "struggle to define reality," so it is probably inevitable that the culture wars become a struggle to control the products and processes of the mass media. (Hunter, 226)

That struggle is now familiar to us. If we are paying the smallest bit of attention, we have heard many accusations about "liberal bias" in the media, and complaints from cultural conservative about the probable corrosive effects of television, movies, and popular music on the morals and character development of America's young people, in particular. Conservatives have mounted letter-writing campaigns, boycotts, and even an attempt to buy CBS television in order to change the content of media programming.

Liberals often respond to such activities by citing the First Amendment and protesting against alleged attempts at "censorship".<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Conservatives respond that they are censored as well by everyday editorial decisions in the "liberal press." Books for the Christian market, for example, are seldom reviewed in

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<sup>\*</sup> Examples of this approach, considered required reading for political science students in the 1960s, include: Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *Danger on the Right*. (New York: random House, 1964); Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964; Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in American, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970).

<sup>\*\*</sup> For a discussion of condensation symbols see Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 6, ff.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> In fact, Garry Wills argues, what they are really upset about is not censorship, which "uses the force of government to contain freedom of speech" but "censure," which are "not examples of repression but of freedom of expression by committed people." (Wills, 1989)

the *New York Times Book Review* or similar venues, despite sales in excess of other "best sellers" on the *Times* list. (Hunter 244)

But what about the film in question? For one thing, the subject of the film is inevitably going to be interpreted differently by each side in the culture wars. Conservatives/traditionalists will tend to receive the film as a representation of the transcendent truth of our savior. Liberals/progressives, however, will see something more complex, and of indeterminate meaning. Given the fundamental differences between each camp, that is inevitable. What is not inevitable is that these differences would necessarily result in such controversy. Compare the response to another film released in the fall of 2003, *The Gospel of John*, which appeared to very little comment.\* And this might be surprising, given that the author of John, more than the other gospel authors, fixes "blame for initiating, ordering, and carrying out the crucifixion. . ." on Jews (Pagels, 1995, 106-107). Further,

The term Jews — Ioudaioi in the Greek — appears more than 70 times, far more than it does in the other Gospels, which tend to use factional names like Sadducees or Pharisees or Scribes, or generic terms like crowd or people. The Jewish leadership is depicted as plotting to kill Jesus early on and as pushing Pontius Pilate to execute him. At one point, Jesus says to the Jews, "You are the children of your father, the Devil, and you want to follow your father's desires." (Waken, 2003)

The epigram opening this paper is from Peter Boyer's sympathetic review of Gibson's film in an issue of *New Yorker* magazine last September (Boyer, 2003), provides the key insight. Gibson's film has a hard edge not only in the onscreen images of the bloody beatings and crucifixion the Christ defiantly accepts on behalf of the rest of us, but also as a metaphorical sword in the culture wars. Cornel West, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, calls the Christ of Gibson's film "Rambo of the Cross" who seems to saying to his tormentors "bring it on, I can endure it" (West, 2004)

Gibson has given us a Jesus movie in battle mode, saying, cinematographically, "Look, see how Christ suffers for you. Can you witness that and not believe. Can you know this and not follow?" He is throwing down the gauntlet, so to speak, challenging all "know the truth" and act accordingly.

Carrying the battle flag to his constituency, Gibson gave prescreenings to audiences of evangelical Christians around the country, and went on talk shows to proclaim his strong faith. Thus, "General" Gibson attacks the culture with

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\* An Internet search using Google for the terms "The Gospel of John" and "movie" resulted in 72,700 hits. The terms "The Passion of the Christ" and "movie" resulted in 1,730,000 hits.

his movie as his sword. An effective leader, he rallied the troops into the theaters and beyond, onto the airwaves, the Internet blogs, the newspaper letters, and into the churches.

Many liberal critics, I would guess, don't like the movie for these very reasons. It has helped rally their cultural adversaries. Criticisms of the movie that they voice are not invalid, but they reflect an interpretive framework that is probably irreconcilable with that of the conservatives. The response of Christians to such criticism is often hostile:

The fierce attacks on the Gibson film come amidst an intensification of the ongoing culture war, with many of the same individuals who are attacking *The Passion* also leading the charge to promote abortion, pornography, sodomy and depravity of every sort, as well as to purge the public square of the Ten Commandments and all Christian symbols (Jasper, 2003)

The biggest issue, I think, that scholars have complained about is how Jews are represented in the film (See Boys, et al, 2003). Given the choices Gibson made in constructing his scenes, choosing his actors and their clothing, selecting dialogue and scenes from among the different Gospels, Gibson seems guilty, at the very least, of insensitivity to Jewish concerns. Gibson's treatment of Jews in the film contrasts unfavorably with the depictions of Jews in *The Gospel of John*:

The filmmakers said they took careful measures to avoid the charge of anti-Semitism. "It's probably the issue that we spent the greatest amount of time as an advisory committee discussing," said Peter Richardson, a professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of Toronto and chief consultant.

The filmmakers chose the Good News Translation, which often translates Ioudaioi as "Jewish authorities." The preamble notes that crucifixion was a Roman punishment not sanctioned by Jewish law, that Jesus and all his early followers were Jewish and that the story reflects a time of "unprecedented polemic and antagonism between the emerging church and the religious establishment of the Jewish people" (Waken, 2003)

Other criticisms coming from the liberal/progressive camp ring false, particularly the complaints of excessive violence. The film *is* violent, and to me it seemed excessive, but the violence is plainly justified by Gibson's artistic purpose. Unlike the violence in films normally objected to by the conservative/traditionalists, violence is not glorified but is instead ultimately shown to be completely in vain. As one Christian columnist writes,

The film is . . . incredibly violent. We have sanitized the cross. For most Americans (indeed, for most people around the world) the cross is a beautiful piece of jewelry or an ornament to grace an altar or a communion table. The cross was in reality a brutal means of torture and execution. It was designed to humiliate the victim and draw out death as long as possible. . .(Sisler, 2004)

The violence is cinematically necessary for *The Passion of the Christ* as a “war movie” because as it sets up a triumphant Christ, depicted in the final scene, where Christ purposively strides out of the tomb to battle music: “The music that plays in the background is not harp music, not a palatable, Sunday school piece that would have satisfied A.O. Scott. It is martial music. It is battle music. And the risen Son of the Living God marches out of the tomb to continue the war against hell for the souls of men” (Sister, 2004)

And the movie watchers march out of the theaters similarly inspired.

Will they be likely to become anti-Semitic? The logic of the new culture wars suggests not. The conservative/traditionalist cultural alliance includes Catholics, Protestants, and Jews who are united against the liberal/progressive/secularists, which is not likely to change. In fact, quite a number of prominent Jewish conservatives have lined up to praise the film and its purpose, including film critic Michael Medved, reformed New Leftist David Horowitz, and Orthodox Rabbi Daniel Lapin. For these viewers, suggestions from the left that they are likely to embrace anti-Semitism are likely to have the salutary effect of prompting a deliberate and conscious effort to prove them wrong. This latter thought is suggested by the trumpeting on conservative Internet news channels of a new survey finding that viewers of Gibson’s movie **lessens** hostility toward Jews (Hunter, M. 2004).

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