The paper places the controversy over Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ into an analysis of the present day “culture war” taking place between progressives and traditionalists within American society and the Catholic Church of the United States. Incorporated into the analysis are such topics, among others, as anti-Semitism and anti-Christianity, the nature of the Christian message, excessive violence, reactions to viewing the film, the historical accuracy of the Gospels, censorship and blackballing, the use of double-standards, the secular dominance of Hollywood and the public square, impact on Jewish-Christian relations, and cultural and political consequences.

(An earlier version of this paper was presented as an Introduction to the lecture by Dr. William A. Donohue, “The Controversy Over Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ,” sponsored by the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies, Friday, April 16, 2004, Garden City, New York.)

The airing of Mel Gibson’s film The Passion of the Christ during 2004 represented both a religious and sociological phenomenon of the first magnitude. It is one of the most talked about and hotly debated films ever to hit the theater screen in the United States (Lapin, 2004a). Gibson’s film depicts the standard traditional account of the Catholic Church of the trial, scourging, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The controversy that surrounds the film begs for it to be incorporated into an analysis of the present day “culture war” taking place between progressives and traditionalists within American civilization (Hunter, 1991) and the Catholic Church of the United States (Kelly, 1979; Varacalli, 2001). For one thing, most of the individuals who are, respectively, critical and supportive of the film would take quite similar positions on such other key issues as homosexuality, abortion, and school vouchers. The critics of Mel Gibson’s movie come from the ranks of secularists, Jews (with the exception of some orthodox Jews), liberal Protestants, and liberal Catholics. Conversely, the two groups most strongly supporting The Passion of the Christ have
been orthodox Catholics and conservative evangelical Protestants, with Eastern Orthodox Christians (I strongly suspect) also being mostly supportive of the film.

Are the film and Mel Gibson primarily being attacked by progressives because they dare to attempt to bring traditional Christianity back into an American public square now characterized by a secular monopoly (Lapin, 2004b)? Relatedly, is this also the reason behind the fervid hatred demonstrated by progressives against the Presidency of George W. Bush, a believing conservative Christian (Lapin, 2004b)?

For Gibson’s supporters, the opposition to the film represents an opportunity for the progressive camp in the contemporary American culture war to register a fundamental blow against the plausibility and truthfulness of a traditional Catholicism and Christianity (Warner, 2004). Orthodox Catholics would claim, likewise, that the film’s critics—primarily liberal Jews and liberal Catholics—are the same as those who view Pope Pius XII as either anti-Semitic or indifferent to the plight of the Jews in the face of Adolph Hitler’s monstrously murderous activities during World War II. Defenders of the film, moreover, claim a double standard on the part of America’s progressive cultural elite as it celebrated, for instance, Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ while at the same time condemning Gibson’s Passion (Limbaugh, 2004). Gibson’s defenders also question why so little attention has been focused on the artistic quality (or lack of quality) of the film instead of it being used—it is claimed—excessively as a standard to judge anti-Semitism, bigotry, and religious fundamentalism (Chavez, 2004).

Some of Gibson’s critics claim that his film is anti-Semitic and lends itself to the collective blaming of Jews for the death of Jesus and as such, stands as an indictment against the Catholic religion and traditional Christianity. Critics claim that the movie is unfair in its depiction of the Jewish religious authorities of the time, especially the head Rabbi, Caiaphas. The claim has also been made that the film is permeated with anti-Semitic images while the character of the Roman leader, Pontius Pilate, is portrayed in a much more sympathetic light (Wieseltier, 2004). Some on the progressive side of the barricades profess that the Gospel claim of any significant involvement of the reigning Jewish authorities of the time in the events leading to the death of Christ is itself historically inaccurate (Wieseltier, 2004). Some Jewish critics go further claiming that the Gospel accounts of the Passion of Jesus Christ are themselves anti-Semitic (Lapin, 2004a; Weigel, 2004; Chavez, 2004).
Defenders of the film provide several counter arguments. One is that all the characters in the film, save Jesus Christ, are portrayed in a less than fully positive light, consistent with the Christian claims regarding all humans being tainted by the effects of original sin (Dean, 2004). Another is that Jewish religious tradition itself admits to the involvement of Jewish authorities in the trial of Christ in the form of such sources as the Talmud and the Jewish philosopher and sage, Maimonides (Klinghoffer, 2004; Mattingly, 2004). Another is the argument that the film couldn’t possibly be anti-Semitic simply because many of the Jewish characters are not depicted as evil (e.g., Mary, John, Mary Magdalene, Veronica, The Good Thief, Simon of Cyrene, Joseph of Arimathea) (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Geholz, 2004). The Gospel accounts of The Passion of the Christ then, according to this logic, are not only basically consistent with each other (Rosica, 2004) and reflect no anti-Semitism but rather, depict an internecine battle between establishment (e.g., Caiaphas) and anti-establishment (e.g., Jesus Christ) wings of the Judaism of the era that only eventually led to the formation of a new religion, i.e., Christianity (Novak, 2003; Weigel, 2004; Geholz, 2004). Some defenders of the film also wonder, relatedly, if one major source of Jewish opposition to the film is to be found in the fact that Christianity claims the existence of a “new covenant” between God and man that, while not destroying the “old covenant” between Jews and God, nonetheless claimed to supercede it (Novak, 2003). Furthermore, the defenders of the film claim that it is the Roman soldiers who come off as the most inhuman in their treatment of Jesus and the Jewish population (Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Critics of the film claim that it will spur violence against the Jews of the United States, Europe, and throughout the world much like some passion plays did in the Europe of the Middle Ages. If true, this brings up the issue of whether or not The Passion of the Christ (or similar Christian classics like The King of Kings, Barabbas, and The Greatest Story Ever Told) should be banned or at least stigmatized and marginalized (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Novak, 2003). Defenders of the film respond by claiming that the message of the film reduces, not inflames, hatred between religions and groups (Donohue, 2004b) that differ, in part at least, in their worldviews. A related issue here involves the indisputable fact that in European society past, a significant number of Catholics and other Christians did blame the Jewish people for the death of Christ. The question, however, is whether or not this anti-Semitism is reflective of official Church teaching. Critics of the film claim that anti-Semitism came directly from the bosom of the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council and that the airing of Gibson’s film
represents a return to anti-Semitism (Winfield, 2004). Those opposed to this claim argue that anti-Semitism derives from neither the film nor from official Church teaching (Whitehead, 2004). As an orthodox Catholic might likely point out, every Sunday millions of Catholics at Mass repeat publically the Nicene Creed that states that Jesus Christ “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried,” therefore casting no official Church blame for the death of Jesus on the Jewish people (Novak, 2003). Rather as orthodox Catholics claim, the undeniable instances of anti-Semitism that either existed or exist presently are a function of individual ignorance and bigotry and other “socializing” factors (e.g., ethnic and tribal allegiances, socio-economic factors, cultural attitudes, etc.) that affect the thought and behavior of individuals who are only “nominally Catholic” in their religious commitments.

Members of the progressive side in the culture war also claim that the film is unnecessarily violent and sado-masochistic (Wieseltier, 2004). Would the film spur on spontaneous acts of violence like those that allegedly occurred after a viewing of the film, Fort Apache: The Bronx? Defenders on the orthodox Christian side respond that there is no empirical evidence of the film serving as a catalyst for violent behavior. Moreover, they make the case that the violence in the film was necessary to show the extraordinary lengths that Jesus Christ—for Christians, both the Son of God and God Himself—went to in order to provide the opportunity for humankind to enter the realm of Heaven. Many traditional Christians made the argument that the violent nature of the scourging and crucifixion of Christ is justified as both being historically accurate and necessary to convey the meaning and logic of the Christian message. Yet some other traditional Christians go a step further arguing that no amount of violence could satisfactorily address the Christian claim that God died so that his creation could live; for these Christians, the film (or any representation of Christ’s passion) was simply not violent enough (Williams, 2004). Traditional Christians claim that seeing the film and witnessing the demonstration of love and sacrifice that Christ has for all his children will reduce violence and engender sorrow and contrition in recognizing personal sin. Supporters of Gibson’s film provide an abundance of anecdotal evidence that the almost universal reaction to the film is one of stunned silence, punctuated only by occasional crying and sobbing (Dean, 2004; Harvey, 2004). Gibson’s defenders also point out what they see as a major hypocrisy on the part of those who condemn the violence in The Passion of the Christ yet, at the same time, have consistently remained silent over decades of witnessing Hollywood films featuring overt sexuality, violence, and murder (Lapin, 2004a).
Any cultural analysis of the film would also have to address the question as to the significance of the fact that it is one of the best selling movies of all time (Donohue, 2004a). Critics of the film claim that the film has proven to be of sincere interest to only the already converted, i.e., to orthodox Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and conservative evangelical Protestants. The large number of sales, the progressive critics claim, was only a function of the controversial nature of the film. Some progressives may also actually feel that the film sold so well at the box office because they believe that American civilization is still characterized by a widespread and diffuse anti-Semitism. Defenders of the film claim that its success is attributable, rather, to the fact that there is an enormous religious audience in American society that yearns for films that faithfully and professionally portray movies of spiritual and ethical import or, in the case of the movie under analysis, of what many call “the greatest story ever told.”

Another issue that should be addressed is the significance of the fact that many Hollywood insiders and members of America’s cultural elite made great, although ultimately failing, efforts to condemn and marginalize the film and see to it that its production and distribution would be difficult. Progressives argue that opposition to the film was a sign on the part of Hollywood to protect the American citizenry against anti-Semitism and a violent and harmful film. The traditionalists respond to the anti-Semitism claim by noting that the Academy Awards recently honored Leni Riefenstahl, a propaganda film-maker for Adolph Hitler (Garnica, 2004). The traditionalist response regarding the violence claim is simply to draw attention to the undeniable number of violent films that Hollywood has produced over the past forty years without a hint of opposition. Traditionalists claim that Hollywood and the cultural elite are obviously attempting to impose a left-wing morality on the American public and want to deny authentically Christian films a chance to survive and perhaps thrive in the marketplace of ideas.

The issue of the explicit and implicit threats of Hollywood elites and insiders to blackball Mel Gibson from ever working again with major production companies is another issue of importance in any cultural/sociological analysis (Buchanan, 2004). The traditionalist wing of the culture war claims that the threat isn’t ethical and, moreover, that it is hypocritical given Hollywood’s previous objections to what it terms a “McCarthyism” of a previous era in American history. Will such a blackball succeed, or has Mel Gibson led a successful revolt against a Hollywood monopoly? Will major movie production companies support future traditionally religious projects by Mel Gibson or by
producers and directors with similar pro-Christian sympathies? Or has Mel Gibson provided an end-run around such monopolies, demonstrating how relatively small budget films can compete successfully against media goliaths, and perhaps eventually force them to change their sponsorship priorities?

How will the controversy over The Passion of the Christ affect Jewish-Christian relations in the United States? Might the relationship be strained further because of what many orthodox Christians think to be unfair attacks on Mel Gibson, his film, and the Christian religion (Lapin, 2004a)? More positively put, has Mel Gibson’s film led to conversions to Christianity or to the strengthening of a dormant/nominal Christianity in others? If it has, how will this then impact the nature of the culture war in America, including in national, regional, and local political elections? Is the 2004 Presidential victory of George W. Bush a harbinger of things to come?

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