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The Passion: A Passion That Offends

A View from Around the Country: Politics and People

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Five deeply spiritual, religiously knowledgeable men and women bring- different perspectives but all agree that the most popular religious movie in years. Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," is too violent, unfaithful to history and incendiary.

"The repeated violence and the sameness of the violence is numbing'," says Diane Wudel, a New Testament scholar at the Wake Forest University Divinity School, Elements of this movie are "quite disturbing," worries Charles Kimball, chairman of Wake Forest's Religion Department.

They were among the scholars that, over a two-and-a-half-hour dinner this week, discussed this cultural and political phenomenon steeped in controversy.

The others are Bill Leonard, the dean of the divinity school, an ordained Baptist minister and Baptist historian; Mary F'oskett, New Testament scholar in the undergraduate religion department; and Fred Horton, an Episcopalian priest and New Testament and archaeology scholar.

This is a relevant setting to discuss a movie made by a conservative Catholic and embraced chiefly by Fundamentalist Protestants. Forty years ago-when I attended Wake Forest-it was a Southern Baptist school and there were no Catholics on the faculty; it broke with the Baptists 18 years ago, and today the student body has more Catholics than Baptists.

The college's department of religion, both pre- and post-Baptist affiliation, has excelled. In only five years. Bill Leonard has built a highly regarded and interestingly diverse divinity school.

Most thought the movie a powerful work. "I was struck with the sophistication of the cinematography," notes Charles Kimball. "It wasn't just Jesus floating two inches above the landscape .

...The production was stirring." Fred Horton, the archaeologist, says he was "very impressed with the attempts to create a Jerusalem that corresponds" to what probably existed then.

Substantively, however, they were troubled by the film. The violence-the pain inflicted upon Christ starts early on and is punishing and cruel throughout- bothered them. This pervasive brutality, like the relentless scourging of Christ, doesn't reflect the gospels, despite Mel Gibson's

insistence he followed scripture. Notes Prof. Wudel: "If you add everything up in the gospels, there'd be three minutes of scourging."

On the historical inaccuracy, the scholars note that the four gospels were written decades after Christ died and "we're only getting highlights," observes Professor Kimball. Then the movie picks and chooses from them, with John the dominant one. "Gibson plays fast and loose with the gospels," says Prof. Foskett. One example: the scene when Jesus is in front of the high priest and his answer is taken from Mark, but the question isn't. Thus, says Diane Wudel, the viewer is presented with "an altered question, an answer from Mark, a trial from Luke and a dialogue from John."

To varying degrees, they all worry about an anti-Semitic message. The movie depicts Roman soldiers treating Jesus sadistically and viciously, but most of the wrath is heaped upon the Jews: it was the Jewish high priests, led by Caiaphas, who were adamant that Christ be crucified and who, when he was on the cross, rode up Calvary on donkeys with a smug- arrogance.

Two particular scenes in this vein caught their eye. In one Judas, after betraying Christ, is jesting with some Jewish children, who then morph into something demonic. And a strange Satan figure, conceived by producer Gibson, is smiling with the Jewish crowds as Jesus is taken to crucifixion. These "were chilling," Bill Leonard laments. Charles Kimball has Jewish relatives and says that he's "never seen anything like the kind of response that people are sending around in Jewish circles. They're terribly distressed." This is aggravated by the sympathetic, almost benign, portrait of the regional Roman ruler Pontius Pilate; he and his wife separately want to save Christ; they give in only for fear of the Jewish rabble. That's not the way it was. "We know Pilate was a brutal thug," says Prof. Kimball. Yet, for all their criticism, the movie has more fans among their students, especially undergraduates. Fred Horton notes that several African-American students particularly have been laudatory; some parallel the brutality inflicted upon Jesus to the violence suffered by blacks in the civil-rights movement. And the religion and divinity teachers say the movie could have some benefits, if it results in more dialogue about religion: "If it produces a new appreciation of Jesus and the fact that Jesus' suffering is relevant to the suffering in the world today, that would be welcome," says Mary Foskett.

Nobody is sure whether this movie will play any role in bridging Catholic-Fundamentalist hostilities- many Fundamentalist Protestants have long viewed Catholicism as a threat, but these are two groups that President Bush in particular hopes to capture in the fall election. Some of the divide is evident in the Gibson film, with the heavy emphasis on the body and the blood of Christ and the central role of Mary; Fundamentalists stress personal experience with Christ rather than sacraments.

Curiously, it's noted that for all the support from Fundamentalists very few mainstream Catholic leaders and almost no liberal Catholics have had anything good to say about "The Passion of the Christ." These Protestant academics suggest that's probably because Catholic leaders understand some of Mr. Gibson's propaganda better than the Fundamentalists do.

Bill Leonard says the most overarching critique is that the story shortchanges God. "When you limit the gospel story only to the crucifixion-when you don't have the story of the prodigal son, the words of the Sermon on the Mount," he says, "It doesn't tell the story that Jesus shows us what God is like. The love of God is not simply revealed in the brutality of the cross."