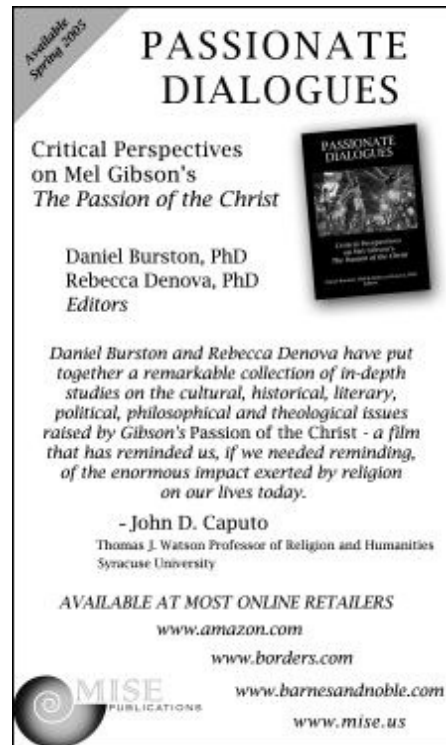

In *Passionate Dialogues: Critical Perspectives on Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ*. D. Burston & R. Denova, Eds. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: MISE Publications, 2005, pp. 171-178.



The Passion of the Christ: Psychoanalytic and Christian Existentialist Perspectives

Donald L. Carveth

Nearly a century ago, in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer (1906) concluded that:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give it its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb (p. 398).

For Schweitzer, “Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery” (p. 399). In this view of Christianity as spirituality rather than history, “... the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it” (p. 401).

Whereas Schweitzer was writing a century ago, a host of contemporary scholars (Harpur, 2004) have come to share his conclusion that “Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but His spirit,

which lies hidden in His words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct. Every saying contains in its own way the whole Jesus” (Schweitzer, 1906, p. 401).

According to Aitken (1991), the distinguished Canadian literary and biblical scholar Northrop Frye is in agreement with Schweitzer, having taught generations of students that “when the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so; reporting was not of the slightest interest to its writers. They had a story to tell which could only be told by myth and metaphor; what they wrote became a source of vision rather than doctrine” (p. xxi). Frye (1991) states his position clearly: “I am saying that the literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts or logical propositions” (p. 17):

The Gospels give us the life of Jesus in the form of myth: what they say is, “This is what happens when the Messiah comes to the world.” One thing that happens when the Messiah comes to the world is that he is despised and rejected, and searching in

the nooks and crannies of the gospel text for a credibly historical Jesus is merely one more excuse for despising and rejecting him” (p. 16).

Whereas some view Rudolph Bultmann’s (1958) “demythologizing” approach to scriptural interpretation as an attempt to strip away from the Gospel narrative all elements that are “merely myth” in order to get at what might be historically accurate, others see it precisely as an attempt to *affirm* the mythical status of the narrative and to retrieve the timeless wisdom inherent in the myth using, for example, Heidegger’s (1927) existentialism as a key to its interpretation. But whether we consider recognition of the mythical status of the Gospel narrative and its truth-content as existential rather than historical to be *demythologizing* or *remythologizing*, the point is that this narrative is not to be taken literally. It is to be understood as “a tissue of metaphors from beginning to end” (Frye in Cayley, 1992, p. 177), conveying, at least to the existential Christian, what he or she believes is timeless existential truth.

For anyone in possession of such an understanding of what the Gospel is about, Mel Gibson's (2004) film "The Passion of the Christ" is, to say the least, problematic on a host of scores. First of all there is its apparent historical literalism. Although some might consider this literalism as rendered ambiguous by the appearance of a satanic figure at several points in the film, this is clearly an indication of Gibson's belief that supernatural forces were at work in and through the historical events that he describes, not to in any way suggest that what is described is myth rather than history.

To play the androgynous Satan in the film, Gibson cast Rosalinda Celentano. In a *Newswire* interview (Baldassarre, 2004) published on a website devoted to her work (Celentano, 2004), the interviewer states: "In order to keep the Devil androgynous, it's my understanding that Gibson dubbed your voice with ... a male's." Celentano replies:

No. The voice was mine. It was deep, I

dubbed it myself in a heavier tone. What they did then, with my voice, is they altered it with a harmonizer to make the voice more metallized. It was a pretty natural process. They did it in a way that the voice could be attributed to anyone, a man, a woman, an old man, a young woman, or no one in particular. That was their intention.

So Gibson seems to have gone to some lengths to associate Satan with gender ambiguity.

While the significance of Gibson's association of gender ambiguity with evil may be open to differing interpretations, the meaning of his depiction of the bloodthirsty, heartless, manipulative and mendacious Jewish mob is not: it is anti-Semitic. To argue that Gibson is merely adhering to history here is ingenuous. There is no history to adhere to. The Gospel story is about timeless human cruelty and the slaughtering of the innocents: the roles of crucifier and crucified are occupied by different groups at different times and in the nightmare of human history are continually being exchanged.

Freud (1920) argued that the core of neurosis is a compulsion to repeat certain complex scenarios originating in childhood that usually involve both unconscious gratification of repressed wishes as well as elements of punishment for such gratification. The result is that the neurotic's life begins to resemble something like a broken record. The same may be said of the collective neurosis of humankind in which the age-old story of killers and victims, sadists and masochists, sacrificers and sacrificed, crucifiers and crucified, is repeated over and over again. So to associate, as Gibson does, the Christ-killers with a particular racial/ethnic group on the basis of no valid historical evidence is both to miss the point of the Christian story and to vilify the Jews.

Today, the inner meaning of the Gospel myth might better be expressed through a narrative in which, for example, a group of neo-Nazis would represent the sadistic mob and an innocent Jew, tortured and killed, would represent the Christ; or one in which Israelis are the crucifiers and an innocent Palestinian

the crucified; or in which a Palestinian mob murders an innocent Israeli. In such ways, the inner meaning of the Gospel account of the sado-masochistic structure of “fallen” or unredeemed human relations—human relations in the state of sin—might be conveyed.

On the other hand, given the literalism to which the human mind seems forever regressively inclined, such accounts would likely end up doing more harm than good: the central point they would be trying to make—that the roles of crucifier and crucified are continually being exchanged in the sado-masochistic repetition that is human history—would be lost and such accounts would be used to demonize and scapegoat the neo-Nazis, the Israelis, the Palestinians, who would thereby come projectively to represent the murderer we refuse recognize in ourselves.

Gibson’s pseudo-historical literalism pillories the Jewish mob as Christ-killers, and does so at time when anti-Semitism is on the rise world-wide. Not only do I find such literalism

misleading and beside the point theologically, it is dangerous and politically irresponsible. Instead of conveying insight into the universality of human viciousness, stupidity and scapegoating—into the sinful nature of human nature after the fall and the path to redemption from sin, which is what the Gospel account is all about—Gibson’s film manages only to scapegoat the Jews. Instead of helping to transcend what psychoanalysis would view as a “compulsion to repeat,” Gibson merely implements another turn of the age-old sado-masochistic cycle.

Needless to say, the film’s failure to understand the inner meaning of Christianity as a therapy *for*, rather than an indulgence *in*, sado-masochism—though historically the Christian tradition has always contained elements of both—is dramatically expressed through its painfully graphic, perverse and pornographically violent depiction of the cruel taunting, humiliation, scourging and killing of Jesus. Naturally, to argue for the therapeutic function of a mature Christianity is in no way to deny the historical prevalence of regressive versions of the faith that are themselves the

disease masquerading as the cure.

Historically, Christianity offers both insight into the psychology of scapegoating (wherein the badness in the self is projected, consciously or unconsciously, into another who is then sacrificed in a magical act of evacuation of the evil within the self) and a theological instance of this very psychology. In orthodox theology Christ is viewed as the sacrificial lamb slaughtered to atone for the sins of humankind and to pay a ransom to a vengeful God who demands his pound of flesh.

Needless to say, a mature Christianity abandons this sado-masochistic notion of the atonement, as well as the image of God as a cosmic sadist who must be placated in this way. Instead, it views the atonement as repair of the relationship between God and humankind broken by our rejection of God and healed through God's gracious gift of Himself in Christ. In this view it is not Christ's suffering on our behalf that slakes God's injured narcissism and sadistic need for revenge, but the God-man's taking upon Himself the human burden of helplessness,

suffering and death that reconciles us to Him and to our human condition. Through acceptance and faith in Christ as the Logos or Word of God our “at-one-ment” with God and God’s design for us may be restored.

This is a film that focuses almost exclusively on the crucifixion: only a few seconds of footage at the end suggest a resurrection. Failure to grasp the wholeness, the integrity, of the Christian message takes the form of privileging either the crucifixion over the resurrection, or vice versa. If “Good Friday” Christians are guilty of the former distortion, “Easter Sunday” Christians are guilty of the latter. Gibson’s variety of what psychoanalysts refer to as splitting or part-object as distinct from whole-object relating (Klein, 1946) is clearly of the former variety.

A healthy Christianity assists us in overcoming such splitting (Forster & Carveth, 1999). It seeks precisely to “resurrect” us from the “death-in-life” characteristic of the most primitive level of human mental functioning in which a concrete, literalistic, polarized, either/or type of thinking prevails, in

which everything is either all-good or all-bad, idealized or devalued (Klein, 1946). It is in this primitive state that the badness is split-off from the self and unconsciously projected into the alien other who is then scapegoated, attacked and destroyed. When the other is idealized rather than demonized, it is viewed as the repository of everything good and, as such, becomes the target of destructive envy.

Like psychoanalysis itself, Christianity, properly functioning, promotes an advance from this primitive mental state to a more evolved mental level or position in which splitting or pre-ambivalence gives way to a capacity to view both self and other in a less polarized, more holistic way and in which ambivalent feelings, both love and hate, can be held toward one and the same object. Because we are now able to see that the object or the self is not all-bad, but contains a mixture of good and bad, we begin to fear that our hate, envy and destructiveness, vented upon the object or the self when we were under the delusion that it was all-bad, may have irretrievably damaged or destroyed all the goodness in the other or in the self.

In this more evolved mental state we become capable of genuine guilt and remorse and we encounter what Winnicott (1963) called “the capacity for concern” for the welfare of both self and other. Out of our anxiety that in our blindness and destructiveness (i.e., sin) we may have irretrievably damaged the good object and the good self comes our desire to make reparation—to repair the damage we have done to ourselves and others. It is precisely this mental and spiritual advance that is expressed and celebrated in the hymn: “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

A healthy Christianity promotes mature concern, justified (non-neurotic) guilt and the drive toward reparation. Here, splitting, projection and scapegoating are overcome and we come to inhabit a world in which darkness is qualified by light (despair countered by faith), and light by darkness (illusions of perfection qualified by the awareness of our perennial proclivity for regression, for falling back into the more

primitive state, and for sin). The “Good News” (Gospel) is that a psychic resurrection is possible--but only through acceptance of the “bad news” of our fallenness and brokenness.

Corresponding to these two mental positions, the primitive and the more evolved, are two fundamentally different types of religion. In contrast to the healthy, mature Christianity that helps us acknowledge our splitting, envy and destructiveness, assisting us to accept and bear our guilt and to make reparation for it, is the infantile and pathological Christianity that splits off and projects our sinfulness onto the scapegoat (Christ) and into the image of a jealous and vengeful, rather than compassionate and forgiving, God. Although primitive types of Christianity have embodied this scapegoating motif, a mature Christianity is an attempt to teach us about how the good object becomes the target of destructive envy and is attacked and destroyed as a scapegoat. As Frye (1991) points out, it is a story about what happens when the Messiah comes. But all too often, instead of understanding the story and in this way being

saved from its deadly repetition, Christians (but not only Christians) act it out.

The virtually unrelieved darkness and brutality of Gibson's account, together with its reckless invitation to scapegoating, embodies not Christian truth, but the very pathology Christianity, at its best, like psychoanalysis, properly seeks to alleviate, even while it recognizes that, on the human plane, no final cure is possible.

If for those who are interested in coming to know Him the quest for the historical Jesus is only fruitless, then Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" is positively misleading. But Schweitzer (1906) pointed the way:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they

shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an infallible mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is (p. 403).

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