

**An Interfaith Reflection for the Holidays:  
Crossroads Ministry Statement on  
Mel Gibson's The Passion**

Dear Anti-Racism Colleagues:

With the holiday season upon us and the close of the year in sight, Crossroads would like to share some reflections on the impact this year of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of The Christ*. At the time of its spring release there was considerable international debate about whether or not and/or in what way its representations were anti-Semitic. While the fanfare over the film's autumn DVD release has died down, we imagine that the disc will appear in Christmas stockings around the country. We thought that bringing our anti-racist analysis to bear on the film was a fitting way to send our holiday greetings as we look to the New Year and ever-growing ways to become more effective anti-racist organizers.

As an anti-racist, interfaith organization devoted to undoing racism, and with a special commitment to undertaking this work in the Church, we think it is crucial to contextualize *The Passion* by drawing on the same historical and institutional principles we use to organize against racism. For example the fact that the film offers yet another depiction of a Caucasian Jesus – albeit it with somewhat ambiguous melanin – indicates that it is continuing the white supremacist tradition of the Church. In particular we would like to use this year of the passion to begin an exploration of the relationship between anti-Semitism and racism, which we believe will enhance both our anti-racist work and callings in our respective religious communities. As we share in our Mission Statement, Crossroads recognizes that resistance to racism is inseparable from resistance to all other forms of social inequality and oppression.

Soon after the release of *The Passion* a reputable poll provided evidence for fears that the film was having a significant impact on public perception about responsibility for the death of Jesus. Despite the 1965 Second Vatican Council edict which declared that “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God,” a growing number of Americans think Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus. As reported in the April 10, 2004 Los Angeles Times the Pew Research Center announced that “roughly a quarter of the population (26%) now express the view that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death. This is a statistically significant increase when compared with a 1997 survey.” The report also notes, “The shift in opinion among young people (under 30) and African Americans has been striking. Currently 34% of those below 30, compared to 10% in 1997, and 42% of African Americans, compared to 21% in 1997 hold this opinion.”

We at Crossroads are concerned that the film is having an alarming influence not merely on American ideology more generally, but on our youth in particular. Additionally, the poll's findings among Blacks suggest that it is likely to increase tensions between Blacks and Jews, which have often acted as a divide-and-conquer tactic to distract from very real issues of racism and power.

**What is Anti-Semitism?**

Anti-Semitism is the oppression of Jews and the demonization (literally) of Judaism, two distinct but mutually reinforcing and inseparable phenomena. Both were linked historically to the colonization of the land of Israel, such as that by the Assyrian Greeks in the eighth century BCE and by Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. These invasions included the explicit repression of religious observance as well as other aspects of sovereignty. The colonial period culminated in 70 CE when the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and initiated the Jewish Diaspora, which eventually produced large migrations to Europe and the advent of a European Jewry.

It was only with the rise of Christianity, however, that an initial ideology of anti-Semitism developed. As part of a theological explanation for why the bulk of the Jewish community did not accept Jesus as the Messiah or repudiate their Judaism, Jews were accused of being demonic – literally the devil's people doing his work. In the absence of a Christian theological pluralism, and in the context of the political power struggles that followed the rise of Christianity, this theological demonization helped to explain the ongoing endurance of Jews and their religion long after Jesus' arrival.

Instances of this demonization abound in Christian history. The myth that Jews have horns, for example, is a persistent remnant of this theological belief later justified in Biblical mistranslations. Depictions of Jews with horns were symbolized in European art, including most famously in Michelangelo's “Moses,” which was intended for the Vatican and is exhibited today in Rome at San Pietro in Vincoli. Another persistent anti-Semitic myth is the notion of the Jews as ruthlessly powerful

– for by definition any group fueled by the devil would have to be. This accusation can be seen throughout the Medieval, modern, and contemporary periods as beliefs that Jews control the government, media, or engage in international conspiracy against Christians.

It was during the rise of the modern period in Europe that we see the linking of the earlier theologically based ideology about Jews to the newly emergent discourse on race. As first European and then American Christian scholars began to articulate a pseudo-science of race they struggled to classify the Jews. Were they or weren't they a distinct race? For example Sir Thomas Browne, a physician from Norwich, devoted an entire chapter of his 1646 work *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or, Enquiries into Very Many Received Tenents [sic], and Commonly Presumed Truths* to examining the idea that “Jews stink naturally, that is, that in their race and nation there is an evil savor [which] is a received opinion” (Gould 1996:394). (Browne actually concluded that it defied the laws of reason to argue that Jews stink, or that they were a discernable race. We can recognize in his investigation, however, the common themes of the racial discourse of the time.) Ultimately debates over the racial classification of Jews culminated in the Holocaust when Hitler used expressly racial language and images to rationalize genocide.

It was in a post-Holocaust America that European Jews were, for the most part, granted white status. This occurred primarily through economic means such as the GI Bill and new anti-discrimination legislation that banned explicit, restrictive university quotas and housing covenants. Consequently most European American Jews in the last two generations have endured less anti-Semitism than in the previous two millennia. Nevertheless, given the shape-shifting, agenda-driven boundaries of race in the United States, and also because many Jews of European descent (Ashkenazim) are still recognizably distinct from Anglo, Northern Europeans, some still experience anti-Semitism in racial terms. Furthermore many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, who have come more recently from the Middle East and Africa, are not Caucasian by any measure. Judaism, as a tribal, ethnic, and religious identity is not neatly reducible to racial categories.

The term “anti-Semitism” is relatively new in the history of oppression against Jews. It was first coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Wilhelm Marr, “a German Jew-hater” (Plitnick, 2004). Some have alleged that Marr was the son of a Jewish convert to Christianity, suggesting an example of internalized oppression common to Jewish and other marginalized communities (Rosenwasser 2004:72). While the term “Judenhass” (hatred of Jews) had been used previously, Marr wanted to scientize and systematize it by planting it firmly in the terrain of race. He chose the linguistic term “Semitic” for this purpose, which referred to Middle Eastern languages such as Hebrew and Arabic. Despite the linguistic association, Arabs “were beyond the racist consciousness of Marr, who never encountered them”; the new terminology of “anti-Semitism” as advocated by Marr was specifically intended for Jews (Plitnick 2004:2).

This historical discussion of anti-Semitism should not be used to deny that Arab Americans have and continue to experience racism. As the boundaries of racial classification change to benefit those who would be counted as white, Arab Americans have been placed in shifting racial gray zones. Unfortunately, divide and conquer tactics which manipulate tensions between American Arabs and Jews and between Blacks and Jews sometimes misrepresent both Arab American and Jewish experience. For example Richard Goldstein, recent executive editor of *The Village Voice*, writes that “In Crown Heights, there’s a black Episcopalian priest named Rev. Heron A. Sam who preaches that Jews have appropriated the term Semite, which rightfully belongs to Africans and Arabs as well as [to] ‘the Hebrew race’... [S]uch a race of people...become manipulators and anarchists” (Goldstein 1994:208).

The fact that historically the term “anti-Semitism” refers to the oppression of Jews should not detract from the proper study of Arab experience and racism against Arabs. Similarly, to misrepresent the historical emergence of the term in order to further demonize Jews perpetuates racism. While there are very real issues involving white racism and Christian anti-Semitism that underlie “Black-Jewish relations,” we believe that perpetuating distortions of history only distract from the important task of understanding these real issues. To the extent that Jews are white, there is racism to reckon with. To the extent that most elite power-holders in the United States are Christian whites, there is Christianity to reckon with. To the extent that Black-Jewish relations do not focus on the real sources of tension and misunderstanding, the distortions act as a smokescreen.

### **The Passion in the Context of *The Passion***

As Editor of Tikkun Magazine Rabbi Michael Lerner noted at the release of *The Passion*, along with many other Jewish and Christian commentators, “Few Christians today know the history of anti-

Semitism and the way that the Passion stories were central to rekindling hatred of Jews from generation to generation" (Carroll 2004). Explains *The Jerusalem Report*, (3.3.04.):

Watching the renewed passion plays at the Bavarian town of Oberammergau in 1934, Adolph Hitler was impressed with their potential, calling them 'precious tools' in the effort to eradicate the Jews. Several years later in 1942, Hitler, attending the cycle of plays once again, addressed the adoring masses and stressed a direct link between his vision and the tradition of the plays. Quoting Matthew 27:25, 'His blood be on us and our children,' Hitler said, 'Maybe I'm the one who must execute this curse...I do no more than join what has been done for more than 1,500 years already. Maybe I render Christianity the best service ever!' (P. 35).

The passion plays at Oberammergau, performed every ten years since the late Middle Ages, are part of a tradition of incendiary anti-Semitic interpretations of the crucifixion that often prompted violent attacks on Jewish communities. However Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, Director of Interfaith Affairs for the Anti-Defamation League, notes that the producers of Oberammergau have now approached this history in an accountable way: "...relying on the same four Gospels, [they] are able to present the Passion without it appearing that the entire Jewish community was arrayed against Jesus, thus downplaying one of the classic sources of anti-Semitism" (Bretton-Granatoor, 2004).

There are myriad other links between Gibson's interpretation of the Passion and classic anti-Semitism, many of which critics brought to light after the film's spring 2004 release. Gibson's own father's rejection of the Second Vatican Council's acknowledgement that the Jews are not to be held responsible for killing Jesus and his denial of the Holocaust help to contextualize Gibson's vantage point. Despite the extreme nature of these personal ties, however, it is important to place the significance of the film in much broader historical and institutional context.

For it is not simply personal viewpoints (though Gibson's mega million dollar film being viewed by millions can hardly be called personal) that are of concern here, but rather how they perpetuate historical patterns and institutional power. For example one theological source for the film comes from a 19th century self-named "prophet," Sister Anne Emmerich, whose visions included images that do not appear in the Gospels but do make their way to Gibson's movie, such as a sympathetic Pontius Pilate conferring with his even more sympathetic wife, or as in Emmerich's own writing, "numerous devils among the crowd, exciting and encouraging the Jews, whispering in their ears, entering their mouths, inciting them still more against Jesus" (Sheahen, 2004). Even today, some within the Church are pressing for Emmerich's beatification, the step prior to canonization. Analyzing the links between "artistic" or "religious" interpretations and historical arrangements of power and violence are crucial to understanding their significance and implications.

### **Anti-Semitism and Racism: An Anti-racist Perspective**

As with other kinds of oppression, anti-Semitism has historically taken institutional, cultural, and individual forms. In the United States today the institutional, economic, and racial oppression of Jews is significantly less than it has been in most times and places in Western history, and clearly less than that of people of color. When anti-Semitism does manifest it is more often individual and cultural. However because Jewish history has seen such dramatic cycles of violence and (apparent) inclusion, even Jews who do not face systemic anti-Semitism often believe – *both* correctly and incorrectly – that it always lies dormant.

Anti-Semitism furthers a key dynamic of racist ideology – *obscuring the real source of institutional power* – to spark, justify, and reinforce violence and oppression. As Paul Kivel notes,

Whenever the stereotypes of Jewish money or power go unchallenged, the injustice of our economic system is strengthened and racism is continued. Blaming Jewish bankers or African-American women on welfare are parallel strategies to divert our attention from the corporate elite that makes the economic decisions that affect our lives. These strategies give the majority of white people the mistaken impression that they are controlled by Jews and in competition with people of color – squeezed on both sides (Kivel, forthcoming, cited in Rosenwasser 2004:64-5).

This distract-and-displace tactic has a long history. Since the Middle Ages, Jews have repeatedly been made the middle men in the local power construct (e.g., tax collectors or slumlords), appearing as the face of power to the disenfranchised, but rarely sharing in power's privileges. Often, Jews had little choice. Denied land ownership, national education, professional occupations, or other governmental positions by European leaders, they were funneled into gate-keeping positions that were easily targets of resentment and scapegoating while the real sources of power remained invisible and aloof.

Interpretations of the Passion that place the responsibility for Jesus' death on the Jews who had recently been colonized by the Roman military empire repeat this pattern. Even today when many Jews have "made it," having been allowed to assimilate to whiteness and live free of racial and economic oppression, they are much more likely to be found in medicine and education than in the seats of corporate or governmental power. Regardless of pervasive stereotypes, every demographic study of the United States shows that the greatest concentration of power in America continues to be held by Christian whites.

We believe that understanding this history is crucial to understanding the processes through which twentieth century American Jews moved from being racially marginal outsiders to being granted and choosing whiteness. It is by virtue of their race and class, not by virtue of their Judaism, that American Jews gain relative social power. The dynamics involved in the institutional pathways, cultural costs, economic benefits, and coalitional setbacks of this move from marginality require careful analysis.

The study of how American Jews were turned into a gate-keeping class is also applicable to the experience of other marginalized groups. As Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz points out, "Japanese, Koreans, Arabs, Indians and Pakistanis are also branded as 'money-grubbing' – while young disenfranchised men of color are blamed for [other] societal problems. 'One group is blamed for capitalism's crimes, the other for capitalism's fallout,' she observes. 'Do I need to point out who escapes all blame?'" (Rosenwasser 2004:68).

The discussion of anti-Semitism is not intended, as some may fear, to distance Jews who are white from the responsibilities of whiteness. On the contrary, its purpose is to precisely and accurately uncover the real history and relationships between racism and anti-Semitism. To collapse Jews into a generic white category is to deny history, which has rarely allowed such absorption. At the same time, to exceptionalize Jews from the benefits of whiteness is to deny the present. Unfortunately, some Jews have so internalized a history of oppression that they fail to recognize the benefits of privilege the bestowal of whiteness gives them.

### **Actions To Take**

We encourage Crossroads teams to see these "Actions To Take" as an opportunity to deepen their understanding of both anti-Semitism and racism. Understanding the relationship between racism and other forms of oppression strengthens our analysis of racism, develops organizing strategies for working with different groups, and helps to undo all forms of oppression. We especially hope that those teams that are affiliated with the Church will take a leadership role in turning the release of *The Passion of The Christ* DVD into teaching and organizing opportunities.

➤ Teams educate themselves. One useful resource is a publication by the American Jewish Committee (AJC), New Jersey chapter titled: "Passion Plays: A Resource Manual". It includes talking points about the film that are very useful. The Manual can be ordered by calling 973-379-7844, cost is \$3.00. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also has useful information on its website. "The Jerusalem Report" article (March 22, 2004 entitled "Putting 'The Passion' in Perspective" provides analysis and examples of how the Jewish people have been depicted in books, stage and screen).

➤ Teams organize damage control around *The Passion* by educating their communities about the dynamics of anti-Semitism and how these dynamics manifest themselves in the film. Teams use this discussion to generate commitment to eliminating anti-Semitism, which begins with being able to recognize it in its various forms. Teams can discuss/role-play ways to interrupt anti-Semitism they encounter. (Many faith communities have resources available, i.e.: *The Bible, the Jews, and the Death of Jesus: A Collection of Catholic Documents* from the UC Conference of Catholic Bishops, and *Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations* from the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.)

➤ Teams apply their anti-racist analysis to anti-Semitism in order to strengthen anti-racist organizing, and develop institutional tools for fighting anti-Semitism when it manifests. Applying an anti-racist analysis to anti-Semitism includes:

- Deepening an understanding of the history of anti-Semitism, and in particular its Christian theological and European racial elements;
- Learning about the process by which American Jews became white;
- Developing organizing tools that are both anti-racist and not anti-Semitic for doing anti-racist organizing with Jews and others;

- Including non-white Jews in team thinking and examples;
  - Deepening an anti-racist analysis of the American Arab experience in the racial construct.
- Teams set up discussions with a Jewish congregation in their community to talk about the Mel Gibson film and to explore ways to further learn about each other. This can be undertaken in the spirit of anti-racist organizing, and building bridges for future coalition.
- Teams encourage other religious leaders in their communities to also open up discussions about “*The Passion*” film and anti-Semitism. The Anti-Defamation League issued a “Call to Understanding,” which was signed by representatives of several denominations. It outlines the history of inter-faith relationships between Christians and Jews, highlighting Passion Plays and efforts to bring about respect of Judaism among Christians. (Teams can find out if their faith community has signed this statement.) The statement also asks Christians to appreciate the “Jewishness” of Jesus and his followers, the oppressive circumstances of Jews living under Roman imperial domination, and the rich diversity of Jewish life during Jesus’ time as essential to understanding the historical circumstances of Jesus’ execution.

We hope that the analysis presented in this statement will open up productive discussion and activities among our team members and the people with whom we work. We also look forward to hearing from you about your thoughts and experiences.

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