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Philip Cunningham, ed. *Pondering the Passion: What's at Stake for Christians and Jews*. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004. Pp. xvi + 214.

J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum, eds. *After The Passion is Gone: American Religious Consequences*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira, 2005. Pp. xiii + 348.

[1] Amid the astonishing abundance of public commentary on Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, these two collections of essays are noteworthy for presenting a rich and varied selection of religious, historical, cultural, and artistic perspectives, thus expanding the possibilities for fruitful reflection and dialogue.

[2] Of the fifteen essays in *Pondering the Passion*, seven focus explicitly on the film itself. The remaining eight explore related issues from diverse vantage points. In Philip Cunningham's fine introduction, the editor provides the scope and context of the essays that follow, reminding the reader that public discussion of the Passion of Jesus, especially when provoked by a controversial and highly charged media event, necessarily elicits important "explorations of questions at the heart of Christian self-understanding, not to mention the conflicted history of relations between the Christian and Jewish communities" (ix). For Cunningham, these questions reveal profound disagreements not only between Christians and Jews, but also among Christians themselves, about certain fundamental issues. In addition to illuminating the deep divide that separates Christians and Jews in construing their own faith histories, Cunningham contends that the film and its attendant controversies also exposed a significant "lack of appreciation for the richness and diversity of Christian thinking about the Passion" (xi), as well as an impoverished understanding of the complexities of contemporary biblical interpretation. Clearly, a great deal is "at stake" when questions such as these come to occupy the public square, and the essays in this collection strive to provide some of the clarity needed to preclude further misunderstanding and mistrust among people of good will.

[3] Part One is concerned with historical and biblical considerations of the trial and execution of Jesus. Claudia Seltzer presents a sketch of Israel's situation under Roman

occupation, including a fascinating account of the various groups comprising Judaism at the time of Jesus. Her description of the Roman practice of crucifixion ends poignantly with the forceful reminder that “Jesus was crucified *as* a Jew (not *by* the Jews), along with thousands of fellow Jews under Roman occupation . . . He shared the fate of his oppressed and subjugated people” (12). Michael Cook examines Jewish jurisprudence and the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial, focusing on what can and cannot be known with certainty about the Sanhedrin and its judicial procedures. Cook presents a persuasive argument that there was, perhaps, no Sanhedrin trial of Jesus at all, basing this on a careful analysis of some key Gospel passages. John Clabeaux, in his concise exploration of the interplay of history and faith as a primary context for understanding the reasons for the execution of Jesus, challenges the reader to distinguish between simply reading the Bible and reading the Bible *well*. He supports his viewpoint with the classical Catholic teaching that both faith and reason are needed to apprehend truth. Likening historical investigation of the Bible to a process of careful “sifting,” Clabeaux reminds the reader that “a Christianity that is contemptuous of history is a Christianity turned in on itself . . . Such a Christianity will never fulfill its mission to the world. As Christ lived in the real world, so must the Church” (37).

[4] Part Two opens with Walter Harrelson’s analysis of various Protestant perspectives on interpreting the Passion story. After examining the ways in which hymnody best expresses these diverse viewpoints, Harrelson concludes that the Gibson film might provide the impetus for some Protestants to examine conventional Passion language and imagery more carefully, even as it causes others to guard these more jealously. Catholic scripture scholar George Smiga seeks a way to mediate between biblical truth and historicity, suggesting that the questions of whether given narrative is *historical* is different from the question of whether that same narrative is *true*. Faithfulness to Catholic teaching on biblical interpretation and respect for the Bible itself demand that we recognize this distinction so that, “Even as we defuse the negative historical claims which seemed to flow from the passion narratives, we can unearth the graced truths which lie within them” (64).

[5] Part Three provides several essays about the Passion story as it has been expressed in the visual, musical, and cinematic arts. Pamela Berger offers a brief and engaging history of the ways Jews were depicted in the Passion iconography of the early Christian centuries, while Raymond Helmick explores what he considers to be the unique way in which Bach, in his *Passion* settings, softened the conventional anti-Semitism endemic to his time and to most works of Passion-themed music. In his history and analysis of the Oberammergau Passion Play, A. James Rudin concludes that the increasingly vocal and effective post-Shoah critique of the play by both Jewish and Christian scholars “illustrates what can be achieved when both sides work together . . . [and is] a significant achievement in the vitally needed area of positive Christian-Jewish relations” (108). John Michalczk examines the Gibson film in the context of other movies about Jesus, noting its marked departure from “the care shown by many of its predecessors in how Jews are portrayed” (114).

[6] Theology or, more specifically, soteriology, is the focus of Part Four. Clark Williamson explores various approaches to the question of what it means to be saved, examining concepts such as “redemption,” “everlasting life,” and “sanctification” as facets of “the many-splendored meanings of the apparently simple term ‘salvation’” (120). Louis Roy presents an eloquent exposition of the classical Catholic view of salvation, seeking to purify

it of “certain unfortunate interpretations acquired in recent centuries” (121), interpretations which are, unfortunately, revived in the Gibson film.

[7] The essays in Part Five deal in a direct and sustained way with the film itself. Noteworthy here is Philip Cunningham’s forthright exposure of the various ways in which the film represents, often egregiously, a direct challenge to official Catholic teaching on presentations of the Passion story. Cunningham is careful to distinguish between the question of anti-Semitic interpretations of the Passion and of the alleged anti-Semitism of the Gospels themselves, and his point is worthy of an essay in itself. John Pawlikowski offers an intricate look at the profound ethical issues brought to the fore by Gibson’s distorted vision of the Passion, stating that “institutional Christianity generally failed its membership in perceiving and making clear the return to classical anti-Semitic themes in the film” (159). In one of the more unusual essays on the film, Maddy Cunningham suggests that there might be serious psychological danger in exposing oneself to the film’s unrelenting brutality, especially as it becomes more widely available for private, isolated viewing. Finally, Mary Boys writes of what she sees as a “crisis in the education of Christians” precipitated by the film (181). She suggests that the controversies unleashed by the film are an invitation to “religious and theological educators to reflect critically on our own practice” (190). Noting that the film succeeded largely because of its emotional power, Boys makes the case that, “our task as educators is to join thinking with feeling” (190) in order to provide the tools for a more discerning and mature response to popular presentations of the Christian story.

[8] *After The Passion is Gone: American Religious Consequences* presents a diversity of perspectives similar to that in *Pondering*, though all of its essays deal explicitly with the film in some way. Calling the film “a disquieting phenomenon that appeared during unsettling times” (13), J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum provide an excellent introduction that expresses their hope that the essays collected here might do “what too many of *The Passion’s* defenders, as well as some of its critics, refused to do: to engage in reasoned scholarly discussion” (10).

[9] Part One is concerned with various aspects of the cultural atmosphere into which Gibson’s film emerged. In the opening essay, Mark Silk examines the genesis of the controversy surrounding the film, and the aborted “culture war” that threatened to erupt because of it. Silk provides important details that help explain what lay behind the confusing and acrimonious public wrangling over the film, and his account is a sobering antidote to the media-driven hype elicited by the film even before its release. William Cork examines the intense nature of Internet blogging on the Gibson film through the lens of his own personal blog and others he investigated. Notwithstanding its limitations, Cork takes a positive view of blogging as a way of building community by “bringing together people of different backgrounds or beliefs who might never meet in the brick-and-mortar world” (42) and thus serves as a forum of mediating conflict. Leslie Smith offers a careful analysis of why a film so steeped in traditional Catholic devotionism would have such a wide appeal for evangelical Protestants. Concluding that this phenomenon can only be understood by acknowledging the dynamics “rooted in the way conservative Christians create and maintain their social groups” (56), Smith notes that “emotionalism, consumerism, and tension with the larger culture were the common elements that linked evangelicals to *The Passion*” (56). The unusual and informative essay by Eric Samuelson places the Mormon response to the Gibson film

within the wider context of the complexities underlying contemporary Mormonism and its ambiguous relationship to the world of mainstream Protestantism. In her perceptive piece, Julie Ingersoll illumines the way the film cast into harsh relief the deep “fault lines” within American Protestant and Catholic Christianity and created a paradoxical alliance between mainstream evangelicals and conservative Catholics.

[10] Part Two focuses on what might be termed the “culture” within the film itself. Karen Jo Torjesen traces the ethos of the Gibson film to medieval Passion devotion, noting that there are “interesting resonances between the context of contemporary spirituality and medieval penitential spirituality” (100), including “a fascination and obsession with violence in its most immediate forms” (102). In a challenging essay that decries the isolation of Gibson’s *Passion* from the concrete biblical, historical, and ecclesial context of the Passion story, Lorenzo Albacete warns against “the current love affair with Gnosticism evident in the popularity of the novel *The DaVinci Code*” (112), suggesting that the film could become “a cinematic *Gibson Code*” (112). While not denying the intimate connection between religion and politics, Robert Faggen believes that political questions have overshadowed questions about the film’s artistic merit, asserting that “where the logic of history, philosophy and theology cannot go, the complex symbolism of art can go” (119). Gary Gilbert argues persuasively that, “However inspiring *The Passion* may be to millions of people, its anti-Semitic elements must be named” (133), directly challenging those who claim that Christian teaching about universal responsibility for Jesus’ death can “erase” the flagrantly anti-Semitic images in the film. Jeffrey Siker characterizes the Gibson film as “a reactionary counterpunch to current developments in historical research and in constructive Christian theology” (146). In his exploration of the importance of gender roles in shaping American religious expression, David Morgan focuses on the relationship between Gibson’s Jesus and his Mary. Lloyd Baugh places the film in a comparative framework with other Jesus movies, limiting his observations to some of the more controversial of these. Among his other criticisms of the film, Baugh makes an important point that deserves careful attention: that Gibson’s Jesus is essentially *docetic* in his superhuman ability to endure physical torment (166).

[11] Part Three focuses on Christian-Jewish relations in light of the film. Susannah Heschel offers a sharp, unequivocal critique of the film and makes the striking assertion that Gibson’s Jesus “reiterates the fascist myth of ‘the Aryan Jesus,’ which emerged in Germany, long before Hitler came to power” (178). Stephen Haynes eloquently expresses his personal ambivalence toward the film, finding himself in the uncomfortable middle between those who wholeheartedly embrace the film by effectively denying its anti-Semitic elements, and those who categorically reject it and appreciate nothing of the power its story can hold for believers. While not underestimating the relatively recent progress made in establishing more just relations Christians and Jews, Richard Rubenstein simultaneously affirms that the film has revealed real limits to dialogue both between Christian scholars and the faith communities they serve, as well as between Christians and their Jewish neighbors. Stephen Davis gives the most positive evaluation of the film, condemning anti-Semitism in general, but not seeing any overt evidence of it in the film. While found the violence “numbing” (226), he believes that most of “[Gibson’s] choices can be defended” (227). David Elcott’s powerfully eloquent “introspective challenges” to his fellow Jews is an outstanding model of self-reflection and honest searching that would serve useful to Christians as well. John Roth

presents an articulate and convincing Christian perspective on the undeniably true equation: “No Crucifixion of Jesus = No Holocaust” (244). Like Elcott, Elliott Dorff lays solid groundwork for careful self-questioning in the Jewish community and again, his recommendations are equally applicable to Christians. Kathryn Smith examines the different strains of evangelical Christianity and their respective views of Jews and Judaism. She acknowledges the need for raising the awareness of evangelicals about “the church’s treatment of the Jews over the centuries” (277); however, Smith finds hope in the fact that there are “many evangelicals who are committed to that task and who are working tirelessly to that end” (277). Finally, in his “Afterword,” Mark Jurgensmeyer discusses the film in the present context of the “war on terror” (279), showing in a cogent way that it is a cinematic “reflection of modern ethnic and religious tensions” (279).

[12] The similarities between these two volumes should not be allowed to obscure the unique contribution each makes to thoughtful, careful, and informed conversation about Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and the important questions it raises. For example, while most of the authors in both collections take up the theme of anti-Semitism in some way, each lends a distinctive perspective that can lead to new thinking and further questions on the part of the discerning reader. In addition, these two collections might provide the impetus for further reflection on other themes (e.g., Gibson’s distorted Christology) that have not yet been fully explored. Indeed, much more work needs to be done to address the specific challenges the film presents to *Christian* theology and intra-Christian dialogue. The authors and editors should be commended for producing work that truly reflects their stated purpose of providing civil, respectful analysis. Their personal opinions of the film notwithstanding, they have done an important service by providing a way of renewed engagement and mutual trust for those who seek to find a better way to live and cooperate with each other and who refuse to succumb, in David Elcott’s poignant words, “to religious assaults that divide us into the forces of absolute good and absolute evil [and that are] a sure recipe for increased hatred” (240).

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