

After *The Passion* Is Gone
American Religious
Consequences

Edited by J. Shawn Landres and
Michael Berenbaum



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CHAPTER TWO

PASSIONATE BLOGGING: INTERFAITH CONTROVERSY AND THE INTERNET

William J. Cork



Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* became the subject of intense discussion more than a year before its release. News coverage of the controversy focused on speculation and criticism by scholars and religious organizations as well as statements by celebrities and public relations professionals. But discussions also were taking place around workplace water coolers, in church and synagogue parking lots, and in our contemporary *Stoa*, the Internet.

The creation of the World Wide Web and hypertext by Tim Berners-Lee in the early 1990s had transformed the Internet from a network of university computers roamed by programmers and technicians into a new public forum. By the mid-1990s, anyone with a PC could surf for information as well as interact with others through e-mail, subscription-based e-mail discussion lists, and Web-based discussion "bulletin boards" and "chat rooms." The latest in this series of labor-saving devices for the Internet is the weblog, or simply blog, an electronic diary-cum-soapbox from which an individual can stand before the world and speak his or her mind on the issues of the day, from the Iraq War to *The Passion*.

The simplest definition of a weblog is that it is a Web page of "links with commentary, with the new stuff on top."¹ Today there are upwards of 4.12 million hosted weblogs, of which more than one hundred thousand are updated weekly.² Blogs have caught on for various reasons.³ From a reader's perspective, they serve as guides to the Web, providing links to information that surfers might never happen to find. Blogs provide context for the sources they link to, both through commentary (especially useful if

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the blogger has expertise in the area) and by bringing together multiple links on a subject. Blogs are information filters with a personal touch, with readers drawn to particular blogs because of the uniqueness of the blogger.⁴ When a blog has comment boxes, it facilitates community formation.

This chapter examines how bloggers wrote about *The Passion* even before its release.⁵ How did bloggers approach the controversy? What is the potential of blogging for interfaith dialogue? Using my own experience of blogging about *The Passion* as a starting point, this chapter explores themes that arose in evangelical Protestant and Jewish conversations, particularly those illustrating how approaches differed across confessional lines.

Blogging *The Passion*

In December 2002, Amy Welborn became the first Catholic blogger to take note of Gibson's then-forthcoming film.⁶ I mentioned it for the first time in January 2003 and referred to a *Time* magazine report from Gibson's set.⁷ I made no mention of anything controversial about the film until 9 March, when I linked to Christopher Noxon's *New York Times Magazine* piece. I called Noxon's story "bizarre" and a "hatchet job" because it seemed to be a scattered attack on everything from the movie to Gibson's traditionalist Catholic beliefs, hints of which Noxon discerned in earlier Gibson films such as *Signs* and *We Were Soldiers*.

A key element of blogging is "linking," or creating a hypertext Internet link to another website, especially that of a media outlet. The appearance of news articles, opinion pieces, and other Web material often drives blogging debates. Thus, both the controversy and my blogging about it intensified in June 2003, when Gibson threatened a lawsuit against the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for their role in facilitating a "Scholars' Report" based on a copy of the shooting script.⁸ On 22 June, I linked to my brother's report about having seen an early preview of *The Passion* at the Atlanta Eucharistic Congress the previous day.⁹

More information about the script review became available on 25 June, and the blogging community took note. I criticized the media for not representing the nature of the criticisms accurately. Links abounded: I linked to an "ADL Statement on Mel Gibson's 'The Passion'" (24 June;

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their first on the subject), which itself was responding to a press release from the USCCB distancing the Bishops' Conference, as well as the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious and Affairs (BCEIA), from the "Scholars' Report."¹⁰ The ADL press release, though careful not to criticize the USCCB, nonetheless linked to a 17 June statement in which the four Catholic members of the "Scholars Group" (the panel that had authored the report) defended their findings.¹¹

The point and counterpoint of the press releases launched a series of blogs debating the issue: was the ADL overreacting, or "hyperventilating," as Mark Shea put it?¹² Were Catholics being censored, as Phil Lawler suggested?¹³ I posted a summary of the facts known to date and concluded that I did not believe it was the ADL that was "hyperventilating." I linked to a press release from William Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights¹⁴ that in my view set the tone for future defense of Gibson by conservative Catholics. It focused not on the substance of the criticisms but on the "stolen" script and sought to drive a wedge between the Scholars Group and the BCEIA and between Christians and Jews. The themes introduced by Shea and Lawler, that the criticism was motivated by "fund-raising" and perhaps anti-Catholicism, also would recur, there and elsewhere.

On 26 June, I received an e-mail copy of the "Scholars' Report." The same day, blogger and screenwriting consultant Barbara Nicolosi announced, "I saw *The Passion*." The screening Nicolosi attended was the first in a series of private screenings to which Gibson invited those he thought would respond positively. Confidentiality agreements ensured that only positive reviews would get out. Nicolosi called *The Passion* "a stunning work of art," "devout," an "act of worship." It was, she said, "no more anti-Semitic than is the Gospel. . . . Having seen the film now, I can only marvel that the attacks are pretty much demonic." She concluded with an invitation, "I'll take questions." When I sent questions based on the Report, she replied,

Would it help if I said that some of the Romans in the movie are shown as being cruel, twisted and blood-thirsty? Does that make you feel better? I'm not going to answer these specific questions because they come from an unpublished version of a script that was then unfairly trashed and copied. I can't comment on anything that came out of that vile and disgusting process.

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I noted the exchange on my blog and commented, “This is unfortunate. She could clear up a lot of rumor and misunderstanding, but is apparently choosing not to do so.” My posts from that date began to reflect my growing concern that emotional defense of the film was preventing objective discussion of the questions that it raised.

“I was still pretty neutral before I saw the reactions to the trailers and to this screening,” I wrote; “now I’m worried. This film is showing the capability of stirring up raw emotion, emotion which is convinced that it is right and that those who question are ‘demonic.’”¹⁵

As I continued to follow the controversy, I began to get accusatory e-mails from a few readers of my blog, repeating arguments made by Nicolosi, Donohue, Shea, and Lawler. Some denied that antisemitism was a concern today; to show that it is, I began linking to websites showing that antisemitism remains alive on the traditionalist fringe of Catholicism.¹⁶ I also linked¹⁷ to a *USA Today* article that detailed how several recent movies (*The Incredible Hulk*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and the *Star Wars* series) had been the subject of Internet rumor and debate long before they were released, yet, unlike Icon, the producers and directors of those films reacted positively to the fan involvement.¹⁸

Gibson next began to show the movie to prominent Jews with conservative political leanings, partly in order to delegitimize the ADL’s criticism. The tactic did not calm the debate in the blogosphere.¹⁹ My blogging on the movie increased following a Houston screening on 8 August attended by a number of my friends. As more of my readers attended *Passion* screenings in subsequent months, I increasingly could comment on specific issues in the film itself (rather than in one version of the shooting script) as well as on how Jews and Catholics were experiencing the film differently.

On 16 January, I attended a screening in Denver and thereafter began commenting on the film as I had seen it. At first, I did so indirectly, but in February, as more reviews began to appear in other sources, I posted an in-depth analysis.²⁰ The discussions in which I participated on the blogs and in person, after August, however, followed the pattern already established. I wanted to discuss the positives and negatives of the film, but the film’s most vigorous defenders seemed interested only in polarization. Though some bloggers have provided balanced coverage (notably Amy

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Welborn), the attitude of Barbara Nicolosi was more typical (27 February, “Why do the heathen rage?”):

I was marveling this morning at the horrific vitriol that some secularists are spewing towards Mel and his film—which is now really “our film” in the way that the Sistine Chapel and the Pieta are ours. I really have to take the Maureen Dowds and the Dominic Crossans, and the Christopher Kellys at their word that this bloodied, tortured Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* is no one that they know. . . .

Sorry, I just don’t believe the protesters. I don’t believe the journalistic outrage, the cultural pundits spewing warnings, and liberal scholars tearing their theological garments. I don’t buy any of it. They are missing the one thing that would validate their claims to authority: quiet tears.

The most ardent defenders of the film chose to use it as a wedge to divide the true believers from the infidels, seemingly angry that some people refused to acknowledge “The Truth.”

Conservative Protestant Reactions

Gibson’s decision to target the marketing of the movie to evangelical Protestant organizations such as James Dobson’s Focus on the Family proved to be a tremendous success. A number of publishers dedicated websites to *Passion*-related resources such as sermon helps, bulletin inserts, tracts, and discussion guides. The Web page of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention exemplifies the conservative Protestant approach. Refusing to be drawn into a debate about details of the movie, these organizations chose to concentrate instead on the opportunity before them:

How do you use a motion picture event such as “The Passion of the Christ” to introduce people to Christ, while at the same time taking care not to endorse elements of an R-rated movie?

This website is a resource for you and your church to use in order to use the impact of this movie to relate the rest of the story about the saving and redemptive power of the gospel.²¹

An indicator of the attention they paid, however, to marketing the film is that prominent evangelical clergy and educators took time to blog

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about *The Passion*. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, defended the film from the charge of antisemitism:

The mainstream interfaith movement has decided that the gospels are inherently anti-Semitic and thus must be “corrected” by modern scholarship. Of course, what this means is that liberal scholars will cut and paste the New Testament to meet their modern standards of political correctness. . . .

The issue of anti-Semitism is not even really relevant to the discussion. It tells us far more about the despisers of Christianity than about Christianity itself.²²

Some conservative Protestant discussions of the film revealed a not-so-latent anti-Catholicism. Apologist James White blogged his concern about the presence of “unbiblical and extraneous Marian elements.” He asked, “Could an Evangelical successfully ‘filter out’ the extraneous stuff? I suppose so, but it would take a conscious effort.” His conclusion: “It is not nearly as accurate as we were told; it is truly a prize for Rome.”²³

Themes on Jewish Blogs

Jewish bloggers noticed the film before Catholics did; at least one, Naomichana, knew controversy would follow: “Where can I get into the betting pool on whether the absurdly-left-wing Jewish groups or the absurdly-right-wing Christian groups will condemn this project first?”²⁴ When controversy did erupt, many Jewish bloggers blamed the ADL for “harping on the issue.”²⁵ They expressed concern that “restrictions on speech will always rear back and bite you on the ass. And make you look small and desperate too.”²⁶

There were, however, certain concerns that Jewish bloggers viewed as legitimate. One was the potential for violence.²⁷ Another was Gibson’s stance on the Holocaust, which most likely caused the greatest concern among Jewish bloggers despite the delicacy and hesitancy with which they raised the issue.²⁸ Some hoped controversy would encourage honest dialogue.²⁹ While many were skeptical of critics of the film who had not seen it, some Jewish bloggers were even more critical of those who supported the film sight unseen.³⁰ Jewish bloggers paid more attention to *The Passion*’s evangelical Protestant defenders than to Catholics, perhaps because

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of the comments by one evangelical leader suggesting that Jewish criticism of “Passion” might weaken evangelical support of Israel.³¹

The controversy prompted many Jewish bloggers to learn about the Gospels, Passion plays, Christianity, and a German nun named Anne Catherine Emmerich.³² Judith Weiss distinguished between Gibson’s use of the gospel accounts and his use of the writings of Anne Catherine Emmerich; she linked to my blog and review and emphasized that Gibson was “adding scenes *not* in the Gospels.”³³

Reflections

Over the past year, I have often wondered whether we were in danger of losing forty years of progress in Jewish–Christian dialogue and to what degree that dialogue has influenced the grassroots. The release of *The Passion*, however, has brought about a revival of dialogue not only among academics and professionals but also in parishes and synagogues. These conversations, both online and in the “real world,” are a sign of life and hope to me. They show that people are interested, even if they are at times ill informed or if they react emotionally when first presented with an opposing opinion.

As discussion forums, blogs are sites for exchange and debate; as links to other stories and perspectives, blogs are information filters, indeed gateways to a world of knowledge and opinion that can be daunting if approached without a guide. It seems to me that the major issue in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue today is not how to produce new statements but how to pass on to a younger generation what we have already learned and shared. Blogs could serve as such a tool, provided that they be used effectively for education and understanding.³⁴

Pippa Norris has written about “the bridging and bonding role of online communities.”³⁵ Some human communities are characterized by “bonding,” in which individuals of similar belief or background come together for mutual purposes and to strengthen their common ties. Other community types seek to bridge differences, creating an inclusive community that can help overcome potentially dangerous divisions in society.

This distinction is true of online communities as well. People tend to be drawn toward those communities made up of people like themselves; this is true of both the Catholic and the Jewish blogging communities;

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their online interaction is a bonding experience. However, the Internet can also bridge differences, bringing together people of different backgrounds or beliefs who might never meet in the brick-and-mortar world. Norris suggests that Internet communities could serve to mediate conflicts in strife-torn territorial communities, such as Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Blogging is a new technology, and to date a small percentage of Internet users are aware of the concept. Like all technologies, it has limits, but it also offers unexplored possibilities for community building and information dissemination. My own experience suggests that blogging could be useful in bridging faith divisions since it provides information and commentary as well as opportunities for building community. My role in blogging *The Passion* was to attempt to focus not only on the issues raised by scholars but also on the different perspectives of Catholics and Jews; this brought numerous new readers to my blog, both Christian and Jewish, living in places as distant from me and from one another as Jerusalem and California. Jewish readers wondered if any Christians could see the movie as they did and whether Christians could listen with respect to Jewish fears. Christians sought insight into the nature of the controversy, the history of interfaith dialogue, and the sources used by Gibson. They found, in my blog and others, a place where they could meet.

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Notes

1. Blood 2002, 3. The early history of blogging is covered by Blood 2000; see Barrett 1999 for an essay that helped define the genre.

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2. See Henning 2003. The remaining four million blogs rarely are touched or were simply abandoned once the novelty had worn off. People under the age of thirty write more than nine out of ten blogs; more than half of all bloggers are female.

3. Blood 2000; Blood 2002, 10–17.

4. During the Iraq War, popular bloggers “LT Smash” (a Naval Reserve officer at a base in Kuwait) and “Salam Pax” (a twenty-nine-year-old Iraqi architect) brought the headlines to life as we read war news through their eyes. Pax’s journals have been republished in book form (Pax 2003).

5. Writing about blogging presents unique challenges, as one must take into consideration the articles to which the blogger has chosen to link, the comments made by the blogger (and his readers, if he has comment boxes), how other bloggers react, and how these conversations flow over time.

6. Welborn 21 December 2002. See Weblogs Cited list on pages 42–43. All weblogs have archive pages accessible from the main page and organized by date. While some bloggers write under their own name, some use pseudonymous “screen names” that usually are nicknames, anonymous pseudonyms, or variations on their own names.

7. Bill Cork 20 January 2003; see also Corliss and Israely 2003. I had begun blogging in June 2002, when the community of Catholic bloggers known as “St. Blog’s Parish” was experiencing rapid growth. Like other Catholics who began blogging at that time, my initial posts reflected a preoccupation with the sexual abuse crisis; blogging was a way to follow and share stories and to vent frustration. Soon, however, I began to concentrate on ecumenical and interfaith issues, and I christened my blog *Ut Unum Sint* (John 17:21, “that they might be one”). See Serafin, “Some Catholic Blogs,” for a list; Drake 2002 and Linner 2004 discuss Catholic blogging.

8. See Silk (chapter 1 in this volume). On 22 June, I linked to a *National Catholic Register* article announcing that the bishops had apologized to Gibson for making use of a preliminary script. This was the first source to report that Dr. Eugene Fisher of the USCCB’s Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the ADL’s Rabbi Eugene Korn had assembled a team of Jewish and Catholic scholars to review Gibson’s script. See Walther 2003; Boys et al., “Report,” 2003.

9. James Cork 2003.

10. USCCB 2003.

11. Boys, “Dramatizing the Death of Jesus,” 2003.

12. Shea 25 June 2003.

13. Lawler 25 June 2003.

14. Catholic League 2003. Donohue was the first to accuse the Scholars Group of using a “stolen screenplay.” He rejected accusations that the film was either antisemitic or too violent.

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15. Bill Cork 27 June 2003.

16. Ciaccio 2003; “The Jews and the Passion”; “Against the Heresies”; “The Secret of the Masons” 1954; Cain 21 January 2004; Cain 10 February 2004; St. Joseph’s Men Society 2004; White 2004.

17. Bill Cork 1 July 2003.

18. Bowles 2003.

19. See Shea’s claim (31 July 2003) that the criticisms constituted “blind prejudice,” an ad hominem “attack” on Mel Gibson, and the advancement of a “liberal agenda.” I had not acknowledged publicly that I had a copy of the “Scholars’ Report,” but it was guiding my selection of material to post as well as the questions I was raising on the blog. In my response to Shea (1 August 2003), I defended the questions as an effort “to seek truth—and that’s what Mel says he is about.” See also my posts on 3 August 2003 and 6 August 2003.

20. The analysis (13 February 2004, with subsequent revisions) also reflected a consolidation of my earlier blog posts on *The Passion*.

21. North American Mission Board 2004.

22. Mohler 2003. Some evangelicals questioned the Jewish criticism of the film, especially in view of a newly emergent Evangelical–Jewish alliance over Israel. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, issued a not-so-veiled threat: “There is a great deal of pressure on Israel right now, and Christians seem to be a major source of support for Israel. . . . For the Jewish leaders to risk alienating 2 billion Christians over a movie seems shortsighted” (Greenberg 2003).

23. James White 2004. See Ingersoll (chapter 5 in this volume) for an extended discussion of this issue.

24. Naomichana 24 September 2002.

25. Solomania 30 January 2004.

26. Weiss 27 August 2003.

27. See, for example, Weiss 25 July 2003.

28. See, for example, the interchange between David Bernstein and Sasha Volokh on “The Volokh Conspiracy,” 30 January 2004.

29. See, for example, Naomichana (16 October 2003). Judith Weiss first described *The Passion* somewhat tongue-in-cheek as a new form of interfaith dialogue (14 March 2003) but later (16 August) speculated that interfaith dialogue might have motivated Gibson to make changes to the film and she hoped that the film would create “a great opportunity for education.” Susanna (9 March 2003), however, warned that dialogue should not become an “I’m OK, You’re OK! umbrella’ that suggests all religions are the same.” She feared that *The Passion* would “inspire more overheated rhetoric and sadly unscholarly accusations.”



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30. Steven I. Weiss (31 July 2003) felt that “even more unjustified is the support of it by those who haven’t viewed it,” particularly evangelical Protestants.

31. Judith Weiss (21 August 2003) said, “If conservative Christians are such fair-weather friends of Israel that they are willing to retract their support of Israel over Jewish discomfort with Mel Gibson’s Passion play, why on earth should Jews kiss their butts to make them stay? Friends like that we don’t need.” See also Weiss 27 August 2003.

32. See, for example, Weiss 25 July 2003.

33. Weiss 24 February 2004.

34. Glenn 2003.

35. Pippa Norris 2004.

