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# THE POWER AND THE PASSION

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Hollywood produced a biblical epic almost every year beginning with *Quo Vadis?* in 1951. In a time when Middle America held the Bible in high regard, biblical epics were often used as vehicles to communicate political themes of the times. *Quo Vadis?* was originally intended to be an anti-Nazi movie while Cecil B. De Mille outlines at the beginning of the *Ten Commandments* his intention to portray a people's desire for democracy and freedom. Films focusing on some aspect of Jesus' life today are more likely to be modern retellings of the story of Jesus (for example, *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) and *Hail Mary* (1985)—both profoundly secular French films) or radical interpretations of the Jesus portrayed in the gospels (Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for example).

But *The Passion of the Christ* has a definite intention to present the suffering of Jesus as faithfully as it can, without any additional political message or modern retelling of the biblical narrative. It does not, however, attempt to explain *why* Christ suffered in this way. It is the personal suffering of Jesus that wrenches at the heartstrings rather than the appeal of Jesus' message of forgiveness and salvation. In doing so, it avoids the main stumbling block Christianity presents to postmodern thinking—its adherence to a 'grand narrative' or metanarrative which purports to be Truth. Perhaps counter-intuitively, postmodern responses to *The Passion* are more than likely to be quite positive, according to Christian film critic Brian Godawa:<sup>1</sup>

We live in a world in the grip of postmodernism with its negation of reason, language, and discourse. People are bored with sermonising and preachiness, especially in the arts. They just won't listen to reason. They want to *experience* your

metanarrative, not mentally process it with the questionable faculties of 'logocentric' rationality...*The Passion of the Christ* meets the postmodern challenge with a legitimate experience of Christ (dramatic and emotional, though not irrational). The story is presented through strong images and minimal dialogue that will transcend culture and denomination alike. That's the power of image. It may be the *only* movie about Jesus that most Gen X or Gen Y postmodern young people will ever consider watching.

This is clearly part of the reason for the film's wide appeal. The sheer intensity of Christ's life in those last few hours, presented with medical accuracy (Mel Gibson based much of the film's depiction of the crucifixion on a 1986 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*), is quite likely to shock many people who have accepted a sanitised picture of Jesus' death and resurrection.

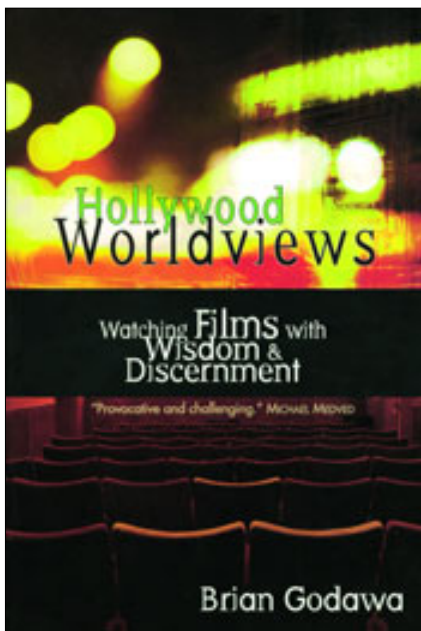
Within our postmodern society it is possible for any person to gain prominence or interest—at least for fifteen minutes. Given the fact that Christianity has had such a dominant impact on Western civilization for two millennia, one could argue that Jesus of Nazareth has had more than his fair share of the limelight. Is there anything unique about Jesus' experience that makes the film compelling? Do we have in Jesus' life and death a story which is unique in terms of its power and impact? After all, other religious figures have been portrayed on film. Perhaps *Gotama the Buddha* made by Indian director Rajbans Khanna in 1956 was equally moving in its retelling of the Buddha's life (I didn't see it—I would guess few *Case* readers did!) Might Moustapha Akkad's 1976 movie *The Message*, tracing the life of Mohammed, also have the ability to silence

Recently about 40 students from New College decided to go as a group to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* at the local cinema. Not surprisingly, discussion of the film's artistic merit, violent content and use of biblical and other Catholic texts has been red-hot among Christians and non-Christians alike. Why should this be the case? How is it that, in a secular society such as Australia which often makes a point of excluding religion from public discussion, a film portraying the central historical event on which Christianity is founded can be shown on 150 cinemas and out-gross recent blockbusters such as *Master and Commander* and *The Last Samurai*?

Certainly there have been other films based on the life of Christ: *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) were relatively successful. Jesus even makes a few cameo appearances in *Ben Hur* (1959). These films, however, were made in a very different context to that in which we find ourselves in today. In the 1950s and 1960s

audiences for hours after seeing it?

To my mind, there is nothing unique in the story of Christ that means it makes a better film than could a story of Mohammed. It isn't uniquely filmic; it wasn't a sure-fire winner. Many other versions of Jesus' life have been mere footnotes in the history of film, going the way of *Gotoma the Buddha* and *The Message*. As far as I can tell, the story of Jesus is currently being told on the big screen because of the *power* of the storyteller—Mel Gibson. Gibson is a more than competent filmmaker who has demonstrated an ability to move audiences, whether the hero is a Scottish warrior or the founder of a world religion. And as a result of his involvement with the filmmaking industry over twenty years he is also a considerable political force within Hollywood and, consequently, the world. Notwithstanding his Catholic beliefs and Australian upbringing, Gibson has appeared in over forty films, has produced nine and directed three. He owns the film company that made *The Passion of the Christ*—Icon Pictures—and personally invested \$US25 million dollars to make the film, which took him 12 years. He was the first Australian actor to be paid \$1 million for a movie and for his role in *The Patriot* was paid \$25 million dollars. Christians might be thankful that someone with this much power happens to share some of their beliefs! If Mel decided to remake Rajbans Khanna's *Gotoma the Buddha* I have no doubt that it would have found a worldwide audience as well.



Those with power in Australian society typically do not share the beliefs of Christians regarding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the storytellers within our postmodern, wealthy media-driven society choose not to tell stories about Jesus.<sup>3</sup> If they do refer to him it is usually in a manner which strips out the theology, removing ideas central to the biblical account such as rebellion against God, judgment or salvation.

The postmodern attitude to power is complex. On the one hand, there is suspicion that power is always manipulative, always pressuring the less powerful into a position they wouldn't ordinarily occupy. But on the other hand, the rise of technology and globalisation have meant that postmodernity in some ways encourages the aggregation of power in new and subtle ways. More people

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have a voice in the media (for example, through weblogs), but media ownership is increasingly concentrated. Christians are right to be suspicious of the abuses of power, but also right to consider how power might be sought to further the gospel mission.

Which is where a place like New College comes in. As a Christian institution—that is, having certain Christian ideas and emphases built into the College's history, mission statement and objectives—it empowers its members to tell a different story about Jesus to that portrayed in secular institutions. It provides somewhere to 'be Christian', somewhere to speak freely as a Christian, somewhere Christianity is given a chance to 'compete' at the academic level. While New College continues to be a place where people are free to adopt many different positions on the life and person of Jesus, it also ensures that the gospel metanarrative can be upheld within the marketplace of ideas.

Rather than regard all metanarratives with suspicion, Christian institutions are places that should empower people to think about such narratives. Questions about the purpose of life, morality, ethics and truth are

all dependent on metanarratives and provide a forum within which the Christian worldview can be presented alongside other worldviews rather than marginalised or silenced. While there is a tendency in many secular institutions to discourage religious discussion and debate, Christian institutions (especially those placed within secular contexts, as is New College on the campus of the University of New South Wales) should be places in which such debates are encouraged so that the gospel metanarrative can be considered alongside competing or overlapping metanarratives of the world. It takes a certain amount of institutional power to make that debate possible, especially when larger forces in society are against it.

Within Hollywood, Mel Gibson has used his power to tell a story about Jesus that has reached a wide audience with its

depiction of Jesus' personal suffering and torment. Within the somewhat less powerful but still influential world of New College, CASE and those who have been associated with the place over the past three decades, we are endeavouring to use the power granted to us to bring to the surface that same crucial discussion. ©

#### ENDNOTES

1 <http://home.christianity.com/local/87108.html>. See also <http://www.godawa.com>, 2004 Movie Blog, entry for 11/14/03.

2 There are, of course, many notable exceptions, but if the Christian hands were counted among the powerful, they would certainly be a minority.

3 Throughout this article, I use the word 'story' in the postmodern sense that is neutral regarding the truth value of the account.

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