AFTER THE PASSION IS GONE: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CONSEQUENCES. Edited by J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004. vii + 348 pp.. $69.00 cloth; $25.00 paper.


These two volumes illustrate in different ways the rapid growth of scholarly writing in the field of film and religion. The two books obviously took shape simultaneously among religious scholars in the aftermath of the appearance of The Passion of the Christ in 2004, with even a few authors contributing articles to both volumes. The aims of the editors are not the same, however, and the results are of differing value.

The most important topic debated in Landres’ and Berenbaums’ After the Passion is Gone is the theological interpretation of The Passion of the Christ, attending to the differing perspectives of and serious exchanges between Christian and Jewish theologians. Especially for a non-American scholar, this volume offers insights into a complicated and ongoing discussion among academics of different strands, and glimpses of a vivid religious and scholarly landscape. Several Christian and Jewish scholars present their readings of the film with true complexity and honesty as well as with a sincere desire to exercise a self-critical examination of Christian and Jewish prejudical concepts of one another. It is a sign of hope that the different perspectives involved in this volume allow a serious debate about controversies regarding perceived or not perceived anti-Semitism in Mel Gibson’s film.
The editors of *After the Passion is Gone* are well aware of the complexities of visual imagery as the main language for many in society today and they should be credited for gathering a wide range of scholars to put *The Passion* in context. A little too often this context is exclusively American, with all its religious diversity and interfaith conflicts of the early twenty-first-century. Perspectives from mainstream Catholicism, traditional Catholicism, mainstream Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, fundamentalist Protestantism, and different strains of Judaism are included. An African-American perspective is missing, and even more problematically, no Muslim voice is heard in this intramural Judeo-Christian dialogue.

More important, however, is the fact that this book -- with theology in fusion with perspectives on popular visual culture -- often raises very interesting questions. Karen Jo Torjesen, for example, maintains that the real is located in the material and physical, discusses atonement theology, and argues for similarities between contemporary society and medieval culture. Gibson’s *The Passion*, she says, re-creates in the modern genre of cinema the medieval vision of Christ. She draws attention to the physical suffering in a warrior culture in the medieval rites, and the medieval images of slashing swords and piercing arrows, the battered, broken and bleeding body of masculine vigor, and a general preoccupation with brutal religious imagery.

If the editors of *After the Passion is Gone* aimed to bridge cultural and theological positions in an otherwise inter-religious debate which has often been sharp and inflammatory, the focus of Timothy K. Beal’s and Tod Linafelt’s volume *Mel Gibson’s Bible* is somewhat different. Its orientation is toward the place of the film in contemporary society as a cultural event and a part of popular culture. While also covering mainly theological topics in a number of articles about the background and biblical sources of the film, this volume is most committed to examining the relationship between religion and popular culture. The
contributors explore understandings of latent religious dimensions in mass culture today and what we can learn from the reception of Mel Gibson’s polysemic film. While some articles get buried in details about exclusive catholic interpretative layers and meanings of the film, other articles push forward perspectives of the film that have far-reaching relevance.

Susannah Heschel’s reading, for example, opens up compelling perspectives about the resonance of The Passion of the Christ in our world. She elaborates interesting ideas about the leading characters of imperialistic Rome in the film -- Pilate and Claudia -- as the heteronormative “Christian” couple of the West, set against mainly alien and perverted cultures of the East. The film, then, reflects and reestablishes the Christian hegemonic moment of the United States today. In her view, the Passion of The Christ becomes a metaphor for Christian America, bloody and violent.

In order to explore current ideas imbedded in culture, several articles discuss theological perspectives in a way which also targets commercial western society. William G. Little examines the idea of Jesus as a figure who undergoes an extreme physical makeover. He argues that contemporary cosmetic surgery and the voluntary participants in this business share the early Christian preoccupation of mastering the body. The nipping and tucking of the flesh, being a secular attempt to manipulate the impure body to redeem the pure essence of inner ideal, is shaping the material surface of the body to match the ideal of immaterial beauty. In such a context Mel Gibson’s choice to show extreme physical violence and excessive visual exposure of flaying flesh in his depiction of the torture of Jesus’s body may explain some aspects of the willingness of the audience to accept this iconographic attack on the body. Such willingness is a sign of the obsession in contemporary society with the surface of flesh and bodily appearance.

David Morgan’s approach uncovers new and interesting sediments of this topic by adopting a psychoanalytical interpretation. Using this perspective, Morgan understands film
director Gibson as struggling with a feminized church and longing for a more manly one. In the assembly of scholars searching for what it is in *The Passion of the Christ* that reverberates in the worldwide audience, with many Christians embracing the film wholeheartedly, Morgan’s perspective is compelling. He suggests that *The Passion* touches a core of a cultural complex that is structured by a troubled relationship with male authority and by a profound emotional affinity with the mother. This could attract not only Mel Gibson but anyone with a certain kind of conservative religious affinity that has a suppressed reaction to present modernity – with all kind of equal rights – and longs for a return to male authority and paternal honor.

These two volumes are both rich in perspectives and contribute substantially to the investigation of religious imagery and visual culture. Religious conflict in the today’s world seems to be increasingly crystallized through images and pictures, becoming vehicles for disputes and clashes of ideas in contemporary society. The publication of the Muhammed cartoons in Denmark and its repercussions around the world is a vivid example following chronologically the controversies of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, inflaming religious conflict through the image. These two volumes contribute to the opposite effect, presenting engaging perspectives and facilitating a sincere and multifaceted dialogue over a disputed visual phenomenon.