

The Gospel and Media Culture

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Your Grace, Bishop Gabriel, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

What I would like to do this afternoon is to offer a few reflections on how we, as Orthodox Christians, can maintain fidelity to the Gospel amidst an American popular culture dominated by the media. More specifically, I would like to consider how we should best react to the distorted images of the Gospel that perennially arise from the entertainment industry and are then endlessly discussed and debated in the media. I will focus our discussion on two recent media phenomena: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which was published in book form in 2003 and released as a movie in 2006, and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which was released in 2004. It might at first seem that these are very different works, and therefore odd to discuss them together. But I will argue that their similarities in some ways outweigh their differences. Both, after all, met with tremendous popular success, both were widely discussed in the media, both served as objects of debate in the ongoing culture wars and, most importantly, both offered new accounts of the life of Christ. I will conclude with a few summary comments suggesting what our relationship to popular culture should be.

I would like to turn our attention first to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Here I will be speaking first and foremost about the book, but much of what I say could be applied equally well to the film. I will be drawing in part from an article I recently wrote for *Orthodox Life* entitled "*The Da Vinci Code*: Religious Relativism as Pulp Fiction,"¹ in which I considered both the book's failure as a piece of literature and the spiritual climate of religious relativism that produced it.

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is popular literature of the very worst sort: atrociously written, intolerably pedantic, intellectually dishonest, derivative nearly to the point of plagiarism, wholly blasphemous, and, *alas!*, immensely popular. Over sixty million copies of the book are in print, in forty-four languages. The movie based on the film, despite receiving uniformly negative critical reviews, has had a worldwide gross of nearly \$610,000,000.00. The book's thesis, such that it is, is as follows: Jesus Christ was a simple mortal Who entrusted the leadership of His Church to His wife, Mary Magdalene, and their progeny. The early Church was a freethinking, proto-feminist Gnostic sect that

¹ Vol. 57, No. 4 (July-August, 2006).

celebrated the sacred feminine; in fact, Jesus Himself was “the original feminist.” The pagan Emperor Constantine, in an attempt to unify his empire under one religion, suppressed this original form of Christianity by creating the New Testament and calling the Council of Nicaea, which in turn decided by a vote, and a close one at that, that Christ was in fact God. Nonetheless, the true nature of Christianity was preserved within the myth of the Holy Grail (which refers both to Mary Magdalene herself and the bloodline established by her progeny with Jesus). The Priory of Sion, a secret society that originated as part of the Knights Templar, has guarded this secret over the centuries. Leonardo da Vinci, one of its Grand Masters, encoded this secret in many of his works of art, most famously in his mural of the Last Supper (hence the novel’s title). The Vatican, aware of the existence of documents demonstrating the bloodline of Christ and Mary Magdalene, has exerted great effort over the centuries to repress this knowledge in order to maintain its power, most recently through Opus Dei, a militant Catholic sect. The gist of the novel could be summed up in the words of Sir Leigh Teabing, the novel’s main ideologist (and, oddly enough, simultaneously its villain): “Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*.”

All of this, it goes without saying, is nonsense both historically and theologically. Nonetheless, what makes these fantastical claims so pernicious and intellectually dishonest is the novel’s opening page that, under the blunt heading “Fact,” informs the reader, first, that the “Priory of Sion – a European secret society founded in 1099 – is a real organization” and, second, that Opus Dei is a “Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due to reports of brain-washing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as ‘corporal mortification.’ ” (In fact, the Priory of Sion as we know it was founded in 1956; Opus Dei is neither a sect nor does it have monks, let alone albino nun-murdering monk assassins.) The “Fact” page concludes with these momentous words: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” As such, the book claims to be much more than simply a novel; the reader is prepared to accept as fact the novel’s historical underpinnings.

It is not the purpose of this brief talk to refute Brown’s claims in *The Da Vinci Code*, as it is my belief that they are entirely beneath contempt. Anyone tempted by them, to speak quite frankly, is neither a Christian nor historically literate. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that each of Brown’s claims could very be refuted by anyone with even a basic knowledge of Christian history. What I would like to do instead is to talk a bit about how the controversy about the movie and book played out in the media.

How can we explain what made *The Da Vinci Code* into such a popular sensation? The book itself was a bestseller long before the movie was made, sitting atop *The New York Times*' bestseller list for month after month. Yet this happened largely through word-of-mouth. Dan Brown's previous books had not done very well, and *The Da Vinci Code* as a book was not aggressively marketed or advertised. However, the book had achieved great popularity by the time the production of the movie version began, and Sony, which produced the movie, spent a good bit on advertising the film version. Yet none of this entirely explains what made *The Da Vinci Code* into such an explosive media phenomenon; after all, Hollywood releases hundreds of movies every year, some of them based on bestselling books, and many of them with hefty advertising budgets. I would argue that what in fact turned *The Da Vinci Code* into the phenomenon that it became was not the buzz around the book, the marketing campaign, or the film's star actors, but rather the controversy that was largely manufactured by Christian protest. In other words, it was the very protest against the book and film by Christians that propelled the controversy out of bookstores and movie theaters and onto the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. In fact, Sony used Christian criticism to *promote* the film, launching a website entitled "The Da Vinci Dialogue," which contained forty-five essays by religious leaders and Christian scholars questioning and correcting various of Dan Brown's assertions.²

The lesson of all this, at least to my mind is that, to a very large degree, active Christian protest of books and movies like *The Da Vinci Code* in fact serves as free advertising. Even engaging in dialogue about grand cultural or theological themes raised in such books and movies does little more than provide publicity and even legitimization. We can in fact find further illustration of this point in the uproar over Madonna's concert in Moscow this September. As you are almost certainly aware, Madonna, during her last tour, had herself crucified onto a giant cross during each concert, which naturally created the desired reaction: media frenzy. When it was announced that Madonna would be giving a concert in Moscow, the Russian Orthodox Church released formal statements condemning the concert and calling on the faithful to boycott it, street protests were held, and the media were flooded with discussion and comment. What was the result of all this protest? The venue was moved from the original concert hall near Lomonosov University, which seated

² C.f., Peter J. Boyer, "Hollywood Heresy: Marketing 'The Da Vinci Code' to Christians." *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006. Online here: <http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/060522fa_fact>

35,000, to Luzhniki Stadium, Russia's largest sports stadium, which has a capacity of 250,000 – seven times the size of the original venue!

People love controversy, and the media have the extraordinary ability to magnify even the silliest controversy to grand proportions. If we look back over the past few decades, one can find many more such instances. Madonna herself has made a career out of this sort of cheap blasphemy. In fact, the central premise of *The Da Vinci Code* was simply lifted from a book called *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which itself generated media frenzy when first published in 1982. So, in fact, the very controversy swirling around *The Da Vinci Code* today is in large part a rehashing of a controversy from nearly twenty-five years ago. Or remember Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, released in 1988? This was another fairly crummy movie that gained its notoriety from this very sort of controversy. My suggestion, therefore, is that blasphemy is something best not engaged, lest we simply pour more fuel on the fire by focusing public discussion on ideas entirely unworthy of attention. Certainly we should stay informed, and we should know to look toward the Church for answers when such media controversies arise, and we should be prepared to give an answer to those with honest questions. But otherwise I think it best simply to ignore such media controversies. Remember that the nature of these controversies is entirely artificial and they will, if ignored, simply go away. *The Da Vinci Code*, for instance, was a very hot topic just a few months ago – but who talks about it now? It is already old news, and soon will be forgotten entirely.

Now let us turn our attention to a very different film, although one which met with a similar media reaction two years earlier: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which was released in February 2004 (in fact on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent for Roman Catholics). It immediately received praise from many Christians and censure from many secular critics, who accused the film of anti-Semitism and of excessive depictions of graphic violence. I should also state that Orthodox reaction to the film has been mixed, and I have spoken with some people for whom I have great respect who have a positive opinion of the film. In considering what I believe a proper Orthodox response to *The Passion of the Christ* should be, I would like to focus on two questions: first, the problem of portraying sacred history in film and, second, the nature of the film's depiction of Christ's suffering. It must be said from the outset that the very idea of having a human actor portray Christ is itself objectionable. Here I would like to cite some very insightful words by George Gabriel, an Orthodox theologian:

As Orthodox, we need to consider seriously the meaning of images of Christ, and movies and theater are indeed images. We have always been taught by the Church, and it was reconfirmed by the decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), to portray in images (icons) our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ the Son of God, His All-holy Mother, the saints, and angels and to identify the image or icon with the Person portrayed, the two being inseparable by definition. Our obligatory worship and veneration are also inseparable, physically offered through the medium or material and transferred to the prototype. The prototype is the actual person, human or divine, in heaven who is depicted. A portrayal of Christ by an actor seems to me a counterfeit image, whether on film or on stage, because it is an alternate icon, usurping the sacred image, prototype, and Person. It plants in the minds and imaginations of viewers a delusion and false Christ, that is, an image and person unsuitable for veneration and worship. St. Paul said it was not “robbery” for Jesus “to be in the form of God” since He indeed was God. Therefore, it seems to me, at the very least, that it is certainly robbery for any son of Adam to be in the form or appearance of the Incarnate Son and Logos of God.³

In other words, Mel Gibson’s image of Christ is a counterfeit image portrayed by a human actor. We should remember that Christ was sinless and perfect in His humanity, whereas we humans are, of course, fallen. It is therefore quite impossible for a human actor to portray dramatically the “psychology” of Christ or, for that matter, any saint. Therefore, no matter how well intentioned a film depicting the life of Christ or of any other event from sacred history may be, it will by definition be presenting counterfeit images, that is, false icons. The very same standard could be applied to any film depiction of sacred history, no matter how pious or devout. So, for instance, a movie currently in theaters called *The Nativity Story*, is also by nature objectionable. (Not to mention that the story’s arc is provided by a sort of love affair between Mary and Joseph.) Moreover, we should remember that the Church has selected and canonized specifically four Gospels – those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and has rejected all other “gospels” as being non-canonical or apocryphal. Therefore all cinematic retellings of the life of Christ, whether *The Passion of the Christ*, or *The Da Vinci Code*, or *The Nativity Story*, or *The Last Temptation of Christ* are, in a very real way, non-canonical or apocryphal gospels.

Those of you who have seen *The Passion of the Christ* will know that it spends nearly its entire two hours depicting Christ undergoing gruesome, explicit, graphic violence. If this is a false icon, what is the true icon of Christ’s Passion? We see in the Gospels that the Passion of Christ is depicted with tremendous restraint: there are no graphic descriptions of violence, blood, or gore. Indeed, there is *much* more violence in the

³ George S. Gabriel, Ph.D., “Who Can Portray Christ,” *Romiosini* (Volume 2, Issue 3, March, 2004), 28-29.

movie than there is in the Gospels. (It should also be noted that Gibson incorporates material of a dubious nature from various Catholic mystics. Moreover, Christ's route follows the fourteen Stations of the Cross of Roman Catholic devotion; and, in fact, the entire movie could be seen as a film version of the piety of the Stations of the Cross.) Whereas Mel Gibson devotes a long and very disturbing scene to Christ's scourging or whipping, the Gospels themselves mention this almost in passing. If we look at Orthodox iconography of Christ's crucifixion, He is shown serene and victorious, not bloody and broken; the depiction is symmetrical and harmonious, not gruesome and distorted. Christ is never depicted undergoing physical suffering in traditional iconography; He is never shown being mocked and assaulted. Even in depiction of the Crucifixion the angels, and sometimes also the Theotokos and St. John the Theologian, are shown looking away, modestly covering their faces. In fact, Byzantine iconography, through at least most of the first millennium, depicted Christ *alive* on the cross, His eyes open, showing that it was precisely in and through death that Christ conquered death – or, as we sing in the Paschal troparion, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death *by death*.” In fact, icons specifically of the Resurrection began to appear only towards the end of the seventh century, inasmuch as the icon of the Cross was seen to depict Christ victorious over death.

Moreover, in my opinion, not only is Mel Gibson's image of Christ counterfeit, but it also portrays a distorted Christology, that is, a wrong teaching about Christ. Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection are never treated within the Orthodox Church as separate events: they are two parts of one single action. Recall that, in the very earliest centuries, the Crucifixion and Resurrection were celebrated as one event; it was only later that the two were in some sense separated, receiving their own liturgical commemorations on different days. This joint veneration is perhaps most concisely expressed in the words that we sing on feasts of the Cross: “We venerate Thy cross, O Master, and we glorify Thy holy resurrection.” From an Orthodox perspective, then, to speak of the Passion of Christ is to speak of both the Cross and the Resurrection as a single event marking the victory over death. The Cross is a symbol of victory, not of defeat. In this context, one Orthodox commentator on Gibson's film speaks of Christ's death and resurrection using the analogy of a rescue mission: “Humans are being held captive by Death, due to their voluntary involvement in sin, and are helpless to free themselves. In a majestic sweep of events Jesus takes on human life in order to die, invade hell, and set the captives free.” Following this analogy, it can be seen why the Gospels do not dwell on the details of Christ's suffering:

It would be as odd as welcoming home a wounded soldier, and instead of focusing on the victory he won, dwelling on the exact moment the bayonet pierced his stomach, how it felt and what it looked like. A human soldier might well feel annoyed with such attention to his weakness rather than his strength. He would feel that it better preserved his dignity for visitors to avert their eyes from such details, and recount that part of the story as scantily as possible to focus instead on the final achievement.⁴

Mel Gibson's counterfeit image of Christ, with its excessive attention to the brutality and horror of Christ's human suffering, is largely rooted in the western, juridical model of atonement classically expressed in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm taught that human sins constituted an offense against God's honor, resulting in a debt that was too immense for any one man to pay. God, according to this western theory of atonement, demanded a punishment of human sin to avenge this offense by Adam and all mankind, and Christ's death alone could be an adequate sacrifice. In this model, the greater the suffering of Christ, the more effective the redemption of man. Moreover, it was Christ's death alone that accomplished the redemption; the resurrection itself becomes something of an afterthought. This particular juridical model took root in the west beginning around the fourteenth century, with artistic expressions focusing almost exclusively on the Passion of Christ, from the late Renaissance paintings of Christ's Passion, to Julian of Norwich's meditations, to Bach's musical settings of the Passion narratives. Seen in this light, we can see that Mel Gibson's *Passion* is a cinematic representation of this juridical model of atonement, in which the focus is on Christ's physical suffering, with only the briefest glance at the Resurrection in the film's closing frames. In the words of another Orthodox theologian, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is "a monotonous and misleading exaggeration of one aspect of the scriptural Christ's suffering and death to a distorting degree."⁵

Turning now to the media debate about Gibson's movie, one can see that the debate was in many ways more an argument about Christianity itself than about the film, and for that reason it is understandable that many Christians took Mel Gibson's side. That is, much of the criticism of the film was actually not-so-veiled criticism of Christianity itself – for instance, in the debate about the film's alleged anti-Semitism – and therefore it was not

⁴ Frederica Matthews-Green, "What Mel Missed," article dated September 24, 2003, posted on the website <www.beliefnet.com>. Online here: <<http://www.frederica.com/writings/what-mel-missed.html>>

⁵ Fr. Thomas Hopko, "Mel Gibson's Messiah," undated article posted on www.svots.edu. Online here: <<http://www.svots.edu/Faculty/Thomas-Hopko/Articles/melgibsonsmessiah.html>>

surprising that many Christians defended the film, assuming it to be an accurate cinematic depiction of the Gospels' Passion narratives. In other words, the debate was very often only superficially about the film, and more fundamentally about the very truth claims of Christianity. However, if we accept the premise that Mel Gibson has presented a counterfeit image of Christ, one which is not true to the Gospel image of Christ, that is, if we distinguish between Mel Gibson's filmic icon of Christ, and the Church's true icon of Christ, we should see that there is no reason we should feel obliged to take Mel Gibson's side in the great media debates about his movie. So, here too, I would suggest that the best reaction by Orthodox Christians to this controversy is largely to ignore it, to avoid it as much as possible.

To sum up, then, I would suggest that both *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Passion of the Christ*, for all their differences, are essentially non-canonical or apocryphal gospels that should be rejected by Orthodox Christians. In the ensuing media sensations, Christian response to *The Da Vinci Code* had the self-defeating result of providing free publicity for Dan Brown, while the popular debate about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was premised on the false assumption that this film was an accurate retelling of the Gospels.

In closing, I would like to make a few general comments about maintaining fidelity to the Gospel in the midst of popular culture and media onslaught. During youth conferences such as this it is very easy to focus almost exclusively on negatives: don't watch this film, don't read that book, don't listen to this music, avoid this and that heresy, and so on. What can be lost in all of this is that the Gospel is fundamentally a message of *Good News*. In the words of the Gospel of St. John, *God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (Jn 3:16). *That* is the fundamental message of Orthodoxy. We have in the Church the true image, the true icon of Christ, and it *this* Christ Who is the criterion of all truth, the measure of all things, the alpha and omega of all that is. We are offered communion with Christ through the Holy Mysteries, we can encounter Him in the pages of Holy Scripture, and when we come together in His Church we constitute His Body. If one knows the Christ of the Gospels, one will never be tempted by the false gospels shown in movie theaters and sold in bookstores; if one knows Church history one won't be tempted by the various "alternate histories" weighing down the shelves of bookstores. Christ tells us that His true disciples are *in* this world, but not of this world. It is very easy to get caught up in the latest debates and controversies, especially now with the Internet, and to

get lost in the present. What I am suggesting is that one of the best responses to all of this media hoopla is to *withdraw*, that is, to take a step back from the here-and-now and instead to focus one's attention on the God-Man, Who was, and is, and will always be.

Therefore there is no reason to be scared by the latest cheap blasphemy advertised by the media. In the course of 2006, for instance, we have seen the release of the film version of *The Da Vinci Code*, the publication of the so-called "Gospel of Judas," and Madonna's self-crucifixion. Each one of these has made its appearance, sparked debate, and then disappeared. Does *The Da Vinci Code*, or the latest popular blasphemy, pose a threat to the Gospel? Absolutely not. There is reason for sorrow, but none for panic. The Gospel will survive and continue to be passed down within the Church's Holy Tradition long after Brown's book has been relegated to the dustbin of history. It is simply the nature of our popular culture that every couple of years a new "threat" to Christianity will arise, spark the powder keg of the culture wars, be debated furiously – and then disappear, only to be replaced with another impotent attack a year or two later. Dan Brown's fifteen minutes of fame have by now run out and he will soon be forgotten, while the Gospel and the crucified and exalted Lord it proclaims will continue to live. Undoubtedly it is just a matter of time before another sensationalist book, or movie, or record will spark another media frenzy. My advice to you is quite simple: when it does, look to Christ, and not to the latest media-driven antichrist.

Thank you for your attention.