

What Do Passion Plays Really Teach?

(This is the text of a curriculum written for religion teachers. Dr. Eugene J. Fisher is executive secretary for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Rabbi Leon Klenicki is director of the Department of Interfaith Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. It is reprinted by permission, St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN.)

By Dr. Eugene J. Fisher
And Rabbi Leon Klenicki

The Passion play was a relatively late development of medieval religious drama. By the time it appeared (the earliest extant text is from the 13th century), most other forms of medieval drama — morality plays, mystery plays, and the great Corpus Christi cycles depicting the whole of the biblical history of salvation — were already well developed.

The "New Catholic Encyclopedia" theorizes that the relative lateness of the development of Passion plays "may very well mean a reluctance to imitate in a fictional manner the awesome mystery of Christ's sacrifice, especially since the Mass as the central act of the liturgy was itself the actual continuation of that sacrifice." Given the subsequent history of the plays, many today would judge this initial hesitancy on the part of our medieval ancestors to have been well placed. For the Passion play's history appears, in retrospect, to have been intimately connected with the spread of the "teaching of contempt" against Jews and Judaism that reached its height (depths?) just in the period when Passion plays gained widespread popularity. No single factor, it may be said, did more to establish the decisive charge of the collective responsibility of the Jews for the death of Jesus as an integral part of Western Christian culture than the Passion plays.

It is important then, to understand the historical context of the origins of Passion plays in order to evaluate their role in Christian-Jewish relations. Scholars agree that the period of the 13th to the 15th centuries represents a turning point (and not for the better) in Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. While the Patristic age saw the development of the anti-Judaic theology so powerfully distilled — for example, in the fulminations of St. John Chrysostom — recent scholarship has noted that this theology existed in the context of relatively amicable relations between the Jewish and Christian communities as a whole.

Thus, Robert L. Wilken's "John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) notes that the great preachers diatribes were precipitated by his growing concern over the fact that so many of his own Christian congregants were increasingly attracted to the ritual and lifestyle of the synagogue. Chrysostom's remarks, despite the inflated rhetoric typical of the period, were aimed not so much at the suppression of Judaism as at convincing his fellow Christians to attend church rather than the synagogue. Even as late as the 9th century, there are records of bishops complaining that their people persisted in going to the rabbis for blessings on their fields. So Christians in general must have viewed Jews and Judaism positively in those periods.

However, the jolt of the rise of Islam and its continuing threat, despite the Crusades, to the survival of the Church, precipitated the development of a new self-image within Christendom, one less tolerant of the religious "other." The Fourth Lateran Council in the 13th century mandated new repressive legislation against the Jews. The ghetto and distinctive clothing were enforced. Gradually, as Jeremy Cohen brilliantly recounts in his "The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism" (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), the notion that "error has no rights" replaced earlier notions of the proper nature of a Christian society. Where Augustine and papal legislation had acknowledged the right of Jews to be Jews in a Christian society, contenting themselves with proscribing any possibility that Jews could proselytize among Christians for converts, the new view sought a society of "one nation, one faith" and began to include Jews in the category of "heretics." It was under this latter rubric that copies of the Talmud were seized and publicly burned.

Great catastrophes overtook the Jewish communities of Europe in this period. The Crusaders massacred tens of thousands of Jews despite the pleadings of the popes and bishops that they get about their proper business — the freeing and protecting of the Holy Land for pilgrims. Jews were accused in the 14th century of having caused the great plague and again Jews were massacred. By the 16th century, Jews had been forcibly expelled from England, Spain most of Germany, much of France, and their numbers limited even in Italy. The bulk of European Jewry now lived in Poland and Eastern Europe, which would remain the center of European Jewish life until the Holocaust.

This period, which Father Edward Flannery has called the "centuries of woe," also saw the progressive "demonization of the Jews, as outlined so powerfully in Joshua Trachtenberg's "The Devil and the Jews" (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1983). Jews were depicted in medieval art as evil sorcerers and devils with horns. Jews were accused of incredible ritual atrocities such as desecrating the Host or killing Christian children. Though such "blood libel" charges were rigorously denounced by the popes for the falsehoods they were, the popular imagery of Jews as connected with the devil flourished, even finding its way into the art of the great medieval cathedrals — such as the infamous Judensau recently scrawled on the Cathedral of Regensburg.

The tradition of the Passion play developed in the midst of the ugliest period of Christian mistreatment of Jews. It was a period which saw increasing violence perpetrated against Jews. The escalation of violence was, in turn, rationalized by an escalation of verbal rhetoric and charges against Judaism, which in turn precipitated further violence in a vicious cycle of destruction.



It would seem that the Passion play both reflected and became a part of this tragic cycle, especially on the popular level where it served to confirm in the people's mind the central tenet of the teaching of contempt — the decisive charge. Passion plays developed not only as part of the larger movement of medieval religious drama, but out of the liturgy of Good Friday itself, out of the dramatized "homiletic" readings of the Passion narratives.

The only extant texts of Passion plays in Latin, the "Benediktbeuren" manuscripts from 13th century Germany, already include two lyrical compositions originally attached to the Good Friday veneration of the cross: these are forms of the lyrical "planctus" or "lament" of the Blessed Mother sung by a cleric after the unveiling of the crucifix. The lines of the "planctus ante nescia" are typical:

"Oh the zeal, Oh the crime of this hateful race (of Jews) and Oh the animal-like hands of those crucifying you... What crime, what shameful this this barbarous people commits. He is made to suffer chains, beatings, wounds, spittings, crown of thorns, though he is innocent... Oh blind deplorable race, repent!"

Scarcely less inflammatory are the images of the alternate lament of Mary, the "fletus, fideles animae":

"He who is innocent is condemned by a damnable people, fulfilling what is necessary... Men of blood rage against the Lord of salvation with iniquitous zeal and all the while they feign virtue" ("Carmina Burana" manuscript 265/4b, 278ff.)

It is no wonder then, as Leon Poliakov reports in "History of Anti-Semitism" (New York: Schocken Press, 1974, p. 130), that cities such as Frankfurt and Freiburg had to order special measures in the 15th century for the protection of the ghetto during the production of Passion plays, or that in 1539 the performance was cancelled in Rome, "for it had been regularly followed by the sacking of the ghetto."

Given this history, it is no wonder that so many of the Passion plays currently produced in Europe and the Americas continue to be accused of stereotyping Jews and Judaism and falsely portraying the biblical accounts. A recent survey by the American Jewish Committee of six major Passion plays annually produced in the United States for large audiences revealed that five of the six continue with all the worst elements of the medieval tradition, and often even embellish on those traditions with anti-Jewish stereotypes of more recent vintage. (The sixth play, the only one performed under Catholic auspices, is currently under revision, and there are hopes that it may serve as a model for other Passion plays.)

The Oberammergau Passionspiel, whose audiences are primarily American Christians, is a case in point, though by no means an isolated case. The Passionspiel has undergone only modest revisions since it was hailed by Adolf Hitler who, as late as July 5, 1942, stated: "...never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed... There one sees Pontius Pilate, a Roman racially and intellectually superior, there he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry."

Hitler's comment reveals the way in which a pious practice, intended to achieve a valid spiritual end, can unwittingly serve another purpose. Despite the patient efforts of Catholic scholars such as Franz Mussner, Leonard Swidler and Gerard Sloyan, and Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, observers report that little has been done in Oberammergau to bring about the changes in the play necessary to remove its anti-Semitic elements. Such changes outlined in "The Passion of the Jew Jesus" by Leonard Swidler and Gerard S. Sloyan (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1984).

It is possible, of course, to depict the Passion in a way which authentically evokes the events of Jesus' death and resurrection without triggering the anti-Semitic image of Jews as "Christ-killers." To do this, one has to begin with a reasonably secure knowledge of what the gospel accounts actually say with reference to Jesus' Passion. This is not so automatic as may appear at first blush, since we carry so

many preconceptions with us from the past when we approach the text. There is always the danger of projecting anti-Semitism into Passion plays.

For example, most Passion dramas tend to have "the Pharisees" as major actors in the event, even though they do not appear in the gospel accounts themselves (except in the Gospel of Luke, where their role is trying to warn Jesus of the plot against his life!). Likewise, the holding of a formal Sanhedrin trial (recounted only in Matthew and Mark) is very doubtful, and is mentioned in neither Luke nor John. Finally, the image of Pilate as a well-intentioned, even benign ruler that one sees in most Passion plays is historically erroneous. In fact, Pilate was a bloodthirsty tyrant who crucified hundreds of Jews. A historically sound scenario based upon a reconstruction of the evidence from all four gospels is conveniently sketched by Raymond Brown in his brief article, "Why the Accounts of Jesus' Death Differ" in St. Anthony Messenger (April 1984, pp. 37-40): "Pilate had to have known beforehand about the arrest of Jesus and perhaps had even commanded it."

Helpful popular summaries of the scholarly literature can also be found in the relevant sections of Joseph A. Fitzmayer, "A Christological Catechism: New Testament Answers" (New York: Paulist Press, 1982); John T. Pawlikowski, "What Are They Saying About Christian-Jewish Relations?" (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); and Eugene Fisher, "Faith Without Prejudice" (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

An excellent text based directly on the Passion narratives themselves, yet taking into account the results of modern biblical scholarship, has been developed by John Townsend for the Christian Study Group of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Entitled "A Liturgical Interpretation of Our Lord's Passion in Narrative Form," it can be highly recommended for parish and catechetical settings.

Another model, quite different in tone, can also be recommended. Catherine de Vinck's "A Passion Play" (Alleluia Press, Box 103, Allendale, N.J. 07401) is a poetic version that centers on the essential meaning of the Christ Event for the Christian. It is highly evocative and moving, especially for college age or adult audiences.

In 1968, the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement giving general guidelines for the evaluation and performance of Passion plays based on the principles of the Second Vatican Council. This was updated in 1984 with reference to the 1974 Vatican guidelines for Catholic-Jewish relations and the U.S. bishops' own statement of November 1975. Catholic theologian Leonard Swidler has worked this material into the form of a list of eight handy "guidelines," which we excerpt here (though without Swidler's discussion of each). The full text is available from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (823 United Nations Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017).

- The play should avoid creating the impression that most Jews of Jesus' day willed his death, or that Jews as a people are responsible for it.
- The play should avoid depicting Pilate — who history shows was a ruthless tyrant and a perverter of justice — as an innocent and kindly bystander.
- The play should not speak of the "old" testament or covenant. God's covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked by God. The Jews remain "people of God."
- The play should not give exclusively to enemies of Jesus recognizably Jewish or Hebrew Bible names.
- The play should not give the impression that most of Jesus' enemies were Pharisees, or that all Pharisees opposed Jesus (e.g. Nicodemus).
- Jesus and his followers should look and act like the Jews they were, and his opponents should not be cast as ugly stereotypes of Jews.
- The play must not depict Jesus as opposed to the Law (Torah).
- The play should not leave us with thoughts of suspicion or feelings of disdain for Jesus' people, the Jews. Rather, it should make Christians grateful that we have been led to the one true God, the God of Israel, through the Jew, Jesus.

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