

# Bigotry toward Jews in scripture is hurtful, outdated

Observance of Easter Passion church services reminded me of the haunting music in the Greek Orthodox Church into which I was baptized.

A chance encounter in Eugene a decade ago with the man responsible for translations in the Greek church reminded me that lyrics for some of the week's music are haunting in another way: the tragic prejudice they foster toward Jews.

A priest of high rank in the Greek Archdiocese, the late Rev. Leonidas Contos, was chief translator of text from the original Greek into English. While a visiting celebrant at St. George Orthodox Church, he told me his

main concern was revising translations of Holy Week services that demonize Jews as killers of Jesus. He said they lead to "hated of Jews among impressionable Christians, a behavior contrary to the teachings of Christ."

A recent public discussion in Eugene of the Mel Gibson film "The Passion of Christ" convinces me that we Christians still don't get it. Of five panelists, two directly addressed the issue of the film building bigotry. They said they believe it does.

There was waffling uncertainty in the views of three others: a Roman Catholic priest, a Baptist minister, and the head of the Islamic Cultural Center.

The Baptist minister said he does not think the film "in any way is anti-Judaic." For me, he cast doubt on his

credibility about the film when he said, "In all my years in the ministry, I've not been aware of anyone with anti-Jewish feeling." From the audience, a Greek Orthodox priest pointed out that "Christians, like Jews, were killed because of Christ in the early centuries."

The evasiveness of three of the panelists and the cleric in the audience left unaddressed the fundamental question: Does the movie feed prejudice toward Jews?

The Christian Church minister placed the issue squarely on the table at the outset when he said, "The Holocaust of World War II could not have happened," had it not been for the way the church through the centuries has taught the passion story and the role in it of the Jewish people. He said

impact of the movie, "while probably not intended, encourages anti-Judaism."

Prof. Jonathan Seidel was explicit: "This film is sado-masochistic. It is a reflection of the bloody, pre-Vatican II passion play. Its violence is pornographic. If one says this is based on the Gospel, then there has to be something wrong with the Gospel. The movie reverses 40 years of progress since Vatican II."

Seidel remembered having to fight back as a child when "kids called me Christ-killer."

Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote, "The Last Temptation of Christ," wrote about his childhood on the island of Crete: "Every year during Holy Week that leads into Easter, Jewish children had to be on their guard. They were

my friends. But I think they understood that other Cretan boys and I would have to hit them because of what Jews did to Christ."

Panelists were asked: "Could heads of Christian sects meet today to agree on how to expurgate scripture of bigotry?" Apparently, no way. Scripture, they agreed, is sacrosanct — too sensitive for church leaders to ever risk consider revising. As the discussion ended, I wondered: What set of values results in our being concerned over hate crimes that harm Jews, while we protect 1,900-year old writings that persist in encouraging those crimes?

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# Columnist oversimplifies religion with presumptions

Chuck Slothower recently articulated ("Forced religion," ODE, April 14) certain timeless verities including a particular interpretation of the separation of church and state, and heavily rested this on his presumed and over-confident agnosticism. In doing so, he magically disabused all the religious plebeians of their silly beliefs within invoking any good argumentation.

How should we understand the relationship between religion and society? Chuck has answers. The application of the hard-learned ideal of church-state separation when individuals incarnate both is nuanced and complex; the realities of history are equally multifarious. While he may be right, his approach lacks intellectual humility or realism regarding the ambiguities of politics and

history.

Chuck continues by taking the complex issue of God's existence and assuming that agnosticism is clearly true. His political argument rests heavily on this (not a good move). Religious belief is "absurd and foolish ... a rather poor attempt to explain where we came from

and to comfort us when we cringe at the thought of mortality." He then

presents the naturalist creed: "When we die, our bodies rot in the ground..." You can almost hear the chorus of fundamentalist (not all) naturalists chanting it together, like the Borg.

The majority of thinkers throughout history have found theism to be satisfying and logically persuasive. While this

doesn't establish its truth, Chuck's hand-waving is far from merited. The largest interest group in the American Philosophical Association is Christian. Many of the best minds in the world accept belief in God as rational (or suggest that demanding this is epistemic imperialism). I don't suggest you can "prove" (another idea riddled with assumptions) God's existence, but Chuck's dismissiveness is presumptuous, not rational.

Chuck suggests that religion is for people with weak moral consciences. Cute, but unrelatable to history or reality (King, Jesus, John Paul II, Wilberforce). This isn't an argument; it's name calling. Even if it were true, it wouldn't bear on God's existence. This is also true of the comfort regarding mortality "argument" — God's nonexistence doesn't follow. I'm also curious what

metaphysic grounds Chuck's understanding of "the right thing to do."

What Chuck fails to do is argue about the truth of the matter. Rather he shares his feelings about religion. No analysis of premises and conclusions — just banal rhetoric. I have not shown that he is wrong, just that he failed to argue effectively.

The article contained two paradoxes. One, says "You idiots; you don't understand the ambiguities of this (I do — I am agnostic)" and then gives grossly oversimplified and unselfconscious metaphysical edicts. Secondly, he mocks "forced religion," then tries to create "otherness" by hand-waving at the absurdity of religious belief. He's simply joined the unreflective forceful chorus. Chuck seems quite certain for someone who says, "I don't

know, and you don't know either." (Chuck knows what I know?)

Most thinkers understand that there are a variety of rationally justifiable world views. There are brilliant and interesting arguments all sides of these matters, although Chuck failed to mention any of them. Resting his political philosophy (which has merit) on such a dogmatic agnosticism certainly violates his own vision for the secular state he has imagined the founding fathers to have envisioned.

While I cannot ask someone to lay aside bias, it is unhelpful to argue for a particular constitutional interpretation based on a metaphysical assumption that begs the question.

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