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Summary of discussion:

**PHONE CONVERSATIONS WITH FIVE PEOPLE OF FOUR FAITHS
REGARDING THE FILM *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST***

The purpose of this document

This document is the 'Record of Assistance' produced by the Office to record the Office's consultations with five religious leaders in respect of the film 'The Passion of the Christ'. This document has been created so that the documents can be readily supplied in accordance with the Official Information Act 1982. The only modifications made are to remove the names of individuals from the specific feedback they provided. This is in accordance with agreements made with the individuals concerned.

The interviews that follow are not provided in any particular order. No other changes (beyond the removal of names) have been made to the record of these interviews. The information is otherwise provided in full. Transcripts are complete records of the interviews with only minor edits being made to reduce verbal encouragers such as "uh-huh".

Date of Interviews: 19 February 2004

Interviewees:

- Pastor Andrew Riordan
Baptist - Pastor, Newlands Baptist Church
- Mr David Zwartz
Jewish - NZ Jewish Council
- Rev. Harry Phillips
Presbyterian – Minister of St Matthews Parish Church, Brooklyn
- Mr Matthew Mawkes
Roman Catholic - Administrator, Wesley Church
- Rabbi Antony Lipman
Jewish – Rabbi, Wellington Hebrew Congregation

Representatives from the Office:

- Bill Hastings
Chief Censor of Film and Literature
- Nic McCully
Deputy Chief Censor of Film and Literature

The Interview Transcripts

Chief Censor Do you think that this film is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor Can you tell me why?

Interviewee It's not so much in an overt way in what it says, but in the portrayal of the priest and the crowds as being so unremittingly anti-Jesus in a sense that, as far as I know from what written records there are, we've got the gospels, was not actually the case, and this is the basis of what was perpetuated by the church for nearly 2000 years but has now been reversed in their official teachings about what happened at the time. They have, clearly since the second Vatican Council in 1965, decided that the record as it exists in the gospels is not the proper one to teach and hold to, but it seems that Mr Gibson sticks with it.

Chief Censor I have words racing through my head right now. When you mentioned that it is not as it was in the Bible, you're taking that one scene are you in Pontius Pilate's palace with the Jewish priests in the front row and the crowd in the back baying for crucifixion?

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor Apparently he took out of that scene words that only Matthew records. I have my Bible here. He took out the words "His blood be on us and on our children."

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor That's after Pontius Pilate says I am innocent of this man's blood see to it yourselves. Does that make a difference?

Interviewee Yes it certainly does.

Chief Censor But even without those words you think the film is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee Yes I do. Another thing that surprised me was having Caiaphus present at the crucifixion which I don't recall there being any reference to all, which seems to indicate a sort of gloating or pleasure in the cruelty of the event.

Chief Censor There was a lot of that wasn't there?

Interviewee The cruelty I thought was extraordinary, totally off-putting. I mean it's

sadistic I think. I mean the pleasure on the faces of the soldiers doing the scourging and the laughter and sort of delight. I felt that, putting aside the Jewish aspect of that, just in terms of the amount of cruelty and violence, I thought was repulsive.

Chief Censor In fact do you think it went so far as to almost subvert any religious message which was coming through?

Interviewee Yes I did. I was surprised to find that was my reaction, but it was.

Chief Censor How do you think Christians come out looking in this film?

Interviewee Say that again please?

Chief Censor Yes. Do Christians come out looking very good?

Interviewee It doesn't arise because at that time there weren't really Christians at all, there were followers of Jesus, well in fact, we were only sure of the two Marys and the apostles, and there didn't seem to me to be any relationship shown between them as followers of Jesus and anybody else.

Chief Censor Every now and then they flash back to Jesus, well twice I guess, to Jesus' preaching.

Interviewee Yes, I thought they were very nice episodes those ones.

Chief Censor OK, yes. Not enough of them though.

Interviewee It didn't seem to me to be putting a message that the Christians were good and the Jews were bad. I don't think it was that sort of anti-semitism but it was the anti-Semitism of saying these were an evil group of people who wanted to get rid of Jesus in any possible way.

Chief Censor Do you think the film could be taken as that evil group of people being all Jews or just those that happen to be in Pontius Pilate's palace that day?

Interviewee Just whoever was portrayed on the screen led by a pretty nasty piece of work in Caiaphas and his cohorts.

Chief Censor That's partly my concern is really that the priests were portrayed as particularly nasty pieces of work but I'm not sure that you can unequivocally say that the Jewish people were.

Interviewee No, but they were the only ones around. You ask me about Christians, I didn't get any sense of their being a group of people who were portrayed as Christians. There were the followers and family.

Chief Censor Yes, and whoever he happened to be preaching to at the time I guess in those

flashbacks.

Interviewee Yes, but they were all Jews anyway.

Chief Censor As was Jesus.

Interviewee Yes, exactly.

Chief Censor Do you think that the level of violence in this film is something that, do you think that the film, given that level of violence should be made available to children for example?

Interviewee Absolutely not.

Chief Censor What about adults?

Interviewee Adults can probably handle it, yes, because they probably have other experiences of violence, in film or in real life but I think for children it would be very disturbing.

Chief Censor What about children taken by their parents, to see it with their parents?

Interviewee Well, I'm a father of five children I just don't think children should be exposed to that sort of thing at all.

Chief Censor Yeah, I kind of agree with you there. With respect to adults though, you say adults can stomach the violence generally, but what amount the anti-Semitism? This is where my job gets hard.

Interviewee I prefer none at all. I'm not in favour of things being suppressed.

Chief Censor So you think this film should not be suppressed even though it is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee I think it should not be suppressed even if it is anti-Semitic.

Chief Censor OK, and your reason for that is?

Interviewee That there is enough common sense and decency in the New Zealand population and in the churches to get the right sort of message across.

Chief Censor Do you think though that this film is going to be attractive or appealing to those people who have common sense and decency? Or is it going to be more attractive to those more extreme fundamentalist Christians?

Interviewee Well, I think it's going to be most attractive to people who like violence and who will have a couple of enjoyment in the violence.

Chief Censor There is that, yes, and that is not a very healthy thing.

Interviewee No. I've read some of the statements of the evangelical church leaders how they say this is going to be a terrific boost to recruitment and so on. I don't

think that's the case.

Chief Censor Do you think the violence is far stronger, far more potent than any religious message?

Interviewee I do, yes.

Chief Censor I guess in some ways it ameliorates the anti-Semitism of it.

Interviewee Yes, I think that's true.

Chief Censor I don't want to put words in your mouth but I'm glad you said "yes, that's true". Mr [name deleted] would you be happy for us to use your name or at least to reveal who you are, should anyone ask under the Official Information Act?

Interviewee Quoting my words?

Chief Censor What we are going to do is not quote you directly, we're going to write in our decision that we consulted various religious leaders and paraphrase x, y and z, and that will go into the decision, but once the decision goes out I can anticipate there being some Official Information Act requests asking "well who were these religious leaders"? Would you happy for your name to be revealed then?

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor OK, so it won't be tied to any particular quotes.

Interviewee OK.

Chief Censor We'll clear it with you first before we do that. My deputy is here and I'm wondering whether she has any questions.

Deputy Chief Censor Nothing further. But we really appreciate the time that you've been able to give us this morning. So thank you very much for that.

Interviewee Oh, thank you.

Chief Censor And I have to say I couldn't imagine classifying this film without consulting you and other religious leaders.

Interviewee Can I ask what other reaction you've had from other religious leaders?

Chief Censor Well, so far you're the second one. The first one was [name deleted], and he actually didn't think it was anti-Semitic, or at least, he said he felt uncomfortable, and he didn't think he could go all the way to calling it anti-Semitic, but he certainly shares your views about the violence. And he in fact thought that the few Christians who were portrayed in the film didn't come

across very well at all. Sort of simplistic people who were um, I didn't want to put words in his mouth either, but he didn't think anyone came positively out of this film. It is a story that could have been told better and it's kind of disappointing. But that's just my view and irrelevant to any classification consideration.

Interviewee Thank you for ringing me.

Chief Censor Thank you very much for your time. I'm sure it took longer than I said it would but the conversation was interesting.

INTERVIEW ENDS -----

Chief Censor [name deleted], it's Bill Hastings, the Chief Censor calling. Thank you for consenting to me calling you today after last night's film. I have the piece of paper that you filled in for Hoyts in front of me and I just wonder if I can ask just a couple of questions. It won't take very long. I guess, just cutting to the chase, do you think this film is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee Personally, I felt upset by the portrayal. I know they weren't called by name, the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin is always thought of as the greatest saviours of the generation, and I found it, this is my personal opinion, but it reminded me of Star Trek and watching too many Klingons.

Chief Censor The Klingons being?

Interviewee A less developed, culturally and educationally, nation who do things by throwing people into jail, lots of fighting and corruption.

Chief Censor So it's simplistic, and not very accurate or not very honest historically?

Interviewee From my point of view I hope it wasn't accurate historically.

Chief Censor Who knows, no one was there.

Interviewee In fact when it talks about the Sanhedrin in the Talmud it's said there are two opinions: that a Sanhedrin who kills once in seven years is considered to be bloodthirsty Sanhedrin, and one which actually executes once in seventy years in the other opinion is a bloodthirsty Sanhedrin. So from Jewish sources the Sanhedrin very rarely ever killed anyone although there are many statutes with the death penalty. They talk about profaning the Sabbath as a reason for executing Jesus when they're standing in front of Pilate.

Chief Censor In the movie you mean?

Interviewee The crime is profaning the Sabbath, yes. Although there is a technical statute of death for it, it's very rare that it ever occurred. Also, when they said we don't need witnesses for this everyone saw it. Nevertheless, even if everyone had seen it they would still need witnesses to

Interviewee warn the person first specifically that this is what he was coming up against and that his death would be a result of profaning the Sabbath, and there was such a careful stipulation put down that very rarely were people ever killed. As far as I know there has never been any suggestion of crucifixion, being a Jewish requisite of death.

Chief Censor But that was made pretty clear in the movie wasn't it, that crucifixion and death was reserved for the Roman governor.

Interviewee Yes. The suggestion was that the Jews were saying crucify him, crucify him, crucify him.

Chief Censor Does that make it anti-Semitic?

Interviewee It seemed to think that the Jews were a blood-thirsty lot who would use any opportunity to have people handed over to the government.

Chief Censor Do you think it was Jews or just those Jews in front of Pontius Pilate at the time and any person handed over to the government or just Jesus?

Interviewee Well, that's obviously the way that an educated person would look at it, but I'm not sure whether in fact this is the way it would be looked on. The behaviour of the Sanhedrin at the time in these circumstances might have been not typical, atypical of the usual behaviour. Nevertheless, the suggestion that they would have behaved like this and with the sneers, I'm sure they would not be sneering. And with these sort of sneers, one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin almost had special dental work to be able to produce this sneer, with this sort of smiling sneer, and nobody would have taken on these judgments lightly in that preposterous way.

Chief Censor And there certainly wasn't much in the film by way of background that would fill in why they were behaving in that way.

Interviewee Exactly. The whole film runs, what, 24 hours?

Chief Censor If that I think, it records the last 12 hours.

Interviewee They don't have any of the background except in flashbacks and the

flashbacks are obviously very selective to produce the emotional effects required.

Chief Censor Do you think it had an emotional impact on most viewers?

Interviewee I think the violence alone has no emotional impact at all with regard to anti-semitism or otherwise. Possibly the youth seeing such a film could traumatise them at an impressionable age.

Chief Censor But the violence is sort of unrelated to any sort of religious impact?

Interviewee I didn't see the violence as being particularly religiously impacted. What I found was the interspersing of the flashbacks into it and of course the music was a very powerful method of perhaps bringing meaning into something which was otherwise just gratuitous violence. And sometimes something like that actually produces a more positive or a stronger effect than just leaving it out.

Chief Censor I noticed on your form that you circled no, no, no, nobody should see it.

Interviewee I wouldn't like any of my friends to see it purely from the violence point of view.

Chief Censor Do you think adults would be okay with it?

Interviewee This is a question for society rather than particular religious leaders, as to whether a censor plus society would find it acceptable to show a level of violence like this.

Chief Censor Do you think showing that level of violence or making that level of violence available even to adults or to older teenagers, do you think that will have indirect impact on changing attitudes towards Jewish people or perhaps even behaviour towards Jewish people?

Interviewee I'm not experienced enough to say on that. Obviously I would be fearful because anti-Semitism is something that is very volatile and can be sparked rationally or irrationally at the smallest thing so obviously there is a fear there but I can't say it's necessarily a rational thing.

Chief Censor Do you think people watching this film, do you think it would promote discussion of exactly what Jesus' role is and what happened?

Interviewee I thought a lot about this after the film and from sort of bringing out the film and thinking about it, the thing that worried me most about it was that the potential for a lack of personal responsibility. In the film he's always saying

forgive these people for they know not what they are doing but he seems to accept no responsibility himself.

Chief Censor That's quite interesting you say that. That could explain a lot about modern day America too, sue everybody and don't blame myself for anything.

Interviewee Exactly, and while everyone is responsible for others as well, they should take responsibility for themselves.

Chief Censor At the end of the day then, the film you felt had a lot of gratuitous violence. I don't want to put words in your mouth but with respect to the current controversy about this film and whether or not it's anti-Semitic, you're not really putting a post in the ground anywhere?

Interviewee I felt uncomfortable. I did feel uncomfortable and I don't know whether I'd say that I was actually scared of what would happen if the audience saw the film. To me the film goes on publicity and its reputation rather than the contents of it. The film itself seems to be very much a specialised interest film but because of the way it's been marketed it will become a well known film which might even become a blockbuster. It's a special interest film which has been brought into the blockbuster world by the marketers and the producers, so for me it's a difficult one to call.

Chief Censor Is the source of your discomfort the potential impact it will have on audiences?

Interviewee I think I would be scared by the potential impact that it could have. You see there are educated audiences and non-educated audiences. So an educated audience – they might be able to place it in context. But for an uneducated audience, I was watching it trying to think now I know nothing about Judaism and I know nothing about Christianity – trying to look at it from that point of view and it just seems to be a mad rant. To me nobody came out well from it. The Romans came out of it, apart from Pilate, possibly the worst of all, but then we're not particularly worried about them at this stage when they've no civilisation as such which leads to the Jewish and Christian communities, and this is purely personal, I felt that the Christians didn't come out particularly well either.

Chief Censor Why do you say that?

Interviewee I just felt that Christianity was shown to be rather shallow and Jesus was

portrayed as a madman or as a saint.

Chief Censor There were certainly no facts really about why Jesus all of a sudden was so important that he should be crucified and why he had a following from anything we saw in the film.

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor I have the Deputy Chief Censor here with me which is why you're on speaker phone. Would you be happy for your name to be used in any decision that we write about the film? You can say 'no' it's OK

Interviewee OK, but if there's anything that actually involves me could I see a copy of it first to clarify anything?

Chief Censor How it will be written up is that it will be a summary rather than a quote and it will be written up in a way that says we consulted, words to the effect, religious leaders in the Christian and Jewish communities. I can only see your name coming up if an Official Information Act request comes in as result asking 'well who did you consult?' Will you be OK with that?

Interviewee That's fine.

Chief Censor I'm just asking the Deputy now if she has any questions. No she doesn't. It's been very interesting talking to you.

Interviewee And thank you for allowing me to be a part of this.

Chief Censor I couldn't see issuing a classification without this sort of consultation. Thank you and if there are any follow-up questions or something occurs to me later can I call you later?

Interviewee That's fine.

INTERVIEW ENDS -----

Chief Censor This is Bill Hastings calling from the Classification Office. I have a form in front of me where you have ticked "yes" consenting to me talking to you about the film last night. Do you think this film is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee Not at all.

Chief Censor Why not?

Interviewee Well, yeah I guess it's my view, but I can't see any reason why it is really.

Chief Censor Do you think some people could read it that way?

Interviewee I guess you can read anything into what you want if you really try hard enough. I certainly didn't come away with any feelings that I wanted to gas Jews or anything.

Chief Censor And why is that? The temple priests were not portrayed in a very nice light.

Interviewee I guess it was fairly accurate from what I've read in biblical accounts so I guess you can claim the Bible was anti-Semitic as well.

Chief Censor The New Testament possibly but not the Old Testament.

Interviewee Yeah true. It reflected fairly well what's in the New Testament.

Chief Censor So if it's historically accurate that takes care of any accusations that it's anti-Semitic?

Interviewee Yeah. I haven't heard of too many people sort of claiming that the Bible is anti-Semitic, but maybe they do I'm not sure. It's the biggest selling book in the country.

Chief Censor There is one scene in particular in my head which is in Pontius Pilate's palace, when Pontius Pilate says "I wash my hands of this man, do with him what whatever you want", and you have the temple priest in the foreground saying "OK, let's crucify him". You have a crowd in the background sort of baying for his crucifixion, could not that be taken as going beyond the temple priest into all Jews wanting to crucify him?

Interviewee I wouldn't have taken it that way, I mean from my recollection of the scene there were a number of people, were they all Jews, maybe they were. I actually had a look through some of the gospel accounts in the New Testament this morning just to check what actually did happen. Seems pretty accurate actually.

Chief Censor They did leave out that one sentence that Matthew said that the Jewish priest said "May his blood be on our hands and on our children's hands". Does that make a difference?

Interviewee Was that in the movie was it?

Chief Censor No, it was taken out.

Interviewee That would really be seen as anti-Semitic.

Chief Censor Do you think the level of violence in the movie almost overpowers its ability to convey any spiritual message?

Interviewee Possibly, yeah. It's a tricky question actually. My wife was with me and she

found it very gruesome and very bloody and that sort of thing. She found it probably a wee bit on the violent side for her. For me, a couple of times perhaps it was a wee bit far, but I guess that's what happens in this sort of medium I guess.

Chief Censor Given that level of violence do you think the film should be available for children to see it?

Interviewee I don't think the children - I really struggled what sort of age group in terms of an age limit should go on it because I haven't seen a lot of R16 or R18 films to be able to compare it with. It is slightly different in that you are not comparing swearing, and sex and drug taking and that sort of thing. It is a wee bit of an unusual one. I sort of thought 16 plus but possibly even 13 to 16s would be fine.

Chief Censor Do you think parents should take even younger children with them to see this movie as a sort of teaching aid?

Interviewee I wouldn't think so. My oldest child is nine, I wouldn't be comfortable in taking him along to that. Yeah, I would think teenagers really, about, 13, at the very lowest. Maybe even intermediate age, 12. I couldn't work out whether the cut-off should be 13 or 16. What did it get in America do you know?

Chief Censor It got an R in America, but three-quarters of all films made in America get an R.

Interviewee What does that mean?

Chief Censor It means under 17 you have to bring a parent or guardian. It's not all that well enforced mind you.

Interviewee I don't know whether you put an M rating or whether you put an R13 or R16 rating on it.

Chief Censor Well, that's our decision. You don't need to think about that too much. Really the main reason we're talking is to find out whether you think the film is anti-Semitic and you're squarely in the camp that is not.

Interviewee Sure. I thought you would be contacting me about the level of violence. I have seen the news article on the anti-Semitic side of it but I didn't find that at all.

Chief Censor Did the violence take you by surprise?

Interviewee It was fairly graphic and fairly gruesome, I heard that it was, I heard that it was fairly explicit and graphic scenes in there, so I was perhaps prepared for some of it.

Chief Censor Did you think it was realistic?

Interviewee I think it probably was, actually.

Chief Censor Did you think anyone could have survived that scourging?

Interviewee I wondered whether it was perhaps exaggerated a wee bit – parts of it. When I had a bit of a read through the gospel accounts this morning.

Chief Censor There's not a lot in there.

Interviewee No, it talks about him being sent out and beaten.

Chief Censor One says the order was given but then immediately was transformed into a crucifixion, and is it Luke, I think, who actually said the scourging took place.

Interviewee Yes. It doesn't go into a lot of details on how it happened and whether it was prolonged.

Chief Censor Whereas the movie certainly does.

Interviewee There was certainly more emphasis put on that side of it than on the crucifixion itself.

Chief Censor Yes, do you think that was gratuitous? That wasn't the story of Jesus as I know it, the story I know is crucifixion.

Interviewee I think it was definitely a part of it, I mean perhaps it was slightly over exaggerated but I just put that down to film making. That's what they did but they sort of focussed in on that point and drew that out. I wondered whether parts of it went on too long some of the beatings.

Chief Censor It seemed that everyone in the movie was taking a punch as they walked by. Where we're going with this is that we're writing the decision up right now and we are going to have a paragraph or two saying that we have consulted various religious leaders and office holders and that sort of thing. You're a pastor are you?

Interviewee Yes.

Chief Censor And we won't have direct quotes or anything but it will be a summary of what people said, you know, x, y and z. That will then go into the decision which will be published. I can see though, or foresee, Official Information Act requests coming in asking us "Well, who are these religious leaders

anyway?" Would you be OK with your name being released as a person we have consulted?

Interviewee Yeah, that will be fine.

Chief Censor OK, that's good. I don't think we'll attribute any direct quotes to you. If we do though we will clear them with you first.

Interviewee That's fine. I've only been a pastor for four months so I'm fairly new at this.

Chief Censor Well, congratulations.

Interviewee My role here is actually as a family pastor and I'm looking at it in terms of what would I think was appropriate for families and teenagers.

Chief Censor Well, thank you very much.

INTERVIEW ENDS -----

Chief Censor Hello Mr [name deleted] this is Bill Hastings calling from the Classification Office about the film you saw last night. On your form which I have in front of me you ticked no you don't consent to me contacting you to discuss your view on the film but you did provide your name and phone number. I'm happy with the no if you don't want to talk with me but I wanted to make sure that was the case.

Interviewee Well, I don't really mind. Of course, we're from the United States and here for a very short period of time so I didn't want to have too much of a voice in this but I certainly don't mind talking to you.

Chief Censor OK, that's good. Thank you for that, it won't take very long and I realise that you're bringing an American perspective possibly to it, but you know the more information we have, the more opinions we have, the easier my job gets. Well, actually I probably lie there, it doesn't get easier.

Interviewee OK, what can I do to help?

Chief Censor The controversy overseas really is whether this film is anti-Semitic. Do you think it is?

Interviewee No.

Chief Censor Can you tell me why not?

Interviewee Well, I think it tells the story pretty much as it is presented in the Bible, and it doesn't accuse the Jewish people of doing anything that didn't really happen.

Chief Censor What about the scene in front of Pontius Pilate there when he says “I wash my hands of this” and the crowd behind the Jewish priests are sort of baying for a crucifixion?

Interviewee Well, that’s what happened.

Chief Censor OK. Matthew says that but I’m not sure of the others.

Interviewee It’s a little bit difficult to say if there had been another race or people involved if they would have done the same thing. It’s not that it is unique to the Jews.

Chief Censor So if you think that is what happened do you think a modern viewer of this film then would ascribe that baying for Jesus’ crucifixion to all Jews?

Interviewee I would hope not any more than they would say that it’s all people. But there is no guarantee, because the Jews themselves are going to think it’s anti-Semitic, and there will be other people who are sensitive to the racial area, who will say, “we’ve got to protect those people of a minority because the spotlight is put on them”. I am sure there will be people who will accuse them, I don’t think it’s anti-Semitic, from my perspective it is not.

Chief Censor OK. Could you just summarise why you don’t think it’s anti-Semitic. Is that because of the historical truth of it?

Interviewee I think it was the historical accuracy that would convince me that it’s not anti-Semitic.

Chief Censor Alright. OK, thank you. The other question we have is given the level of violence in it, do you think this film should be available for children to see?

Interviewee Only if parents understand that it is a very violent movie. It is the one of the most graphically explicit violent movies I have ever seen.

Chief Censor Do you think there are any words we can use that would adequately warn parents?

Interviewee It depicts the horror of the Jesus arrest, trial and crucifixion in very graphic terms and therefore is not recommended for small children.

Chief Censor Do you think the graphic horror of the violence – for people who don’t know the teachings of Jesus and the story behind the last twelve hours of his life, do you think it might almost overpower any of the religious message?

Interviewee There is that possibility because the church has tended to sort of sanitise the whole process. We talk about it in very general terms as being a terrible death, but nobody these days really spells that out. So we are not accustomed

to thinking of that. My own judgement is, that Christians really need to understand that this is not something that can be represented by a gold cross or sitting on an altar, but it really was an intense time of suffering and pain that Jesus went through on our behalf. I think that, from my perspective, it deepens my own understanding of the sacrifice that was made but I can't guarantee that people would receive that. One of our people felt that, rather than spend so much time in making it so graphic, it would be better to depict the horrors that people are going through today and move people to want to help the poor and the suffering of the world rather than to understand the suffering of Jesus, but I don't agree with that but I understand his position

Chief Censor And do you think he would have said that, but for fact that he saw the movie and the movie generated that kind of discussion?

Interviewee Yeah, yeah.

Chief Censor That's probably a good thing.

Interviewee In his mind he was not interested in seeing that depiction of Christ suffering. He is a life-long church member, he would rather see the suffering in the world today and call people to open up their hearts and be generous in helping people who are suffering today. That's just his perspective. OK there will be people who feel that way.

Chief Censor Perfectly acceptable reaction to it I would have thought.

Interviewee I think that the movie is a significant film and I'm a little bit hard pressed in what to recommend even to my own people. I think I would have to be candid in saying that the graphic representation of Jesus' suffering was just very, very heart rending.

Chief Censor Do you have any kids yourself?

Interviewee Yeah.

Chief Censor I don't know how old you are. But if they are young, would you take them to this movie?

Interviewee They're not young, but if they were primary school age I probably would not. I say that because I wouldn't let my kids see horror films that a lot of kids see. Some kids see the most horrible things they can and I think that the disadvantage of that is that it sort of immunises people to appreciate real suffering if they don't believe it's real.

Chief Censor Is that a down side of this film?

Interviewee It's not a down side of the film, it's a down side of the media today I think. Because in television and movies we tend see all kinds of really horrible things that people don't believe is real. I think that this may diminish the effect of the movie because people are so accustomed to seeing gory stuff and think, "oh well, that's not real, it's a movie".

Chief Censor That's fair enough. I'm just going to tell you what we are going to do from here on in. We're not going to quote you but we would like to paraphrase, and I sort of see a paragraph something to the effect that we consulted with religious leaders without naming them who have said x, y and z, and that will go into the decisions published. I do see, however, an Official Information Act request or two coming in asking us who are these religious leaders.

Interviewee I wouldn't mind being quoted if I thought it had any effect on anybody.

Chief Censor OK, if we were to do that we would run the quote by you before we put it in the decision for accuracy purposes. But I'm not sure we're going to use direct quotes yet.

Interviewee I would like to help in any way I can because I do think it's a significant film and that adults and older teenagers really ought to see this, I really do.

Chief Censor OK, lovely. Well thank you very much for your comments.

INTERVIEW ENDS-----

Chief Censor This is Bill Hastings calling from the Classification Office. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today after viewing the film last night. Do you have five or ten minutes?

Interviewee Certainly do.

Chief Censor What I would like to find out from you is basically, given all this controversy, well so-called controversy, do you think that this film is anti-Semitic?

Interviewee No, I didn't think so.

Chief Censor Can you give me reasons why not?

Interviewee I think it didn't feel anti-Semitic because most of the characters were Jewish and most of them were sympathetic. I thought the leaders were, um, they needed to be portrayed the way they were. They came across as evil and

power hungry but it was interesting how he omitted the line “Let the blame be on us and on our children”

Chief Censor Yes, which is only in Matthew.

Interviewee Yes, that’s right. I really didn’t think it was anti-Semitic.

Chief Censor Even though in that particular scene in the palace of Pontius Pilate, after he said let it be on your heads, basically, then do what you want. The crowd behind the priests was baying for a crucifixion as well. Could people read that as being all Jews?

Interviewee I guess I wasn’t being too sensitive about that. I suppose they could read it that way but I think that would be a bit sensitive, yeah. I could see how people would think that.

Chief Censor Further on this anti-Semitic point, whether it is or it isn’t, the fact that the film didn’t really portray very much of anything about Jesus to explain why he became so significant and what his teachings were and why the Romans and Jewish priests were so concerned, it sort of shows them as “Oh yea, let’s just kill this guy”.

Interviewee Well, that’s true, it was a bit odd actually. It kind of going straight to the passion. It felt a bit . . . yeah . . . hmmm

Chief Censor I’m just sort of talking this idea out to see whether it makes any difference to, whether or not in your view anyway, it’s anti-Semitic.

Interviewee Yeah, I just didn’t read it that way at all.

Chief Censor Yeah, OK. Did you think it was historically sort of reasonably accurate?

Interviewee I did actually. Of course he took a few liberties, but I mean I had no problem with that at all. I think it sort of added to it. I think it did dive straight into the story. I think non-Christian people, people who don’t know the gospels very well might be a bit bemused.

Chief Censor Do you think anyone will go to see it just to see the violence?

Interviewee No, I don’t think so. The violence was really brutal. I think if people went to see it for that they would not get any sort of enjoyment at all.

Chief Censor Given the level of violence in the film do you think that it should be made available for kids to see?

Interviewee No, no, no way.

Chief Censor Not even taken by their believing parents as a gospel lesson?

Interviewee No, I would give it a restricted rating. I don't think it . . . it would give them nightmares, it was just too brutal I think.

Chief Censor It was, and as far as the censorship criteria are concerned that is really my major concern - the brutality and whether it was necessary or gratuitous to tell the story.

Interviewee Oh I see, I don't think it was gratuitous, especially the scourging was the worst bit. That definitely went on for too long, but I actually think that historically it was probably pretty accurate.

Chief Censor The scourging though – there was not a lot of mention of it – I think it's only mentioned by Luke.

Interviewee Yeah, again it was not biblical, but historically I think it was accurate, the Roman methods of the time. The same thing goes for the scourging. I think it is a very Catholic film.

Chief Censor Are you yourself a Catholic?

Interviewee Yes, that's right.

Chief Censor Why do you say it's a very Catholic film?

Interviewee I think it is, it follows more the stations of the cross than the Bible and the relationship with Mary is very Catholic and emphasising the brutality is also quite Catholic actually. Reflecting on that side of things is something that Catholic people do. Especially at this time of year, coming up to Easter and all that. So I really think it's made by a very staunch Catholic and I think that's the sort of audience who will not have any trouble with this film, except for the excessive violence. Other people will. As a Catholic, I can certainly understand where he was coming from.

Chief Censor To what extent do you think the historical atmosphere and the religious aspect of it pulled back the violence to make it a more acceptable message?

Interviewee I think the violence probably was in danger of swamping it actually. I think it could have been, yeah, taken a few more creative liberties perhaps.

Chief Censor Do you think any believer I suppose, any Christian, seeing this film, do you think, is there any danger of this film riling them up and leaving the cinema either with a more profound belief that the Jews really did kill Christ, or sort of fired up by the violence, and change their attitudes towards Jewish people in general negatively?

Interviewee I think that possibly the more evangelical Christians might think that, but although they probably did to begin with. I am not too sure.

Chief Censor We don't want to read too much into this film, we don't want to overstate anything.

Interviewee I do think if anyone is offended by it, it will be Christian people not non-Christian people. I don't think non-Christian people will enjoy it or know what to think of it at all actually. But yeah, possibly with evangelical groups, there could be some sort of danger there.

Chief Censor So when you left the theatre last night how did you feel?

Interviewee Well, I thought it was moving, but a bit odd.

Chief Censor Odd because?

Interviewee I think it was the way he portrayed the devil was a bit odd.

Chief Censor' Yes, it had a horror aspect to it, didn't it.

Interviewee Yes, that's right, and one little bit earlier on with Judas, that was over-the-top.

Chief Censor Thank you very much for your comments [name deleted]. They're appreciated.

INTERVIEW ENDS -----

Further enquiries to be made: No

Invitations to make written submissions: No

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