

Religion Today
August 13-19, 2006
Mel Gibson and Anti-Semitism
Paul V.M. Flesher

During his recent drunk-driving arrest, Mel Gibson not only acted abusively and persistently threatened the arresting officer but also made several anti-Semitic remarks. It is odd that there was no reason for anti-Semitism during the encounter. Most of Gibson's recorded comments constitute threats of retaliation against the officer or exclamations about how the arrest will hurt his career, both of which fit the circumstance.

But Gibson's anti-Semitic comments came out of nowhere. Although the arresting officer happened to be Jewish, Gibson did not know this until after he began his anti-Jewish tirade.

From the arrest report, it is clear that the officer has often arrested belligerent drunks, and most of Gibson's ravings were unheeded. But when Gibson began to curse the Jews, the officer got scared and took steps to protect himself from potential violence.

This incident provides a good example of anti-Semitism's power to generate fear in the people it targets. This power has for centuries produced not only fear but injury and death to Jews. To understand why anti-Semitic threats would frighten an armed policeman arresting an unarmed man, let us review anti-Semitism's history.

Anti-Semitism originated within Christianity. Its roots stem from the period when early Christians were debating whether or not Christianity belonged to Judaism. In the beginning, Jesus and his followers saw themselves as Jews and as fulfilling Jewish prophecies. After Jesus' death, the church was headquartered in Jerusalem, where Judaism's central temple was located, and where many Christians continued to worship.

When the Apostle Paul successfully argued that new Christians should not be circumcised or follow other Jewish practices, such as dietary rules, Judaism rejected Christianity. Christians saw this rejection as a betrayal and many angry words were said and written on both sides. Some of these words were preserved in the New Testament, and hence carried on into later Christianity.

By the early medieval period in Europe, Christianity had developed the notion that all Jews throughout history were responsible for killing the messiah, even though Jesus' crucifixion had happened as a single, one-time event where no more than a couple hundred Jews could have been present. This was forgivable if the Jews converted to Christianity. But Jews as a whole did not convert. Since Christian theology had no place for unconverted Jews, Jews living in Europe became

objects of hatred and largely without the legal rights accorded to Christians; they had no place in Christian society.

Over the centuries, Jews were ejected from England and Spain, were persecuted and killed en masse during the Crusades, and often forced to live in ghettos. Given their lack of legal protections, Jews often were accused of crimes by those in power, such as kings and dukes, bishops and priests, resulting in attacks and pogroms against entire Jewish communities. (Anti-Semitism in the Muslim world differs significantly and will be addressed in a future column.)

As the Enlightenment dethroned Christianity in Europe during the 19th century, anti-Semitism changed. The charge of killing Jesus no longer resonated in a secular society and gave way to the accusation of a world-wide conspiracy theory that Jews controlled governments, major events, trade, and so on. Since these ideas were not based on evidence, some government organizations, most notoriously members of the Russian secret service and the French army, manufactured evidence with which to frame Jews.

Mel Gibson's comment to the policeman, "The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world," expresses this type of anti-Semitism. The silliness of this remark exemplifies the entire concept's thoughtlessness.

There are only 12 million or so Jews in the world as against two billion Christians, more than a billion Muslims, nearly a billion Hindus, to say nothing of Buddhists, Sikhs, secularists, and many other groups. The notion that such a small group runs everything that all these other groups do is simply preposterous.

What is really going on in such a belief is an attempt by those on top of society, whether ruling classes or individuals who derive power from wealth or celebrity, to present themselves as victims, as persecuted by a secret cabal. This in turn justifies their actions as defensive measures, at least to themselves. Gibson, a man of wealth, accomplishment, and fame, threatened a policeman carrying out his legal duty, saying that the officer's actions would bring Gibson's retribution upon him. That Gibson has apologized several times since his arrest indicates his sober awareness of the immoral character of his actions and statements at that time. But the fear which these threats evoked in the officer has a long past.