

## Reviews

### **BRAVE HEART OF JESUS: MEL GIBSON'S POSTMODERN WAY OF THE CROSS** by Joe Egan, *The Columba Press*, Blackrock 2004, Pp. 155, £8.50 pbk.

Joe Egan's *Brave Heart of Jesus* is undoubtedly an important contribution to the discussion about Mel Gibson's latest cinematic achievement. Since many of the articles praising or criticising *The Passion of the Christ* deal with only a few aspects of the film, and often refrain from discussing it against a background of both theology and cultural theory, Egan's book, owing to its broad scope, naturally finds a niche on the book market. The author promises to "respond, in fidelity to the scriptures and to the tradition, and with an eye to developments in the contemporary world, to the film's portrayal of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (p. 7). As a working hypothesis, Egan suggests that the film depicts in a postmodern way the traditional devotion of the Stations of the Cross (pp. 54, 56). However, in the conclusions of his book (in chapter five), Egan slightly modifies this opinion, and argues that Gibson's film reflects the "Stations of the Postmodern Cross. . . somewhat different from the traditional ones" (p. 152). By using this imagery, Egan claims that *The Passion of the Christ* is a very peculiar variety of the story told by the Gospels, a variety tailored to the sensitivity and expectations of the modern audience. Egan's final verdict on the film is twofold: it is flawed in terms of historical and theological veracity, yet, concurrently, it deserves praise for highlighting some aspects of contemporary culture. In other words, the film serves as a mirror reflecting the truth about contemporary society, and it highlights the "scandalous particularity of the cross" (p. 149).

The author arrives at this conclusion gradually. In the first chapter, we get an encyclopaedic and diachronic presentation of the Christological titles, theories of salvation, as well as of different attitudes towards crucifixion imagery. The first chapter lays a foundation for the whole discussion, and provides the reader with the background of the problem. In chapter two, Egan proves why Gibson's film may be regarded as postmodern. To this end, Egan concentrates on four features of the film. First, he states that *The Passion of the Christ* is a nostalgic pastiche of the traditional Catholic piety. Then, he moves on to the analysis of the monstrous, and the role it plays in the film. Furthermore, Egan shows how different boundaries are blurred in the film, and gives as an example "blurring of the boundary between church and cinema" (p. 70). Finally, he analyses how violence is depicted in the film. In the third chapter, Egan shows the ways in which Gibson's film severs links with historical reality and accuracy, whereas in the fourth he attempts to outline a broader interpretive context of Jesus's death and resurrection.

The main advantage of the book is that Egan succeeds in convincing us that the image of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* is, in many aspects, postmodern. Egan is careful not to pursue his thesis too far: "I have no intention of arguing that *The Passion of the Christ* represents the postmodern in every respect. On the contrary, the argument I am putting forward is relatively modest: namely, that a number of issues . . . offer us a way of situating the film within a contemporary cultural setting" (p. 57). Given this reservation, we must say that Egan achieved the goal he put forward in the book's introduction.

Egan's book has, however, a number of minor flaws. Since its main thesis concerns the postmodern character of a work of cinematic art, we would expect an additional

chapter on postmodernism and contemporary film. Certainly, when Egan discusses the film's features, he provides us with numerous analyses by postmodern critics; yet a separate short chapter on the matter would be desirable, especially as he admits the "elasticity of the term [postmodernism] and . . . the variety of conflicting stances adopted by commentators towards the postmodern" (p. 57). We must be aware that the features shown by Egan in chapter three belong to only one aspect of the postmodern condition, which is *aesthetic* (see *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard). Whether the film's message touches on the *epistemological* and *political* factors of postmodernism needs to be established, and such an analysis would be an interesting part of the book. The problem with the postmodern is that the term is very general and all-encompassing. In view of that, any discussion that aims to prove the postmodern character of a work of art should distinguish clearly between the presence of a given artistic motif, which may be characteristic of past centuries, and the way the motif is presented and configured by the cinematic medium. After all, a preoccupation with violence and the monstrous has not begun in our times. Yet, a particular way in which violence is portrayed may be an indication of postmodern influence.

Moreover, many of the ideas signalled in the book could be further developed. The unquestionable fact that the film severs links with historical reality, and depicts the characters in an ahistorical way, is itself proof of being swayed by the postmodern. Similarly, when Egan states that the "screen image often appears much more dramatic, more gripping and even more 'real' than the historical reality itself" (p. 146), Jean Baudrillard's well known theory of simulacra and simulations immediately come to the reader's mind, and this direction could be explored a little further in the book. Finally, the author unnecessarily repeats himself many times. There is no doubt that this helps us to grasp the main ideas that he communicates; yet, at the same time, when we arrive at p. 137, and read about our response to poverty and injustice, we have the impression that the thought has already been stated so many times that it has become rather trivial. In the last case, the author becomes a passionate preacher, but this seems to be done at the expense of the academic merit of his book.

Those readers who want to pursue further the matter presented in the book are encouraged to do so by the book's last paragraph. Egan argues, "If we can detect our own fingerprints in the acts that are depicted on the screen and, on that basis, change so that his [Jesus's] way of doing things becomes ours too, then and only then the film will have merited the success it has achieved" (p. 154–155). Thus, the last word in the discussion of the artistic values of Gibson's production belongs to the audience, and depends on the response that the audience gives to the film in their private lives. In this respect, Egan turns out to be surprisingly postmodern.

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**HOLINESS, SPEECH AND SILENCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE QUESTION OF GOD** by Nicholas Lash, *Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, Pp. 108, £12.99 pbk.*

The teaching role of theologians in the Church is perhaps underemphasised nowadays, in comparison with the apogee of that form of the ordinary magisterium at the Council of Constance in 1414. Nevertheless, this role remains important, especially with regard to what is commonly seen as the developing crisis in the formation of or transition to a mature faith in young adults; and this pedagogic theme is one with which Nicholas Lash is concerned in the four lectures reproduced here, originally delivered at Exeter University and later at Westminster Cathedral.

Lash begins his discussion by noting that "we underestimate at our peril the comprehensiveness of the ignorance of Christianity in contemporary Western