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Christian Leaders Urge Caution on 'Passion' DVD Release

By Kevin Eckstrom

(RNS) A group of nearly 100 Christian theologians urged caution and expressed concern about "misrepresentations" of Jews in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" as the blockbuster film was released on DVD.

A statement signed by 97 theologians, pastors and other church officials said the "visually powerful portrayal" of the death of Jesus in Gibson's film includes "numerous explicitly anti-Jewish elements that we consider an affront to the gospel."

"It encourages misunderstanding of the role of Jews and their leaders in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death; it includes gratuitous anti-Jewish portrayals; and its promotion by Christians has largely ignored the pain and concern of the Jewish community about the film," the statement said.

The statement was coordinated by John Merkle, a professor of theology at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota, and Peter Pettit, director of the Institute for Christian-Jewish Understanding at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa.

The statement echoes concerns by some Jewish groups that the film could fuel more anti-Semitism in private viewing than it did in theaters, where it made \$600 million in box offices around the world.

Gibson has defended the film as a historically accurate depiction of Jesus' suffering and death and strongly rejected charges of anti-Semitism. Since its DVD/VHS release Aug. 31, the film has sold nearly 9 million copies, breaking the record held by "The Lord of the Rings" series for sales of a live-action movie.

The signers said they were not questioning the faith of Gibson or his legions of Christian fans. Still, they said the film contains "factual misrepresentations" and "age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes of coldblooded Jewish power conspiring to control historical events."

They also had strong words for their Christian colleagues. "We ... find it lamentable that Christian leaders so easily pass over its anti-Jewish character in favor of what they perceive to be its positive aspects," the signers said.

Notable signers included Harvey Cox and Karen King of Harvard Divinity School, Mary Boys of Union Theological Seminary, former Swedish Lutheran Bishop Krister Stendahl and the Rev. John Pawlikowski, director of the Bernardin Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.