

# **Mel's Merry Messianic Movie Missionaries: An Analysis of Apocalypto and Other Silver Screen Savagery**

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This holiday season, audiences at American cineplexes are being treated to two movies that depict the arrival of Christianity. The first one that was released, *The Nativity*, goes to the Biblical beginnings of Christianity by depicting the events surrounding the pregnancy of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity. The other film, *Apocalypto*, shows Christianity arriving in another place and time namely, Central America. The director and co-writer of *Apocalypto*, Mel Gibson, has not openly said in any interview or press release that this is the film's central point, that it instead focuses on the decline of the Mayan empire. (The film opens with a quote from philosopher Will Durant, A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself. ) However, given that the film unmistakably ends with Christian missionaries arriving in Central America, an event that happened hundreds of years after the Mayans Classical period, and Gibson's own conservative religious beliefs, which were heavily publicized during his last film, the controversial *The Passion of the Christ*, an alternative reading of the film and its intent is needed. This article examines *Apocalypto* in relation to Gibson, the portrayal of Christian missionaries in modern American cinema, and the current situation of the real, non-fictional Mayan people in Central America. **Maligning Mayans**

For all of the historical visual details that exist in *Apocalypto*, from elaborate sets to a cast of characters that speak only in the Yucatec Maya language, the plot itself is very simple. The central character, Jaguar Paw, is taken out of his idyllic tribal existence when he is captured by Mayan warriors and taken to a vast city along with many others as the part of a human sacrifice ritual that, as the temple priests believe, will appease the bloodthirsty Mayan gods. Jaguar Paw soon escapes to return to his pregnant wife and son, and he is chased by his captors for the rest of the movie. During the last several minutes of the film, Jaguar Paw encounters several Europeans arriving on the beach and prominently carrying a

crucifix. The film then ends, with Jaguar Paw's final fate left a mystery.

From an outsider's point of view, one may wonder what the problems may be with such a narrative. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, Gibson said that his idea for *Apocalypto* stemmed from his desire to make a new kind of chase film:

Oddly enough, I just wanted to fashion a really exciting chase. I wanted something fast and exhilarating. And I thought, What kind of chase? Cars? Nah, I'm sick of cars. Trucks? Planes? Been done before. Foot chase? I haven't ever seen a really good foot chase. A foot chase could be really primal, with animals and all sorts of stuff.[1]

Gibson hired a cast of Native American actors (some of whom are actual Mayan, although none were cast in the lead roles), largely unknowns who have never been in a movie before, to star in his film. As Gibson put it, he hired unknowns because it's much easier to believe a character who doesn't have any baggage.[2] He also insisted that the actors speak in a foreign language because I think hearing a different language allows the audience to completely suspend their own reality and get drawn into the world of the film. And more importantly, this also puts the emphasis on the cinematic visual, which are a kind of universal language of the heart.[3] Of course, the actors had to be trained to be believable as ancient Mayans. I had a movement teacher work with the cast to knock the 21st century right out of them,[4] Gibson said.

While the film appears to deal with the Mayan fall from empire status, Gibson has admitted that *Apocalypto* is his criticism of the current Bush administration, of how a civilization that needlessly and willingly sacrifices innocent people under the pretense of survival is a sign of the civilization's inevitable downfall. As he told British film magazine *Hotdog*, The fear-mongering we depict in the film reminds me of President Bush and his guys.[5] Gibson's effort has even drawn some praise from American Indians after he screened it for a sold-out audience at the Chickasaw Nations Riverwood Casino. It is very important to note that Mr. Gibson has gone to great lengths to cast indigenous people in this film, said Chickasaw Nation Gov. Bill Anoatubby. This not only helps the film to be more realistic; it serves as an inspiration to Native American actors who aspire to perform relevant roles in the film industry.[6] Likewise, some Mayans hope that *Apocalypto* will spark interest in the Yucatan Mayan

language. I think it is a good change to integrate the Mayan language for people who hear it in movies, on television, everywhere, said Hilaria Maas, a Maya who teaches the language at Yucatan's state university.[7]

So with such effort and sincerity poured into *Apocalypto* from a man who just wanted to see a new kind of chase film, not to mention support from some Native Americans as well, what could possibly be wrong with it?

First, there is the violence: to put it simply, the ancient Mayan culture is depicted as a hyper-violent society with an insatiable, obsessive bloodlust that is as unmotivated as it is gory.[8] Slate critic Dana Stevens does a good job at summarizing the kinds of violence depicted in the film, and its complete lack of cultural context:

Here is a partial list of the indignities to which the human body is subjected in Mel Gibson's Mayan epic *Apocalypto*: being impaled on a trap made of animal bones. Being forced to ingest tapir testicles. Being tricked into rubbing a caustic agent on one's own genitals while the whole village watches and laughs. Seeing one's father have his throat slit. Getting one's heart cut out in a sacrificial ritual. Having one's head subsequently chopped off and thrown down the stairs of a pyramid. Having one's face chewed off by a panther. It teaches us nothing about Mayan civilization, religion, or cultural innovations. (Calendars? Hieroglyphic writing? Some of the largest pyramids on Earth?) Rather, Gibson's fascination with the Mayans seems to spring entirely from the fact (or fantasy) that they were exotic badasses who knew how to whomp the hell out of one another, old-school.[9]

Then there are the historical inaccuracies within the film, such as the depiction of mass human sacrifice and its role in the downfall of Mayan civilization. Even though ancient Mayans did practice ritual human sacrifice, it was not on the grand scale depicted in the movie; it was part of the Mayan's complex view of the world a view that *Apocalypto* does not even begin to explore. Furthermore, even though a few ancient Mayan murals depicted the capture and torture of prisoners, none depicted the act of decapitation, as does the one shown in *Apocalypto*'s trailer. Robert Hansen, the Idaho State University anthropologist who worked with Gibson for two years to ensure *Apocalypto*'s authenticity, concedes the decapitation painting is fake, an artistic choice that was entirely by Gibson.

The murals I recommended were rejected because this one made the point more clearly, said Hansen.[10] (It should be noted that Gibson also made a generous seven-figure donation to Hansen's dig in northern Guatemala.[11])

Gibson's questionable use of Hansen's academic background during the making of *Apocalypto* is explored in further detail in *The Los Angeles Times'* coverage of the movie. In a particularly revealing statement, *Apocalypto's* production designer Tom Sanders said that, We had an archeologist, Dr. Richard Hansen, onboard . . . It was really fun to say Is there any proof they didn't do this? When he said, "There is no proof they didn't do that," that gives you some license to play.[12] Such license to play included showing in *Apocalypto* the Mayans playing a game where their captives are given a chance to run for their lives while Mayan warriors throw spears and fire arrows at them, even though neither Hansen nor *Apocalypto's* co-screenwriter Farhad Safina could say for certain if ancient Mayans ever did such a thing. The process of using these individuals as target practice is a real possibility, said Hansen. I couldn't say it did happen, but I couldn't say it didn't either. [Gibson] wanted to have some reason to have guys go after Rudy Youngblood (who plays Jaguar Paw), to go after the hero. . . . That was entirely Mel's scenario but it's highly reasonable.[13] Another of Gibson's scenarios a giant pit filled with hundreds of sacrificial bodies was, according to Hansen, based on conjecture whether those pits existed and that All [Gibson was] trying to do there is express the horror of it.[14] Gibson's usage of ancient Mayan architecture that does not fit the time period of the film was also his intention. There is nothing in the post-classical period that would match the size and majesty of that pyramid in the film, said Hansen. But Gibson was trying to make a story here. He was trying to depict opulence, wealth, consumption of resources.[15]

Finally, there is the matter of the film's ending, the arrival of European Christian missionaries, which did not actually happen until the Mayan cities were already abandoned. Traci Ardren, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Miami who has studied Classical Maya society for over twenty years, recently posted her opinions of why Gibson included this detail as the film's ending on the Web site [Archaeology.org](http://Archaeology.org):

I find the visual appeal of the film one of the most disturbing aspects of *Apocalypto*. . . . The fact that this film was made in Mexico and filmed in the Yucatec Maya language coupled with its visual appeal makes it all the more dangerous. It looks authentic; viewers will be captivated by the crazy, exotic mess of the city and the howler monkeys in the jungle. And who really cares that the Maya were not living in cities when the Spanish arrived? Yes, Gibson includes the arrival of clearly Christian missionaries (these guys are too clean to be conquistadors) in the last five minutes of the story (in the real world the Spanish arrived 300 years after the last Maya city was abandoned). It is one of the few calm moments in an otherwise aggressively paced film. The message? The end is near and the savior has come. Gibson's efforts at authenticity of location and language might, for some viewers, mask his blatantly colonial message that the Maya needed saving because they were rotten at the core. Using the decline of Classic urbanism as his backdrop, Gibson communicates that there was absolutely nothing redeemable about Maya culture, especially elite culture which is depicted as a disgusting feast of blood and excess. . . . Gibson replays, in glorious big-budget technicolor, an offensive and racist notion that Maya people were brutal to one another long before the arrival of Europeans and thus they deserve, in fact they needed, rescue. This same idea was used for 500 years to justify the subjugation of Maya people and it has been thoroughly deconstructed and rejected by Maya intellectuals and community leaders throughout the Maya area today.[16]

Many Mayans have protested Gibson's portrayal of the ancestors, with Mayan cultural groups such as the Nahual Foundation arguing that scenes of scary-looking Mayans with bone piercings and scarred faces hurling spears and sacrificing humans promote stereotypes about their culture. Basically the director is saying the Mayans are savages, stated Lucio Yaxon, a 23-year-old Mayan human rights activist.[17]

### Gory Be To God

The religious nature of one of *Apocalypto*'s bigger distortions the premature arrival of Christian missionaries has not been discussed by many film critics; one of them even suggested that the European arrival probably is best shrugged off and forgotten as just another weird apparition in a filmmaker's grand but cruel and twisted vision.[18] Yet for all the effort he put into his movie for supposed accuracy, Gibson deliberately warped the Mayan timeline in his narrative so that sprawling Mayan cities and incoming Christian missionaries can co-exist. Furthermore, the fact that the Europeans who arrive are missionaries, not conquistadors, indicates that the ending of *Apocalypto* does have both cultural and religious

overtones that suggest the missionaries and their god are the new beginning alluded to in Apocalypto's script and advertisements.

Perhaps if Gibson had not made any previous comments about his faith, or based any of his previous movies explicitly on his faith, it would be somewhat easier to give him the benefit of the doubt when religious ideas and symbols appear in his work. However, his last film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was as explicitly sectarian as it was gory in its depiction of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus, and it portrayed Jews as the primary perpetrators of Jesus' death. A devoted Catholic, Gibson owns his own Catholic church in Malibu for a very conservative branch of Catholicism that employs only the Latin Mass and rejects the reforms started by the Second Vatican Council (the Council that absolved all Jews of being guilty of deicide).[19] Gibson's father, Hutton Gibson, had already made a name for himself in the Holocaust-denial community by the time *The Passion* was released, which did not ease the Jews' concern of the film's anti-Semitic leanings. Gibson also cited two unusual sources as part of his research to ensure the accuracy of his depiction of the crucifixion: two nuns who lived in the 17th and 19th century, nuns who were both separated from the crucifixion by over a millennium. As summarized by Christopher Hitchens in a 2004 article for *Vanity Fair*:

The first of these women, Mary of Agreda, was a figure in 17th-century Spain who wrote that the Jewish culpability for the murder of Jesus descended to their posterity and even to this day continue[s] to afflict this group with horrible impurities. The second, Anne Catherine Emmerich, is better known. She was a 19th-century German, one of those who brooded for so long and so morbidly on the Crucifixion that she claimed to have received the stigmata the bloody wounds in hands and feet that are for some people the sign of the true devotee. She also told of a vision in which she saved an old Jewish lady from purgatory. This woman had confessed that Jews would slaughter Christian children and use their infant gore to thicken the Passover matzo. This blood libel, an even more depraved allegation than the Christ-killing one, was a powerful toxin in medieval demagoguery and was later much exploited by the Nazis.[20]

So, if Gibson is willing to include the writings of nuns who could not have possibly seen the crucifixion but claimed to have visions and stigmata and made false, gory accusations against Jews to ensure historical accuracy in *The Passion*, then it should probably not come as a surprise that he would be more than a little violent and careless with historical details in his depiction of another non-Christian culture. Not that Gibson's tastes in

violence ends at his filmmaking: when expressing his anger over one of The Passion's critics, New York Times columnist Frank Rich, Gibson said, I want to kill him. I want his intestines on a stick. ... I want to kill his dog.[21]

If Gibson learned anything from his previous filmmaking experience it would be that if you are going to demonize a minority group, pick one that the mainstream public knows and cares so little about. The portrayal of ancient Mayans in Apocalypto as violent heathens in need of salvation not only fits with Gibson's conservative Catholic understanding of the world, since the populations of modern-day Central and South America are overwhelmingly Catholic due to the religious affiliation of their European conquerors, but with his own upbringing in Australia, a country with its own brutal colonial past. He also found a way around the concept of white guilt. Instead of risking the arousal of remorseful feelings among his predominantly Caucasian audience by showing cowboys or conquistadores killing Indians, he chose instead to show Indians killing Indians or, to be more exact, show many Indians killing many, many Indians, and with many, many, many more Indians cheering them on. The Western genre of filmmaking may no longer be the blockbuster franchise it was before, but it appears that portraying Indians as brutal, bloodthirsty savages from a primitive, bygone era is still considered acceptable in mainstream filmmaking. While Gibson has claimed before that his movie is a critique of the Bush administration, his movie clearly exploits the white American fear of exotic, swarthy foreigners with unusual languages and violent, inexplicable religious beliefs to add appeal to his movie[22] the same kind of xenophobia Bush has utilized in promoting his anti-Arab, anti-Muslim War on Terror that has resulted in countless cases of profiling, harassment and incarceration on the basis of race and religion. Moreover, The Passion of the Christ focused on the martyrdom of Jesus, who died for his religious faith. In contrast, when looking at Gibson's Apocalypto world, there are no martyrs for indigenous non-Christian indigenous beliefs worth mentioning and since Christianity brought to them a new beginning they so desperately needed, whatever injustices indigenous cultures suffered at the hands of their Christian conquerors is likewise moot.

To put the figurative shoe on the other foot, imagine if a violent, gory movie was made that portrayed a large medieval Catholic community as a group of child-molesting, Jew-torturing, witch-burning, crusading holy warriors who relished gruesomely executing thousands of innocent people in Vatican Square, and that a new beginning for the Catholics was provided at the end of the film by the arrival of several Scientologists.

(Yes, I know witch burnings ended centuries before the beginning of Scientology, but if you use the same kind of sloppy chronology that Gibson uses in *Apocalypto*, Scientology and church-sanctioned witch killings could easily co-exist.) Also imagine if this film was written and directed by one of Hollywood's more well-known and controversial Scientologists Tom Cruise, for example. Do you think that the mainstream media would give Cruise's movie such a free pass, calling it at best a thrill-ride and at worst a blatantly sadistic spectacle, and not make connections between Cruise's religious beliefs and the ending of his film? Just think of how the Pope would respond to hearing that Cruise, in his search for historical accuracy, used a cast of no-name Catholic actors who he had to train to act like medieval Catholics to fit the movie, to knock the 21st century right out of them?[23] Somehow, I doubt Catholics like Gibson would view such a film as an inspiration to Catholic actors who aspire to perform relevant roles in the film industry.

### Mayans Today

For as gory as *Apocalypto* is, it does not compare to the atrocities faced by the Mayans when the Spanish conquistadors and their missionaries arrived a subject *Apocalypto* completely avoids. Over the last 500 years, Mayans have been subjected to forced removal from ancestral lands, terrorism, and genocide; human rights abuses against the Mayans continue to this day. In a summary by Amnesty International, Mayans experienced considerable losses during the recent civil war in Guatemala that started in the 1960s:

The conflict between the Guatemalan military and the armed opposition was characterized by numerous human rights abuses that included large-scale massacres, disappearances and the cultural destruction of Indigenous communities through displacement. While no segment of the Guatemalan society was unaffected by the conflict, the vast majority of the victims were unarmed Mayan villagers. Indigenous women suffered from rape and sexual abuse by the army, cases which have been vastly under-reported. Male populations of entire Indigenous communities were forced to serve as civil patrols, putting them on the front line as shields for the army and forcing them to commit human rights violations. In fact, over 80 percent of the victims of human rights abuses during the civil war were Mayan. Even more disturbing is the fact that according to the Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH), the Guatemalan state itself was responsible for over 90 percent of abuses committed during the conflict. The CEH itself concluded that the Guatemalan army and its civil patrols had been responsible for genocide

in four specific areas of the country. The CEH report, *Memory of Silence*, concluded that the state's violent stance stemmed from its internal enemy policy, intrinsic to the National Security Doctrine which grouped all opponents of the state under one banner, and was used to justify the massacres carried out against the Mayan populations. Moreover, documented atrocities such as mass killings, rapes, kidnappings, and forced relocations were left uninvestigated and unpunished by a biased judiciary, reinforcing impunity, and the discrimination felt by the Mayan people. Those who spoke out against the injustice were labeled enemies of the state, and became vulnerable to harsh state retaliation.[24]

Even though the conflict ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in December 1996 by representatives of the Guatemalan government and the Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, URNG), Mayans continue to face violent, prejudicial treatment at the hands of the Guatemalan government. Mayan farmers still work for the landowning elite in a semi-feudal system that was held over from Spanish colonization, and local authorities support the influential farm owners in their regular violation of the farmer's land and labor rights. Laborers who dare to protest their treatment are often subjected to violent evictions, physical injuries and even death at the hands of police and other individuals who receive food, supplies, and money from the wealthy landowners.[25] Further complicating matters are oil, logging and nickel mining companies that have expressed interest in using Mayan homelands to further their own business ends. When Mayans attempt to resist the damage they face from corporate interests, such as the contamination of their local waters and poisoning of their wetland environment by oil drilling, they are met with harsh force. Local activist Carlos Coc Rax, leader of the Association for the Development of the Maya Q "eqchi" People of El Estor who worked on behalf of several indigenous communities facing intrusion by local landowners, vanished in April 1999 after organizing his community of Santa Rosa to denounce illegal logging in the area; Legal Advisor Erwin Haroldo Ochoa Lopez, who was investigating the illegal activities allegedly being carried out by Basic Resources Oil Company in the protected Laguna del Tigre Reserve and National Park, was assassinated in February 2000.[26]

### Spear the Savage, Spoil the Missionary

*Apocalypto* was originally scheduled for release on August 4th, which would have put it closer to the DVD release of another missionary-themed film, *End of the Spear*. Released theatrically in early 2006, *End of the Spear* depicts the real-life story of a group of missionaries who tried to

convert the violent Waodani tribe (also known as the Huaorani tribe), an isolated tribe living deep in the rain forest of Ecuador, in 1956. As a result, five of the missionaries were speared by the tribe. (In the movie, the missionaries refused to defend themselves; as one explains to his son, We can't shoot the Waodani, son. They are not ready for heaven we are.) The families of the dead missionaries came back to live with the tribe several years later, forgiving the killers and converting them to Christianity. The film particularly focuses on Steve Saint (yes, his last name is Saint), the son of one of the slain missionaries. The story behind End of the Spear is well-known in evangelical circles: the missionaries who died are referred to as martyrs in some evangelical articles and Web sites, and the event itself is referred to by others as the greatest missionary story of the 20th Century and served as an inspiration to future missionaries.[27] The overall message of the movie is that because the Christian missionaries were able to forgive the people who killed their fellow missionaries, Christianity brought peace to the savage Waodanis who, according to the missionaries account, were murdering each other to near extinction prior to the conversion.

End of the Spear was directed by Jim Hanon and produced by a company called Every Tribe Entertainment (ETE). ETE was founded by Mart Green, who also founded Mardel Christian and Educational Supply Stores. ETE's first release, Beyond the Gates of Splendor, was a documentary based upon the events depicted in End of the Spear. To help sell their low-budget movie, ETE pre-screened it for Christian groups before releasing it in theaters, where it grossed \$11,703,287.[28] End of the Spear has a soundtrack CD featuring popular Christian musicians such as BarlowGirl, Steven Curtis Chapman, Nicole C. Mullen and Mark Schultz. You can even go to the official Web site, <http://www.endofthespear.com/> (be sure to listen to the site's faux tribal drum beats), and buy official Spear Gear merchandise, or go to the Christian Broadcasting Network's (CBN) own special Web page, <http://www.cbn.com/special/endofthespear/>, devoted to End of the Spear. ETE's movie went on to win the Crystal Heart Award for Best Dramatic Feature at the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis, an award that included \$50,000 in cash.[29] Future ETE film projects include documentaries and stories of people living in the persecuted church and amidst the ongoing crisis in Africa.[30]

While all of this is fine for ETE and the Christian entertainment industry, End of the Spear, like Apocalypto, does not tell the complete story and gets many details wrong.[31] For example, even though the film's press release says that End of the Spear tells its story from the perspective of

the Waodani tribe[32], the fact is that no actual Waodanis appear in the film at all the actual language heard in the film is that of the Embera people, who are from Panama and were cast as the film's natives.[33] (According to conservative columnist Cal Thomas, Director Hanon says the Waodani at first refused to cooperate with acting out a violent representation of themselves, despite financial incentives.[34]) Like *Apocalypto*, *End of the Spear* focuses on the more violent and bizarre aspects of the Waodani tribe without providing any context or motive. In an article for *The Revealer*, Lucas Bessire outlines many of the film's inaccuracies:

As with most indigenous groups in lowland South America, the terrible violence that preceded peaceful relations between Huaorani and missionaries was a consequence of contact with diseases and outsiders. It was never the natural state of these groups. The approximately 700 Huaorani, called Auca (Savages), that survived into the 20th century were only able to do so by fiercely defending their homeland on the south banks of the Rio Napo against explorers and colonists. In return, they were hunted down like animals, enslaved, and murdered whenever possible. As anthropologist Laura Rival and others have demonstrated, this violence was legitimated by exaggerated reports of their violent, aggressive nature; one suspects *End of the Spear* would play well for an audience seeking reassurance for such images. The missionizing endeavor among the Huaorani, as for many groups, was possible because of the convergence of corporate and state interests in taking possession of territory and resources that belonged to native people; in this case, rubber and oil. Missionaries were given exclusive state license to contact, round up and sedentize particularly troublesome groups who were not sufficiently terrorized to surrender. All of this is erased from *End of the Spear*. Glory, personal salvation and cold hard cash were among the Saint's goals. Today, evangelicals are still racing to reach the few remaining isolated peoples across the Americas for just such reasons.[35]

Yet in spite of its gross inaccuracies that cover a horrible, inconvenient truth, *End of the Spear* proves that not only are evangelical Christians willing to go to great lengths to convert non-Christian jungle savages, but that they can also make movies out of such experiences that include profitable merchandising opportunities (such as DVD sales and soundtrack CDs that feature leading Christian musicians), which will in turn be distributed with the aim of promoting more missionary activity that can also inspire future cinematic adaptations and merchandising ventures, and so on.[36] *Spear's* press release also mentioned that, Every Tribe Entertainment has agreed to donate 50 percent of all proceeds from the

film and licensing program, including the End of the Spear Original Motion Picture Soundtrack, to benefit the Waodani and other indigenous people like them. [37] However, it is unclear how this money will benefit the Waodani and other tribes that have been settled by the missionaries into reservation-like church towns where they no longer cause problems through nomadic roaming and attacks against the illegal (oil) drilling. [38]

### The Competitive Christian Conversion Crisis

Not only do the religious stereotypes perpetuated by films such as *Apocalypto* and *End of the Spear* continue to tarnish the reputations of and overlook the political injustices faced by non-Christian indigenous cultures of Central and South America, but they also fail to address the current religious conflicts within such regions. Even though the assumption is that Christianity will bring peace to non-Christian indigenous communities, numerous clashes between Catholics and evangelical Protestants continue to rage on within several indigenous communities. For example, in the last 30 years, the Tzotzil Mayan indigenous community of Chamula in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas has been shaken by 100 deaths resulting from religious conflicts, while another 30,000 community members have been expelled for professing Protestant beliefs that provoked local orthodox Catholic authorities.[39] (In an odd coincidence, these authorities, like Gibson, practice an orthodox brand of Catholicism that also rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, which promoted greater openness to other religions.[40]) Such discrimination against Protestants in Chamula has also resulted in the expulsion of 200 children from public schools because they came from non-Catholic families.[41] While religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants among indigenous communities in Mexico is located mainly in the state of Chiapas, similar incidents have occurred in the last few years among other indigenous communities such as the Huicholes of Nayarit, the ethnic groups of Oaxaca, and the Nãñhú of Hidalgo.[42]

Yet regardless of which version of Christianity will ultimately gain the upper hand in such quarrels, the original, non-Christianized tribal religions and religious practices have suffered the greatest losses. As stated by Rafael González Roc, spokesman for the Committee for Campesino Unity in Guatemala, Many religions have destroyed what we are, and it is sad to see the contempt that the new generations have for what we once were. They think that the traditional beliefs of the Mayans (the main indigenous ethnic group in Central America) are witchcraft, or satanic. [43] According to the 2004 International Religious Freedom Report prepared by the U.S. Department of State:

While there is no government policy of (religious) discrimination, a lack of resources and political will to enforce existing laws and implement the Peace Accords limits the free expression of indigenous religious practice. Indigenous leaders state that Mayan culture does not receive the official recognition that it is due. The Government has not provided mechanisms for indigenous control of or free access to ceremonial sites considered sacred within indigenous culture. Individuals seeking to practice traditional religious ceremonies at sites considered sacred must pay an entrance fee or request permission far in advance from the Historical Anthropological Institute (a division of the Ministry of Culture). The Government's use of sacred sites as revenue-generating tourist destinations is considered by some indigenous groups to be an affront to their spiritual rights. In October 2001, the Government swore in the Commission for the Definition of Sacred Places to address such issues. However, the Commission has not taken action to open, or restrict, any sacred sites to religious use since its establishment. Often, individuals who wish to hold religious ceremonies in sacred sites must pay an entrance fee or request permission from the Ministry of Culture many weeks or months in advance.[44]

The report goes on to say that there is a widespread intolerance of Mayan "spirituality" and the practice of indigenous religious rituals, and While many members of evangelical congregations are indigenous, local evangelical leaders often denounce traditional religious practices as "witchcraft" or "devil worship," and actively discourage their indigenous members from being involved with traditional religious practices. [45]

The report does mention that Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of indigenous practices than the Catholic Church, whose approach in many areas of the country is to tolerate traditional practice not directly in conflict with Catholic dogma, [46] but which and how many traditional practices that do and do not conflict with Catholic dogma is not specified. Yet because (as the report says) Many Catholic churches are built on sacred Mayan sites and that Mayan leaders report that, in a few areas of the country, Catholic priests have forbidden followers of Mayan spirituality access to these sites, [47] it would appear that the Catholic Church's tolerance of traditional Mayan religious practices is not much more than its Protestant counterparts. (After all, the Catholic Church willingly endorsed and participated in Spain's brutal conquest of the Mayans and other tribes how can that be considered tolerant?[48])

Such setbacks faced by the indigenous tribal religions of Central and South America could even affect future environmental preservation efforts.

In early 2006, the United Nations (UN) led a new \$1.7 million initiative that aims to help protect sacred sites around the world by documenting species, conducting surveys with local communities, and assessing potential for ecotourism. The initiative, which is named the Conservation of Biodiversity Rich Sacred Natural Site initiative, is predicated upon the findings by environmental experts that suggest that the preservation of sacred sites is essential to slowing the loss of animal and plant species. A part of the findings, a string of religious sites have been identified across the globe as pilot ecosystems where local customs have helped protect collections of biological richness. There is clear and growing evidence of a link between cultural diversity and biodiversity, Klaus Toepfer, UN Environment Program (UNEP) executive director, said in his announcement of the initiative. Sadly, sacred sites are also under threat and there is an urgent need to help local, indigenous and traditional peoples safeguard their heritage which in turn can do much to conserve the biological and genetic diversity upon which we all depend. [49]

Several evangelical Christian groups have also expressed interest in getting involved in environmental protection as well.[50] Of course, just as the evangelical involvement in fighting the AIDS crisis overseas came with its own set of preconditions, such as promoting abstinence and not condoms,[51] evangelicals have their own concerns to address while dealing with environmental issues. They refer to their environmental efforts as creation care, lest anyone confuse it with environmentalism, a word that connotes liberals, secularism and Democrats in evangelical circles.[52] For example, on the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section of Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) Web site, the questions Does addressing climate change mean we're becoming liberals? and Are we working with environmentalists? are both answered with No ; the answer to the working with environmentalists question goes on to say that once we have established our own voice on this issue we should use this as an opportunity to share the gospel with those who care about environmental issues. [53] Evangelicals also have suspicions about environmentalists religious beliefs. While evangelicals are open to being good stewards of God's creation, they believe people should only worship God, not creation, said John C. Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, in an interview with The Washington Post. This may sound like splitting hairs. But evangelicals don't see it that way. Their stereotype of environmentalists would be Druids who worship trees. Indeed, Richard Cizik, former leader of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), said as much during an interview with New York Times Magazine. He said that environmentalists have a bad reputation among evangelicals because they keep kooky

religious company . . . Some environmentalists are pantheists who believe creation itself is holy, not the Creator. [54]

With evangelicals looking to share the gospel with those who keep kooky religious company , it would seem that Christian evangelists are looking to "save" nature-based indigenous tribal religious groups through proselytization while working to save the environment, with stereotypes from films such as *Apocalypto* and *End of the Spear* convincing them of the righteousness of such intentions. On this particular issue, some environmental groups have addressed the impact of religious conversion on the environment in some of its literature, such as the World Conservation Union's report, *Protecting Sacred Natural Sites of Indigenous and Traditional Peoples: an IUCN Perspective* :

Many traditional sacred natural sites have been appropriated or destroyed because they were considered pagan or idolatrous by newly emerging world faiths. In some instances religious buildings were forcefully superimposed upon traditional sites. While it is important to guard against "demonizing" the involvement of major faiths with indigenous and traditional peoples, it is important to acknowledge that the erosion of sacred natural sites can be directly related to the expansion of the dominant faiths in many cases.[55]

The report also includes the erosion of traditional values, particularly associated with widespread diffusion of institutionalized religions brought in by colonization processes, and which considered traditional beliefs as "superstitious" as part of its list of threats to sacred natural sites (SNSs).[56] Nevertheless, how the more open-minded and tolerant environmentalist groups deal with evangelical Christian environmental efforts remains to be seen particularly if the evangelicals accept financial kickbacks from oil companies to aid them in their conversion efforts, as was the case in the *Waadani/Huaorani* situation. Even if certain evangelicals claim to be doing environmental preservation work, that still would not preclude them from taking money from environmental polluters to suit their own ends. For example, Pat Robertson openly acknowledged the reality of global warming on his 700 Club show: "I not been one who believed in the global warming, he said. But I tell you, they are making a convert out of me as these blistering summers. . . .We really need to address the burning of fossil fuels." [57] However, Robertson also used his Christian Broadcasting Network to heavily promote *End of the Spear*, promotion that also overlooked the connection between the Saint missionaries and the corporate interests that supported their

proselytization efforts in Ecuador.

### Future Filmmaking

Essentially, *Apocalypto* and *End of the Spear* portray a world where savagery thrives when Christianity is absent, even if the actual historical record shows a very different reality. It could be argued that Mel Gibson and Every Tribe Entertainment are simply using cinema to express their religious beliefs. Yet as the Mayans and Waodani/Huaorani have seen for themselves, ruthless Christian missionary efforts to convert non-Christian groups have led to more conflict and corruption, not less, and this inevitable outcome cannot be ignored if religious freedom and diversity are to prevail. As eloquently summarized by Robert Samson:

Cultures and families have been crippled and destroyed by missionaries who, by converting a few, inflame them with fear of hellfire and turn the passions of their newly converted against the others in their family, children against parents, and spouse against spouse. When one member of a family is convinced that the others are heathens worshipping the devil in disguise at their traditional family altar, he or she then feels justified in using any forceful argument or accusation to convert other family members to the only way to salvation. This divides a family and culture against itself, creating a cancer within it, resulting in loss of respect and love and peace among its members. Some never speak to each other again. Children, spouses, and relatives abandon their home, carried away by their convert's conviction that the entire family is living in sin and going to hell.[58]

The film's blatant distortion of the truth shows how far mainstream Christian American culture a culture built on colonial policies and expansionist ideology has yet to go to understand the true, irreplaceable value of non-Eurocentric, non-Christian cultures and how the forceful imposition of another faith within these cultures can severely damage them, condemning them to an existence rife with injustice, violence and poverty. Mayan activist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu Tum once said, We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle, or zoos. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism. [59] To respect the people and faiths of the present, we must stop creating and accepting false, self-serving depictions of the past.

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[9] Stevens, Dana. A Pre-History of Violence Slate.com, December 7, 2006. <http://www.slate.com/id/2155107/>.

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decapitation, even though Safina's familiarity with ancient Mayan culture is less than Hansen's. See In Apocalypto, fact and fiction play hide and seek. The Los Angeles Times, December 9, 2006.

[11] Miller, Lisa. Beliefwatch: Sacrifice. Newsweek Web site, December 11, 2006. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15994163/site/newsweek/>.

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[15] Ibid.

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[19] Hitchens, Christopher. The Gospel According to Mel. Vanity Fair, March 2004. Pgs. 200-206.

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[21] Mel's "Passionate defense gives offense. New York Daily News Web site, September 6, 2003. <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/115475p-104184c.html>.

[22] See also Turistas, another recent box office release that depicts several attractive Caucasian tourists being murdered one by one as part of an illegal organ donation racket while vacationing in South America.

[23] Gibson's original knock the 21st century right out of them comment about his Indian extras reminded me of the Black Acting School skit in Robert Townsend's parody of the entertainment industry's portrayal of blacks in *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987). In the mock Black Acting School ad, white instructors prepare aspiring black actors for roles that include pimps, drug dealers, prostitutes, and Civil War era slaves.

[24] Just Earth! Guatemala. Amnesty International Web site, [http://www.amnestyusa.org/justearth/indigenous\\_people/guatemala.html](http://www.amnestyusa.org/justearth/indigenous_people/guatemala.html).

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[27] Bessire, Lucas. The Real Point of the Spear. *The Revealer*, May 3, 2006. [http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless\\_002525.php](http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless_002525.php).

[28] See the Rotten Tomatoes Web page for End of the Spear, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/end\\_of\\_the\\_spear/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/end_of_the_spear/).

[29] Film by OKC-based Every Tribe Entertainment wins award. *The Journal Record*, October 27, 2005. [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4182/is\\_20051027/ai\\_n15811003](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4182/is_20051027/ai_n15811003).

[30] See Mart Green: Above and Beyond the Gates of Splendor. Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) Web site, [http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/mart\\_green033005.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/mart_green033005.aspx).

[31] Even the one of the Spear posters blatantly telegraphs how the film views the world using broad stereotypes. On the right side of the poster are two clean-cut white people (the missionaries), one looking down and the other onto some unseen horizon, while an angry, swarthy man with a large earring is looking straight at you (the savage). The two sides are separated by a spear.

[32] Jones, Kim. Word Records and End of Spear Soundtrack Press Release. <http://christianmusic.about.com/od/musicnews/a/wordendofspear.htm>.

[33] Gonzalez, Ed. End of the Spear review. Slant Magazine, 2005.  
[http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/film\\_review.asp?ID=1986](http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/film_review.asp?ID=1986).

[34] Bessire, Lucas. The Real Point of the Spear. The Revealer, May 3, 2006. [http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless\\_002525.php](http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless_002525.php).

[35] Ibid., [http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless\\_002525.php](http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless_002525.php). Additional accounts of encounters between missionaries, oil interests, the CIA and indigenous South American tribes can be seen in the documentary Trinkets and Beads (1996) and the book Thy Will Be Done by Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett.

[36] However, End of the Spear was not without its own controversies within evangelical Christian circles: it was discovered later on that the film's leading actor, Chad Allen, was gay. See Evangelical Filmmakers Criticized for Hiring Gay Actor by Neela Banerjee. The New York Times, February 2, 2006.  
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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid. doctrine

[48] See Indian Country for more information on the Catholic Church's doctrine discovery papal bulls and their ongoing effect on indigenous American tribal autonomy, in particular Indigenous in Americas just say no to papal bull (<http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096413472>) and Newcomb: Review of "Unlearning the Language of Conquest" (<http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096414102>).

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