

# "Are you comfortable with that?"

Are you comfortable with that now-oh-so-common question in American conversations? When you're asked it? When (if you do) you ask it? This Thinksheet is to give it a bit of theology-&-culture analysis.

1 Yesterday the question popped into my mind when NEWSWEEK's Ken Woodward asked me whether I thought Mel Gibson's "The Passion of <sup>the</sup> Christ" (to be released next month, on Ash Wed.) would prove more "offensive" to Christians than to Jews. More threatening (I responded), for Christians must feel the shock from the inside of their religion, whereas Jesus' crucifixion/resurrection is no part of Jewish religion (& Brooks deliberately avoided the visual stereotypes of Jews in casting Jesus' enemies). Repeatedly, Brooks has said (variously worded) "I hope to offend none & inspire all."

Besides: "When was He [Jesus] not controversial?" The response of a man confirmed recently in the RCC at age 55 (as mentioned in the current automatic emailing of David Bruce's "Hollywood Jesus" ["Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View"]--mailto:newsletter--subscribe@hollywoodjesus.com; in this issue, Bruce attributes the tsunami interest in THE DaVINCI CODE to public disenchantment with institution religion & revulsion at some clergy-behavior).

2 Why did this Thinksheet's title-question pop into my head? Because (I said to Ken), as Christ's agonies (in his last 12 hours, in Gibson's film) are shocking to human sensibilities, the film shockingly exposes the question for its revelation of our current culture's superficial, surface-only quality. It is as though, leaving the theater, viewers of "The Passion of Christ" were asked by street-pollsters' "Were you comfortable with that?" THAT! Nothing viewable in two dimensions could make anyone more UN-comfortable!

3 ...and my third comment to Ken was this: Christians who've been believing-&-living their religion lite, by cheap grace (Easter without Good Friday, love without sacrifice, salvation without pain) will be shocked by this radical irruption of repressed elements in their comfortable revisioning of the biblical Story of the reality of evil, the cost to God & humanity (to the God-Man) of the victory over evil, & the cost ("Take up your cross") of discipleship. This aspect of shock is from the gap between Christianity real & the current Christianity lite: "in America, the inward-looking quality once associated with strong versions of the faith has been transformed by the individualism and hedonism of American culture" (p.66 of Alan Wolfe's THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN RELIGION: How We Actually Live Our Faith [Free Press/03]).

4 Now, observe how comfortable our question is with the American cultural "spirit of the time" (Zeitgeist). We are educated by television's infotainment, seduced by Hollywood's glitter, ecstaticized by professional (& pseudo-professional school-) sports, manipulated by Madison Avenue's teaching us the price of everything & the value of nothing, & soothed into "spiritual" reveries by institutional as well as entrepreneurial religion. And all these applicants for our attention/time/money are concerned so to shape their blishments as to elicit from us, when they ask "Are you comfortable with that?" the answer YES!

5 Negative hermeneutics explores what, that the interpreter considers relevant, is not in the text/situation/question & asks why the omission/absence. As the bottom-line question about how one lives, our question leaves out everything uncomfortable in human life. Make your own list! Hearing from the couple that they plan not to have children, a marriage counselor asks "Are you comfortable about not having children?" Of course they're comfortable or they wouldn't have injected that stipulation into the conversation! And of course, if by inadvertence, they came to parenthood, just think of the discomforts! More individualistic-hedonistic than most, Italy's youth are increasingly childless, & that country's population is in steep decline.

6 When comfort is life's *summum bonum*, community disappears, & individuals "bowl alone". Everything, including sexuality/love, is commodified in the interest of pleasure....No wonder I am uncomfortable with this Thinksheet's bottom-line question!

7 But a positive construal of the question is possible: rightly ordered **discomforts** are divine signal-calls to action. ("Rightly ordered" means discomforts deriving from abuses/disruptions/violations of God-given structures/processes--the opposite of disordered discomforts from commitments to the fallenness of human nature.)

BODILY, your feet hurt because you're wearing the same shoes you wore yesterday, & the hurt is the signal-call to change shoes (& make a habit of not wearing the same shoes day after day). And since the human world is made up almost entirely of others, recycle to the poor shoes you're unlikely to wear again soon.

MENTALLY, boredom is one discomfort by which God is telling you to attend to what's wrong with how you're using your mind. I remember someone saying "I'm so bored it's about to drive me out of my mind!" Better to be driven *into* one's mind, i.e. into reflecting on the quality of food one has been feeding into one's mind & the uses to which one has been putting one's intellectual energies. In his logotherapy, Viktor Frankl taught that one dimension of human dignity is that no one can take from anyone the ability & therefore the responsibility to determine the use of one's own mind. (I heard him tell of a 27-year-old painter who got ALS & could no longer paint; then became blind & could no longer teach painting; but then so transcended his affliction that his students came regularly to talk with him. "ALS," said Frankl, "could not take from him the power to choose the attitude he would take toward what was happening to him, & he became himself a work of art.")

SPIRITUALLY-&emotionally, human beings experience heart-ache discomforts from "existential anxiety" (again Frankl: emptiness of transcendent meaning), griefs (from losses & failures), worries, fears. If you will, if you choose to, you can receive all these as just so many calls to prayer--as in the gospel song "Heart-aches, take them all to Jesus! He will take your heartaches all away."

The shoe-salesman will ask "Are you comfortable in those?" And the doctors of the mind & of the soul will inquire as to your inner discomforts in hope of helping you see & attend to the causes of your distress.

As creatures, we need both creature comforts & the creature discomforts of our finitude. As sinners, we need to feel the discomforts that call us to repentance & amendment of life. And as saved by grace, we need to give thanks for the Spirit's afflicting our comfortableness so as to move us to comfort the afflicted.

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