The Role of Language and Mediation in Selected Aspects of Contemporary Culture.

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Introduction

Internationally, an enormous amount of effort has been spent, addressing the shortfalls in such perceived “mission-critical” fields of knowledge as SET (Science, Engineering and Technology). Here a clearly naive and foolhardy political agenda often underpins why these particular fields are given such hegemony over other less respected fields. Regardless, given that the avowed intention is to prioritise these sanctified fields, is it not strange (given their not inconsiderable sponsorship), that students (as a whole) still seem to continue to struggle with (*inter alia*) mathematics and science literacy?

Specifically, the retention rate of South Africa’s potential graduates in SET and business is a matter of grave concern, especially considering that the South African Department of Education (2000) made it quite clear that it had no real idea why this was happening. Despite every effort to increase relevant study in the SET and business fields coupled with a corresponding dramatic and alarming marginalisation of the very sector that is needed in this crisis (i.e. liberal arts and humanities) there are not enough academically prepared learners to successfully enter into these favoured knowledge areas because so few school-leavers obtain the necessary grades in these highly sought after fields – the so-called “hard disciplines”.

Given that we accept that we live in a world where science (or more correctly the language of science) dominates the throne of knowledge, the other contenders for this role, such as religion, fine art and even the liberal arts generally, are seemingly being undermined and certainly undervalued as having a justifiable role in today’s global society. It would seem that most decision makers today are unaware of the real importance of language and the liberal arts because they are still largely trapped in the nineteenth century paradigm of consciousness, a worldview which was founded on a more traditional epistemology which supports the hypothesis that we construct our knowledge of the world from inside out. Here, it would seem, many persons still believe that we construct our knowledge and our communal language on the grounds of our inner subjective needs; where we create private inner definitions of undisclosed experiences and then amass a vocabulary of words to explain them.

However, what is even more surprising (given the fact that this outmoded notion has been successfully supplanted by a linguistic paradigm) by-and-large educators and
policy makers still seem to be losing sight of the fact that the sciences by themselves are not our salvation and their study in isolation will not ensure that students master them sans basic literacy. They do not appear to realise that the languages of science are but one small sub-set of a very wide range of language games we play in our attempt to understand the world around us. In addition, the benefits of being able to conceptualise in an efficient, global/international language as well as the freedom and liberation to constricted thinking processes as offered by the liberal arts as a whole seems to be overlooked.

A similar misperception exists among the more technocratic members of our society that tends to prioritise the production of written textual-based research outputs over non verbal linguistic forms, especially the visual and iconic forms such as are found in the fine arts.

However what does seem to be evident is that even if a non-verbal linguistic form may be interpreted by persons “fluent” in that particular language game, surely they still base their visual literacy on an underlying verbal literacy? In short, uninformed minds cannot be fully visually literate. And even after a visual form has been established it still needs to be interpreted into other linguistic modes such as speech and writing.

Skaggs clearly supports this claim when he advocated that English departments in universities should emphasize visual literacy “because visual literacy is impossible without verbal facility” (1981). Indeed the debate still continues regarding the possibility of visual images remaining signs devoid of import until such time as they are placed within some textual perspective. Skaggs reminds us that certain images often do not make sense until we have given it a “verbal title” or have “translated it into a series of verbal associations” (1981). He goes on to ask “Does a series of silent visual images, as in the montage of cinema, create its own context of meaning, or does it, too, need to be translated verbally? Such questions are, of course, among the central concerns of semiology, but semiology has not laid them to rest” (Skaggs, 1981).

This in no way undermines the notion that it is quite possible to think in a nonverbal language. Indeed, there is no doubt that our medieval forefathers were far more
visually literate than we are today and (inter alia), issues of faith were communicated quite successfully and powerfully through the medium of image and symbol. However, what must be assumed is that visual (iconic) literacy and verbal/alphabet literacy are interconnected and further the phenomenon characterized by the prioritisation of writing at the expense of the non-verbal languages is an attribute more or less peculiar to the modern western world.

Regardless of this hegemony of the written word, textual linguistic proficiency seems to improve and inform visual literacy. The notion that the great artists were mostly illiterates who, relying totally on an inherent ("God-given") talent were able to make beautiful artefacts because they were merely “good with their hands” is a long outdated falsehood which unfortunately still persists in contemporary western society. Indeed, the difference between creating say a work of art and formulating a written judgment pertaining to the said artefact should illicit neither a reciprocal elitism nor an hierarchic delineation of these two processes.

If we but briefly turn to history we will immediately see that many of the leading lights in visual and tactile creation proved that they were equally at home in a textual linguistic paradigm. For example Alberti, Cellini, Cézanne, Lebrun, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Poussin, Rubens, Reynolds, Vasari, Van Gogh etc. each demonstrated their ability to conceive and manifest physical art forms as well as produce written lucid conjectures as to the nature and purpose of their trade, thus showing that these are not adversative or conflicting activities. Further, significant contributions may effectively be made to society in more than one discipline by a single thinker.

Here Costache’s refutation of the more common perception of the artist as “verbal illiterate” is pertinent:

The notion that ‘true’ art is the product of individuals who are social outcasts, inarticulate, or suffering from some sort of mental disease, and preferably dead at a young age, and that their emotional states make them incapable of in-depth understanding, in stark contrast to the image of the erudite, restrained and controlled scholars, are outdated, romanticized and mythical models, perpetuated, unfortunately, by the media. Moreover, the assumption that artists make art but can’t or do not have to talk or write about it, an excuse widely used by art students, and that theorists rarely know anything about the creative process, has been consistently refuted by the many texts written from Leonardo da Vinci to Mary Kelly. The abundance of these carefully articulated writings demonstrate the thoughtfulness and critical awareness artists and theorists have of the dialogue between text and image inherent to making as well as
understanding art. Even van Gogh, a martyr of the stereotypical ‘misunderstood genius,’ whose artistic career has been distorted by scores of films and books, wrote with lucidity and insight about art and his work. (s.a.: http://www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/costache.html)

The present situation experienced in South African higher education seems to be as a result of the endorsement of science and maths education at the expense of language proficiency and further, even where “lip service” is given to the languages, visual literacy is rarely (if ever) considered to be important. Both are the domain of the liberal arts and despite their role in the total spectrum of human experience, including their understanding of the irrational, are seemingly dismissed by virtue of the attitudes of educationalists and policy makers in general. It is for example, well known, that in most western societies and the developing world that when the money runs out the humanities and especially the liberal arts are normally first on the firing line. It would appear that we insist on measuring the value of our actions and achievements in purely acquisitive and financial terms. Indeed, both our technological and cultural accomplishments are ultimately appraised in terms of a profit margin. And here, it would seem that the Liberal Arts as a whole have lost their status – a fact that is often reflected in the very language that is used to describe them – where the liberal arts as “soft disciplines” are commonly viewed as being inferior to the sciences.

The question thus arises whether the linguistic paradigm has any merit. For if it does then it would appear that without a good conceptual grasp of reality through the medium of an adequate global, all-encompassing language plus the critical thinking skills made available by such disciplines as philosophy and history which are themselves dependent on the very mastery of an international language(s), a person is hardly likely to be able to become proficient in say a scientific or technological milieu. The ideal of course may even be multi-lingualism including proficiency in at least one international language (especially where the vocabulary of the individual is significantly increased). However for most individuals who are equipped with only their mother tongue language, and where this mother tongue language does not have the scope and range of an international language the individual concerned if desirous of personal empowerment would they not do better to adopt an international language in order to take advantage of the extended vocabulary it offers? Can we go further and say that not only is thought (thinking) a linguistic phenomenon but in addition a particular language (or language game) has the ability, by virtue of its very
structure, to modify / influence the very way we think – a notion that seems to be in some accord with certain aspects of the well known SWH (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis)?

As an aside, the SWH, so named after the (then revolutionary) ideas of two American linguists, viz.: Edward Sapir and his disciple Benjamin Whorf espoused the hypothesis that all human beings have a vital need to make some sense of the world in which they live. They do this by enforcing order on what they perceive around them. In this regard, both Sapir and Whorf postulated in similar ways that language was the very means by which humans controlled the world. For this reason, the SWH is also known as linguistic determinism.

In this context at least, the SWH seems to support the view that the very architecture of a person’s language game has a profound influence on their worldview and perception. If supported it would confirm that language literally does embody a person’s culture and accurately defines a person’s sense of self. Using Dreyfus’ metaphor of “embodiment”, the only way we could develop a set of words/gestures for talking about any phenomenon, is by accepting that concepts arise in specific social situations and result in publicly accessible behaviour. In this regard, vocabulary is constantly checked and verified against communal usage; even the rules of grammar are ultimately, socially authorized. Obviously, this practicality does not in any way contradict the theory that the linguistic system, or what Saussure called *langue*, exceeds any given society, whose members have to internalize the rules of a language’s grammar when they “enter” language. With this in mind it is still important to realise that being part of a linguistic community informs and reinforces the very rules we possess in our particular language.

With this context in mind it would be informative to ascertain some of the key roles that textual language and iconic mediation play apropos some selected aspects of contemporary culture, including religious belief.

**Statement of the Problem:**

Specifically, how suitable is a textual language in communicating “irrational concepts” and religious myths designed to explain the irrational? Furthermore, how important is the mastery of a textual language apropos of our conceptual processes and in what
ways can the structure of a specific language-game impact on a person’s conceptual abilities?

To undertake this enquiry, certain assumptions will have to be made. For example, it is accepted that everything we interpret and ultimately understand is mediated solely through language in the broad sense (which includes visual cognition or literacy). Here it is accepted that without language we cannot think. Indeed, even our most private thoughts are based on a language, which embodies communally sanctioned criteria.

**Hypothesis:**

It is then the premise of this dissertation that the very architecture of a person’s mother-tongue has a profound influence on the worldview and perception of a particular person. Also it is possible to consider that certain languages, by virtue of their very structure, either hinder or facilitate certain cognitive development or potential. Further, if we could but increase the linguistic proficiency of our citizens, we will be better positioned to develop a critical mass of people who are problem solvers, mathematicians and conceptualizers; and who will address the shortfall of graduates in science, engineering, technology and business in South Africa.

If in any way accurate, this would tend to imply that (*inter alia*) the retention rate of potential graduates in the SET and business disciplines will be significantly improved if educational policy-makers embraced even the most basic tenets of the linguistic paradigm.

**Methodology:**

To explore the various roles that language and mediation play apropos some selected aspects of contemporary culture and religion, this dissertation will via the medium of four (interrelated) articles, each suitable for publication in an accredited journal, explore a number of selected cultural issues with a view to better understand the pivotal role that language (in the broad sense of “signification”, which includes the meaning generated by images) and its power of mediation play in a contemporary society.
To this end, the following linguistic issues will be explored within the confines of a logocentric tradition and where it is understood that for the most part the problems of philosophy are really problems of language itself, viz.:

**The irrational:**

Here the inadequacy of alphabet literacy to deal with irrational concepts (such as “God”) as well as the logocentric problems inherent in the very linguistic medium will be explored. The topic selected for this will be the relevance and the significance of the more fundamental tenets of Judaic theology as they apply to the concept of God. An attempt will be made to compare a more western approach to concepts concerning the existence/nature of God with the inherited religious mythology of contemporary Judaism and its concept of Shekinah. The paradoxical ability of a religious myth to cope with and/or make sense of the more irrational aspects of human existence will be demonstrated.

**The role of image in the interpretation of verbal texts:**

Here the exploitation of imagery that has been mediated through various mediums (be they traditional painting or contemporary film), will be highlighted and its efficacy gauged given the low visual literacy rates of a contemporary western society. The topic selected for this will be the relevance and the significance of Mel Gibson’s recent cinematic attempt to visually present the “truth” contained in the Christian gospel account of the Passion of the Christ.

**The role of basic “alphabet literacy” on an individual’s subsequent maths and science literacy capabilities:**

Here the specific importance of mastering textual literacy in (preferably) an international language(s) which embodies a large vocabulary as a precursor to the attainment of significant improvements in both science and maths literacy will be debated.
The role of the liberal arts in promoting high linguistic competency:

Here the pivotal role of employing liberal arts approaches to linguistic mastery and consequently the importance of promoting proficiency in (an) international language(s) in the development of an international curriculum at a university are dealt with.

Through these topics, the role of language will be selectively explored as regards its ability to both obscure and enlighten our grasp of the irrational (i.e. our concept of the divine) and the rational; its unconscious role in moulding our thought processes and our world view (i.e. the role of a specific language game [film and religious myth] will be analysed as regards their pervasive ability to colour and control our perceptions of our particular reality). Finally an attempt will be made to find evidence to support the Sapir - Whorf hypothesis by looking specifically at the role of language and the liberal arts (by extension) on such disciplines as maths and science literacy. These interrelated studies will each serve to demonstrate that language proficiency is a prerequisite for the ability to improve one's understanding in a variety of disciplines.

However, this inquiry must be viewed within specific contexts and delimitations. Here it must be emphasized that the emphasis is primarily on so-called “alphabet literacy” rather than other forms of literacy but it should be understood that no language game operates in exclusive isolation and that an interface/overlap in terms of interpretation is assumed to occur between all aspects linguistic signification including text, sound, smell, taste, image etc. In the latter case “image literacy” or the iconic aspect of thought cannot be ignored. Here it is acknowledged that thinkers (such as Freud and Shlain) have postulated the notion that thinking in images is perhaps more primordial than “alphabet literacy”. In this regard, this investigation will not deal directly with the possible contemporary loss of visual literacy and associated thinking ability in the light of the present hegemony of alphabet literacy but will show how visual icons as are manifest in (inter alia) contemporary film literacy do make significant impact on alphabet literacy and interpretation.

Significance of the Study:
This should be seen as a potentially significant contribution because, if it can be substantiated, the hypothesis of this investigation proffers the basis for an educational philosophy whose tenets have the real potential to resolve the present inability to facilitate meaningful improvements in such areas as maths and science literacy.

Thus, this inquiry strongly advocates for a major paradigm shift on the part of our educators and policy makers. In this context, if it could be shown by means of selected case studies that levels and scope of conceptualization are wholly dependant on one’s mastery and understanding of both a textual as well as iconic language and if this finding were to be translated into action, it should result in a drastic improvement of our learner’s language skills and the more efficient utilization of the Liberal Arts or Humanities, all of which may be prerequisites to empowering our citizens and making (inter alia) maths and science literacy more accessible as well as restoring the lost status of equally important disciplines such as philosophy, history and ethical cultural discourse. If successful this investigation may also go some way to explaining why some (textual) languages (for example) are eminently better suited for developing certain skills than others.

Selected Source List:

Publications:


**Internet Sources:**


Towards an Understanding of the Jewish Concept of God

Introduction:

This essay attempts to examine, albeit within the confines of a logocentric tradition, both the relevance and the significance of the more fundamental tenets of Judaic theology as they apply to the concept of God. This includes the existence of God, “his” supposed nature and relationship (if any) with thinking human beings. These reflections on the Jewish “God-image” are undertaken in an attempt to show that it is possible to mediate something that surpasses human understanding and achieve at least a basis for some measure of intercultural mediation.

Western notions concerning the concept of God:

Perhaps one of the most central questions of philosophy, certainly from a more Western perspective, concerns the existence or non-existence of God. Indeed, Baumer (1977) lists it among the five so-called “perennial questions”. Here the term “God” may refer to any one of a number of concepts but normally seems to be employed when referring to something beyond our human comprehension. When it comes to God, westerners normally have in mind something akin to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic concept of an infinitely good, just and loving “father” who is *primus mobilis* and creator of everything we know and see. More realistically, the term “God” is more often used as a sop to try to make some sense of that which the feeble human mind cannot grasp. Indeed, it is a common perception of our more modern times (i.e. post nineteenth century), that as we (albeit naively) believe, our scientific theories are increasingly able to explain the mysteries of the cosmos more efficiently, so the realm of God and the need for God, necessarily, diminish.

Regardless, human beings, have always felt the need for a force greater than them; something to explain the genesis or *raison d’être* of the world they can experience. This force (which purely for the purposes of this essay will be referred to in traditional terms as being masculine), has been variously ascribed to a whole panoply of deities, dual deities and of course the single deity of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world. Generally, the features or believed characteristics of “God” or “the gods” are largely modelled on human traits. The deities of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, for
example, were subject to the same emotions and foibles as human beings and consequently the ancient Greeks (for one) believed themselves to be quite dependent on the whims of divine beings who could one moment favour a person and the next instant, destroy them. Even the Jewish God of Biblical times, who by then technically already had been attributed the superhuman characteristics of omnibenevolence, omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence still suffered from the occasional fit of jealousy, remorse, anger and even changed his omniscient mind when implored by Moses.

**Questions concerning the existence and nature of God:**

Is there in fact a God – some infinite force greater than anything we as humans could ever imagine? And if there is, does he really have any concern, to any degree, for anything in this universe, including living things and sentient beings? Most remarkable of all, why do we as humans, even bother to try to determine the existence of a God given the seeming impossibility of such a task? Or yet again is it really such an issue, especially in modern times? Perhaps God is a pure fiction and we are looking for that which has either never existed or “no longer” exists.

Indeed, we have a paradox here, since humankind seems to be consistently attempting to prove or disprove the existence of something that it is not quite sure it believes in or not. Surely, there can be no other topic in the history of philosophy that has had this specific problem. For example, it is possible to ask what the nature of the world is but, by and large, no one would doubt whether or not the world existed. It is true that René Descartes in his Meditations subjected himself to methodological doubt and that Edmund Husserl advocated the suspension of belief in the world’s existence for purposes of phenomenological analysis, but most would surely agree that, in the specific case of “God” why ask the nature of something you cannot even see or comprehend? Of course, as an aside, it is possible, in these post-modern times, to state that it is not even possible to “know the world” except through the mediation of language, but for all practical purposes, there is never much doubt that this linguistic mediation of the environment has its genesis in something (albeit unknowable as *ding an sich*), that we naively assume exists.
Most of the proofs for and against the existence of this hypothetical and very often ontic entity called God, have taken place within an idealist framework or a paradigm of consciousness.

**Proofs for the existence of God based on Knowledge:**

From a standpoint of "knowledge", there are clearly no substantiated proofs for the existence of God despite the many attempts to do so, especially during the last millennium. Although these should be well known to students of philosophy, before looking at some of the possible solutions to the “God” issue, it will still behove us to document the more classical arguments for God’s existence and their various shortfalls.

Here, perhaps the most promising arguments (albeit stillborn) are the so-called ontological arguments of St Anselm and Descartes

- **St Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God:**

  St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE) in his famous *Proslogium*, supposed that God could be defined as being “other than which, no greater could be conceived” (St Anselm, s.a.: [http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01546a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01546a.htm)).

  With this as his premise, he argued the following:

  a) Even if this God did not in fact exist then it followed that it was possible to at least conceive of a being like God that did exist.

  b) If this being like God did exist it would have to be greater than the conceptual God that did not in fact exist.

  c) This contradicts the definition that God is a being other than which no greater could be conceived. This is impossible because such a being which enjoys extra-mental existence and not merely an “existence” in consciousness, would be God.
d) Therefore, God as a being other than which no greater could be conceived must in fact exist.

e) Therefore, God must exist.

Now one can very quickly decimate this argument (as it stands) exactly as Anselm’s contemporary, Gaunilon attempted to do (cf. *In Behalf of the Fool*), viz.: by applying its logic to an arbitrary object other than God (Christian Classics Ethereal Library. s.a.: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.html).

Indeed, Gaunilon asks Anselm to replace the term “God” with an hypothetical island somewhere in the ocean, which is home to unimaginable wealth. Imagine that it is an island “other than which, no greater could be conceived”. Now by employing Anselm’s reasoning (*ut supra*) it would follow, logically, that such an island must in fact exist! Indeed, we can go further, if Anselm’s logic is correct we should be able to apply it to any number of things, say perfect people, animals, plants or even fantastic things like demons and angels.

However, to be fair to Anselm, God as a concept has to be considered differently to other things, since his existence in Anselm’s cosmos would have to be “necessary” and not merely “incidental”. Therefore, for Anselm, the non-existence of God was quite inconceivable. This point will be returned to later.

**Descartes’ ontological argument for the existence of God:**

René Descartes (1596 – 1650 CE) in contrast to Anselm’s 11th century version, recommended an argument that was grounded in two central tenets of his philosophy:

a) The theory of innate ideas

b) The doctrine of clear and distinct perception.

Descartes does not to rely on an arbitrary definition of God (as does Anselm) but rather on an “innate idea” whose content is “given”. Descartes’ ontological
definition is also extremely uncomplicated in that the very existence of God is contingent with the fact that obligatory existence is identical to the obvious and discrete concept of a superlatively perfect being. He states

But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God? Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one that I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature (The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. 1984:45).

It has often been noted that Descartes’ argument reads more like the testimony of an intuition than a formal philosophical proof. Indeed, he emphasizes the simplicity of his argument by comparing it to the manner in which we can determine basic truths in say mathematics. For example, we intuit that the number four is even or that the sum of the angles of any triangle is equal to the sum of two right angles. In the same way Descartes says that the existence of God follows from the fact that existence is contained in the “true and immutable essence, nature, or form” of a supremely perfect being. Briefly stated his proof is as follows:

a) Whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived to be contained in the idea of a “thing” is true of that “thing”. As an aside it should be emphasized here that Descartes first established that clarity and distinctness constituted the criterion of truth via the *Cogito* before applying it to the concept of God.

b) It is possible to clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God.

c) Therefore God exists.

One problem with this approach is that Descartes is relying on a traditional medieval distinction between a thing’s essence and its existence. According to this tradition, one can determine what something is (i.e. its essence),
independently of knowing whether it exists. Certainly, this ontological argument, like Anselm’s does not prove in any way that God (irrespective of the attributes we may grant him) exists or not.

A similar problem comes up with another argument, used by Descartes and others. A Supreme Being, by definition and conception, is superior to all other beings. However, we can only conceive of God as either existing or non-existing. The assumption is again made that existence is superior, therefore we must conceive of God as existing. It is interesting to note that David Hume argued that the idea of a necessarily existing being is absurd and thus has the fictional spokesperson of atheism: Cleanthes, reply to the theist: Demea, that “Whatever we can conceive as existent, we can also conceive as nonexistent.” (1947: 128)

Even if existence is superior to non-existence, Descartes’ argument only proves that our conception of God is of an existing being. One can, like Gaunilon, conceive of say an island paradise, which is more perfect than any other island paradise (i.e. the most perfect island paradise). This only means that this perfect place can be conceived and can exist in one’s mind. It says nothing about whether this place exists in the physical world.

- **St Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God:**

Of course, there exist many proofs for the existence of God over and above the ontological arguments already cited. Here, with some reference and apologies to St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225 – 1274 CE), who first came up with the idea in the 13th century, are five distinct ways that we can philosophically prove the existence of God. However, to illustrate their respective shortcomings, they are each followed up by five sound reasons why these particular arguments are really quite nonsensical:

  a) **The “unmoved mover” argument:** We witness a universe that is in constant motion and realize that whatever is in motion was first moved by something else; to avoid an infinite regression, we must hypothesize a “first mover,” which we shall term “God”.

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Refutation: The assumption here is that there cannot be an infinite regression. This has not been proven and why should it be avoided simply to suit Aquinas’ sense of order? Also, even if true, we could also avoid the regression by having more than one “first mover” for different chains of motion. Finally, why should the “first mover” be God, and even if true, how does this tell us anything about his nature?

b) The “nothing is caused by itself” argument: All things in the universe are brought into being by something. For example, a child is brought into being by her parents, who in turn were conceived by their parents. Again, to avoid an infinite regression, we are forced to conceive of a “first cause,” or God.

Refutation: Again, the assumption here is that there cannot be an infinite regression. Also, even if true, we could also avoid the regression by having more than one “first cause” for different chains of cause and effect. Finally, why should the “first cause” be God, and how does this tell us anything about his nature?

c) The cosmological argument: All existent, ontic things, through various ordered processes, come into being and go out of existence, irrespective of how long they may last. Because time is infinite, there must be some time at which none of these things existed, or a state of nothingness. Because things cannot be born out of nothingness there must always have been one eternal thing that gave rise to everything else, that thing is God.

Refutation: However, in point of fact, the cosmological argument, which claims that the universe had to be created by a cause which itself was uncreated, neither proves the existence of God nor the nature of God. Indeed, if we want to play the Devil’s advocate at this point, even if this hypothetical first cause was indeed a god, he could have ceased to exist the moment the universe was created
and who is to say that he has any of the traditional attributes granted to him by contemporary religions? Indeed, he may have been totally unaware of his actions at the time! It is in fact, far simpler to accept that the Universe has always existed rather than haul yet another element (e.g. God), into the equation.

d) **Things in the universe have variable degrees of goodness:**

However, speaking of more or less goodness in an infinite universe only makes sense by comparison with something that is infinitely good, which is God.

**Refutation:** Aquinas believes that there must be something in the universe, which is the source of all goodness. But the notion of “good” is affirming the consequent (which is logically invalid). This argument is faulty because in its endeavour to prove the existence of God it embraces a preconceived notion of God (i.e. the foundation for goodness) as part of its substantiation.

e) **The teleological argument:** Everything in the world shows evidence of design and its existence is necessitated by the design. For example human beings can only subsist in the world by virtue of their design (i.e. their anatomical structure, organs etc.) and the specific design of the world (i.e. air to breathe, food to eat, water to drink etc.). This design needs a creator, i.e. God.

**Refutation:** David Hume aptly squashed this argument by pointing out that there is no valid way that the hypothetical features of God as the author of the universe can in any way be contingent upon the qualities of his creation. For instance, Hume asks whether the universe could not have been fashioned by a team of deities. Furthermore, Hume speculated that it was possible for the universe to be the end result of a number of trial “creations” or even worse than that; the universe that currently exists was a blemished invention of some “infant deity” who at some point in time “abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance” (1947: 170).
With these well-known archetypical debates in mind, should some super being, which we term “God”, exist in reality, human logic and “knowledge” clearly has not been able to reveal his face. Schubring expands upon this point well (2000: http://cae.wisc.edu/schubring/ideas/proofgod.html) when he states:

Throughout several thousand years of history, some of the most brilliant minds have tried to prove God’s existence and have failed. While this does not prove that demonstrating God’s existence is impossible, it lends evidence to that possibility and leads one to search in that direction.

Proofs for the non-existence of God based on knowledge:

If it is not possible to prove the existence of God, is it perhaps possible to at least prove that he does not exist? This should be a simple matter, given the fact that we cannot perceive this God and despite our best attempts, are quite unable to prove his existence. But of course, because of the nature of the dilemma, to contradict the existence of God proves to be just as problematic.

Here most of the archetypical arguments against the existence of God (apart from the criticisms of the various arguments for the existence of God already presented above), are based on the following;

a) The observed facts.

b) The naive accepted characteristics of a Judeo-Christian God.

A typical argument which uses this approach would point to an observable fact and compare it to the characteristics of God as proffered by an organized religion e.g. Judaism. It would then demonstrate the illogicality of the proffered characteristic for God and then deduce that God does not exist. The following example is typical of this approach:

The following three statements cannot (collectively) be true:
a) God is omnipotent (tenet of faith).

b) God is omni-benevolent (tenet of faith).

c) Evil exists (observable fact).

Therefore it follows that:

- If God is omni-benevolent and omnipotent, evil would not be allowed to exist.
- If God had the power to prevent evil, but clearly elected not to do so, then he cannot be omni-benevolent;
- If God is omni-benevolent but cannot prevent evil then he cannot be omnipotent; and lastly
- If God is omni-benevolent (e.g. He cannot abide evil), and he has the means to prevent it (omnipotence) why then do we still observe evil?

Of course there are at least two reasons why this type of argument fails. Firstly, we are assuming that two of the characteristics of God are in fact omnipotence and omni-benevolence. If we for example misunderstood the characteristics of God (i.e. the nature of God) then the possibility still remains that God exists even though “evil” is observed. Secondly, what we describe as being “evil” depends on a specific context. For example, certain actions which are considered wicked and abominable by some societies may be deemed to be virtues by others. One would have to first prove the existence of “evil” as a noncontextual entity before using it to disprove the existence of God.

Another popular and appealing argument, which falls down for similar reasons already covered, claims that the existence of an omniscient God is incompatible with the observable fact of free will. This argument postulates that since God is omniscient, he must know in advance (i.e. he has always known) exactly what a person will do in a certain situation. If true, then nobody is in fact free to do anything
other than what God has preordained. Therefore either God does not exist or free will is an illusion. Of course, this argument assumes a causal connection between divine knowledge and human action – something which is contestable.

**Free will: a Jewish perspective:**

It is interesting to note here, that traditionally, Judaism vigorously defends the notion of free will so much so that it considers everyone to be fully responsible for their own actions. Although there are some sects that have their own idiosyncratic views, Judaism, by and large does not accept the existence of evil. Here “evil” is simply the logical result of an inappropriate action and not some supernatural force or entity that hinders one from undertaking a godly action. With this understanding of “evil” in mind, Judaism’s concept of free will is balanced in *halachic* literature by the notion that individuals may, due to a number of reasons, perform “evil” acts without being aware of their culpability. For this reason, punishment for a crime is normally subject to there being clear and unambiguous evidence for individual responsibility – consciously realized by the person in question.


> [t]he strict rules of court that demand two witnesses and, especially, that a clear warning be enunciated by an onlooker before the crime, indicate that punishment, generally, is to be given only when we are absolutely sure that the individual is choosing to do evil (author’s emphasis).

**Why we need God:**

Despite the fact that the existence of “God” can neither be proven nor clearly refuted, it would be fair to say that even when aware of this paradox, and given that we live increasingly in a secular milieu, most people still feel the need to believe in some force greater than them. This is on the face of it quite illogical. Surely, it would be far simpler to simply shelve the concept. Indeed, we could declare God, or rather, the concept of God as a *non sequitur*, or, if you prefer, an irrelevancy. Many have become agnostic as a result, sitting on the fence so to speak. Some even go so far as to merely believe in God in preference over total non-belief as a safer option. Here one is reminded of Blaise Pascal’s (1910: 233) famous wager:
God either exists or he does not. If we believe in God and he exists, we will be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven. If we believe in God and he does not exist then at worst all we have forgone is a few sinful pleasures. If we do not believe in God and he does exist we may enjoy a few sinful pleasures, but we may face eternal damnation. If we do not believe in God and he does not exist then our sins will not be punished. Would any rational gambler think that the experience of a few sinful pleasures is worth the risk of eternal damnation? (sic)

It is understood that Pascal made this comment somewhat “tongue-in-cheek”, parodying the rationalist approach to the question of God but if anyone was to validate this stance it would be quite pointless, because it would remain an empty gesture made with no understanding or conviction. However, surely, the worst of all assumptions is atheism, not for any other reason that it is supposedly justified by a substantiated philosophical argument, which turns out to be, at best, nothing more than another “belief”. Put another way, it becomes a naively justifiable, blind “faith” in the non-existence of God, which for some strange reason is preferred over a blind “faith” in God. Good examples of this approach include possibly the greatest atheistic thinkers of their time: Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). For them the belief in God is simply the projection of the human fundamental nature onto an ideal. For Marxists, the abolition of God becomes the prerequisite for a positive pursuit of happiness without illusions underscored by Marx’s theory of value versus the reductionist exchange value of capitalism. Here, God is not the creator of humanity rather human consciousness manufactures the concept God. Organized religion thus becomes a placebic device for manipulating the masses and which helps them to deal with their human condition. In this regard, Marx (1844:3) states:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people … The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for the real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusion.

This may be argued, to be a very depressing outlook for
things we love and strive to realize and to make permanent, should only be
temporary and doomed to frustration and destruction ... Atheism leads not
to badness but only to an incurable sadness and loneliness (Gates of
Prayer, 1975: 9).

However, to be fair to thinkers like Feuerbach and Marx, before any attempt may be
made to justify, from a position of “faith” why there is a very real need for God,
especially in such a pointedly secular age as ours, which tends to ridicule and
undermine religious values, it is important to understand that this essay is not an
attempt to justify “faith” or a specific religious practice blindly. It is also not an attempt
to validate the use of any particular belief system simply because it helps one deal
with the unpleasant realities of life such as sickness, pain and death. The Central
Conference of American Rabbis picks up on this very point when it declares

[r]eligion is not merely a belief in an ultimate reality or in an ultimate ideal.
These beliefs are worse than false; they are platitudes, truisms, that nobody
will dispute. Religion is a momentous possibility, the possibility namely that
what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature – that there is something at
the heart of nature, something akin to us, a conserver and increaser of
values ... that the things that matter most are not at the mercy of the things
that matter least (Gates of Prayer, 1975: 9).

FAITH VERSUS KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:

Because the existence of God cannot be proven logically, does not mean that God
does not exist, rather, one can never know that God exists. It is only possible to
have faith in God. In order to see this, one must understand the differences between
“knowledge” and “faith”.

Although faith and knowledge share one vital thing in common, viz.: “belief”,
knowledge of a proposition also requires that it be “true”. In short, knowledge
requires justification, for which only a substantiating proof is acceptable. This cannot
apply to questions of faith and despite the pseudo-proofs proffered by certain
religions for their dogmas and tenets of faith, in the final analysis; faith does not and
cannot require proof.

Knowledge, then, may be viewed as a “substantiated belief” and it is quite certain
that no religious faith could ever survive close scrutiny when subjected to the litmus
test of verification. Therefore, following this line of reasoning, all of our beliefs, with
the exception of those that we can clearly substantiate, should be considered matters of faith.

As an aside, it is interesting to note at this point, that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), attempted to illustrate how philosophy could prove the existence of God despite the fact that his earlier thinking had proven that we could not know reality directly as *ding an sich*. After all, whatever is real in itself is quite beyond our knowledge. Even if God exists, we cannot know God as he really is. However, even Kant did not consider it irrational for humankind to believe in a God who gives purpose to the moral realm because humans have the free will to creative moral values.

**Judaism as a viable alternative to substantiated faith:**

Many philosophers agree that philosophy may help us clarify religious concepts, without giving us a secure foundation for religious belief. So for a person who embraces Anselm’s view that the non-existence of God is something inconceivable, Judaism offers a solution because as a belief system it does not side step the problem of faith versus knowledge and further realizes the limitations of language to grasp the irrational let alone the ontological. For example, Judaism teaches that the highest presence (i.e. God) is absence because absence is the essence of holiness. Indeed, God, philosophically speaking, is an absence. Here God should not be regarded in the more popular, traditional way as an ontic being; rather “he” should be treated as a “process” which is understood by his/its negation. Indeed, any attempt to characterize God or to assign to God even the most elevated attributes is to marginalize “him” and stunt “his” very potential to be God.

**Absence as the essence of holiness:**

For example, God may be attributed such positive attributes as “omniscience”. However all this does is to make God yet another sentient being and places him qualitatively on the same level as all other sentient beings. God may also be described as being “omnipotent” which makes him quantitatively different to other beings but qualitatively the same as any other potent being and thus limits what Jews believe are his true yet unsubstantiatable qualities. Therefore, the only way to express “God” accurately would seem to be by negation. This is not a new concept
as “negative theology” is well known in Western philosophy and theology as well (e.g. Pseudo-Dionysus). For example, Moshe ben Maimon (better known as Maimonides: 1135-1204 CE) is famous for describing God by means of negative attributes. By following his example, it becomes preferable to describe God as being unfathomable, ineffable, unnameable, indiscernible, and impenetrable, etc. Any attempt to describe God in a positive sense is to explain the essence of God, which it is quite impossible to do, because in essence, God is what he is by virtue of what he is not (i.e. his absence). It could be argued that in Judaism, non-appearance is the essence of holiness, where God can only be contemplated as an absence. Of course from a pragmatic perspective, we as humans still use positive descriptors to describe the qualities of God but we must be aware of their limitations or rather the limitations they place on God.

The presence of God in the world:

Despite the lack of substantiated proof, many people still assert that they have had a “religious experience” which one can define as the subjective experience of the divine directly. This is often termed “revelationary”. The problem for the more analytically minded person is that any “religious experience” is thus solipsistic, immeasurable and untraceable and does not share the same characteristics as does a normal “sensory experience” or inter-subjective intellectual findings. It therefore cannot be proven philosophically and strictly speaking lies beyond the scope of philosophy.

In this regard, it is possible to posit (inter alia) a few characteristics of the “religious experience”, viz.:

a) It cannot be explained by reference to human logic or knowledge.

b) It remains profoundly personal and cannot be shared experientially or intellectually with others; yet most agree, their particular religious attributes and rituals notwithstanding, that they gain a similar if not common understanding of the nature of God which is expressed emotionally as “joy”, “godliness”, “positiveness”, etc.
c) These experiences are expressed or embellished by positive changes in personal behaviour patterns, which normally have a direct benefit for the community or the person involved.

Although true for many of the world’s mainstream religions, this is especially applicable to the Jewish experience of faith in God and the Jewish elucidation of “godliness”.

Even the idealist, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), thought that the God of religion was an intuition of absolute spirit or what he termed “Geist”. However, Hegel’s concept of God or “Geist” is nothing like the God of Christianity, which is transcendent (outside of our consciousness). But it is, strangely enough, very similar to the more Jewish understanding of God, where God is immanent. Indeed, when one has understood Hegel’s theory that history is the process of “Geist” coming to know itself, it appears that humankind is in fact part of God. Therefore it follows that instead of trying to define God we need, rather, to define ourselves and the world we live in as aspects of divinity.

For example, Rabbi David Eliezrie, Director of the Chabad Community Centre in Anaheim, California, explains that from a Jewish perspective, the nature of God manifests “himself” in everything in the world. Eliezrie (s.a.: http://www.spiritualworld.org/hasidic/print.htm) states that

The world, in essence, extends from godliness and spirituality. That the world in itself is not a true existence because it’s really dependent totally on God and God constantly interacts with the world physically. God makes the world exist. There is this link between the physical world and spirit [sic].

In Judaism, this manifestation of the presence of God is termed Shechinah. This cannot be defined philosophically and it is pointless to attempt to do so. However, Shechinah as a valid religious experience of the divine is brought about when Jews strive to share in an act of “godliness”. In Judaism, one can become sensitive to “godliness” through learning, prayer, and going through a period of spiritual development. According to Eliezrie, in Judaism, spiritual development relates primarily to prayer (s.a.: http://www.spiritualworld.org/hasidic/print.htm).

By seeking “godliness” and not God, it is therefore possible to manifest God in the world. This of course remains an act of free will and seems to say something
important about the nature of God, amplifying as it does the more traditional notions of God's divine characteristics such as omni-benevolence, omniscience etc. It also says something about human's intellectual attributes in addition to their intuitive or revelatory faculties. Indeed, in Judaism, the intellectual process is paramount to developing one's spiritual attributes. Then again, humans are not all born intellectually equal, they are only capable of understanding according to their own innate and/or acquired abilities.

Having said this, it still follows that irrespective of an individual's intellectual capabilities or training, everyone can use the same process to better themselves. Due no doubt to literally thousands of years of experience, trial and error and constant striving to experience Shechinah, Judaism, perhaps more than any other organized religion, continues to fine-tune its approaches (albeit based on a strong sense of tradition), which recognizes not only the individual's need to be constantly mindful of God but also the spiritual attainment of the Jewish nation as a whole. This would not have been possible if Jews had ever forgotten to experience God through their actions. In other words, to achieve Shechinah in everything they do. In this way, they have given the world a tried and tested formula for not only giving everything a spiritual purpose but to bring out that purpose constantly in everything they do. In this regard, “failure” also has its place. Eliezrie (s.a.: http://www.spiritualworld.org/hasidic/print.htm) sums it up as follows: “You’re supposed to try and fail. That’s the essence of what being a human being is all about – it’s trying and failing, as well as succeeding.”

**Restoring the world:**

Allen Stairs (1988: http://brindedcow.umd.edu/236/evil.html) points out that in mystical Judaism, God needs humanity as much as humanity needs God, and humanity and God must work together in the process of tikkun – the reintegration of the world and, in a sense of God Himself. He states that

> [t]his myth (in the literary sense of the word) is not a provable truth about the world, but it was a source of sustenance for Jews in the face of a reality that must sometimes have seemed almost unbearably hostile.
The term *tikkun* is a Kabbalistic concept meaning literally: “repair” and so *tikkun ha olam* means “restoring the world”. The study of Kabbalah and its long history are not the concern of this essay but suffice it to say that Jewish Kabbalists who are still Torah-based, by and large realize that it is not possible to express mystical ideas in any literal sense. In this regard, Kabbalah, in opposition to the rigid and often linear thinking patterns of scientific positivism and other more logical knowledge systems, makes much use of symbolism and imagery to attempt to liberate and illuminate the mind. In short, its primary goal is to achieve a higher level of “understanding self” in relationship to God. In this context, James J. DeFrancisco (2002: http://www.metamind.net/kabbalah.html), explains that

> [e]ach human living is believed to have a special tikkun [for] his or her unique and divine mission in the overall redemptive process of God. In the overall redemptive and restorative process of creating a paradise on earth, each human act either aids or impedes this process.

Kabbalists believe that humans are mostly blind to the problem areas they need to rectify and thus require as it were a mirror to reflect back their true selves and thus “see” their “blind spots”. Every aspect of one’s life is part and parcel of the *tikkun* process. The traditional Jewish holiness laws (as perceived divine instructions) specified how the Jews should live with a conscious sanctuary in their midst (i.e. tabernacle and temple). This notion is still adhered to in modern times, where living in accordance with God’s law (Torah) brings harmony while the process of *tikkun* helps to refine and balance the world (*tikkun ha olam*). The healing of the world begins with the healing of oneself (*tikkun ha nephesh*). Only then is it possible to love others and of course God. This means in effect that one can only love God when one loves others. The immanence of God is only experienced through the action of loving others. This means that instead of asking “where is God?” (as has been the case throughout recordable time) we should rather ask “when is God?” The answer then is “God is the result of an active, ethical, loving action”.

**Ethical behaviour and Godliness:**

For Judaism, the love of God and ethical behaviour are inseparable. In the first line of the *V’ahavta* prayer “Thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all
your soul and with all your might” is found a commandment to conduct ones life with total commitment.

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut (The Torah: a modern commentary, 1981), explains that in the V’ahavta prayer, the words “your heart,” refers to a person’s “intellect”; “your soul” refers to a person’s “life”; and “your might” refers to a person’s “physical strength”. In the case of the latter, he associates, by referring to Jewish tradition, “physical strength” with a person’s “material possessions”. From this he understands that to truly love God requires a person to harmonize their intellect, spirit, and personal conduct.

This is supported by Rabbi Leah Cohen (in Perry, 2002: http://www.uahc.org/rjmag/02winter/goodjew/shtml), who informs us that “the very arrangement of the three aspects of the V’ahavta—heart, soul, might … indicate an ethical hierarchy of ever-deepening levels of Jewish commitment”. According to her, loving God with “your heart” and “your soul,” is not sufficient, you must also love God with all “your might”. Cohen explains that for her, this means literally putting your money where your mouth is. She concludes: “It’s about the behavioural aspect of your being as opposed to the emotional aspect”. In the same vein, Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn (s.a.: http://www.choosejudaism.org/principles/html) tells us that, to be truly Jewish is to strive to possess the qualities of God, viz.: “compassion, graciousness, patience, kindness, faithfulness, and forgiveness”. These qualities are all manifested in one’s behavioural aspect. In summary, if a person wants to bring “godliness” into their life, they must live an ethical life style such that there is no compartmentalizing of their various activities and where the good intentions of their heart and soul are reflected in their very actions.

“Godliness” is thus grounded in informed, ethical behaviour and the key to understanding what constitutes “godliness” especially as this applies to such aspects as tikkun and Shechinah must be ingrained in learning, especially the Torah. The more one studies Torah, the more one learns how to conduct an ethical lifestyle.

In the introduction to his translation of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger (In Perry: s.a. http://www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/BusinessEthics/TO_BusEthics_Th_and_Th/Loving_God_Doing_Business.htm), confirms that
An unlearned person cannot be pious … although an individual may possess the highest motives, unless he knows the law, it is possible that he might take unfair advantage of a colleague. For this reason, it is important to study the Torah’s edicts of business law, and integrate them within our personalities … The contents … serve as guidelines which every one can — and should — apply in his daily life … (These) active, spiritual principles … point toward the refinement of ourselves and our society.

Free will and determination:

One of the biggest pitfalls of a faith in God concerns the notion of free will. An omniscient God would by definition have to know everything and of course would know in advance every action and choice that would be made by all humankind. God’s knowledge is thus determinative, which implies that his creation, humanity, has no real free will. However, as has already been pointed out, the concept of free will is pivotal to Judaism. Without free will, concepts such as tikkun and Shekinah and the goal of obtaining a state of “godliness” are meaningless. Regardless, logically, it really is not possible to resolve a situation where the determinative omniscience of God as well as the total freedom of choice of his creation is maintained. Furthermore, if such a scenario was somehow an accurate reflection of the status quo, then it would point to God and humankind being engaged in a truly paradoxical arrangement.

As long ago as 539 B.C. E. certain Jewish sages had already understood and accepted this paradox. This is borne out by the Jewish intercalated calendar, which is a Babylonian invention. Indeed, the names of the months have changed little and would still be understood by an Ancient Babylonian if he/she were alive today. By its employment, the sages could literally empower the Jewish community to not only, regulate accurately their largely agricultural needs (e.g. sewing seeds, harvesting the grain crop, threshing the corn etc.) but also to recognize and acknowledge, on a daily basis, the enigma of this symbolic yet paradoxical relationship between God and humankind.

Now the seeming passage of the sun was well known to many ancient civilizations, most notably the Egyptians and the Babylonians from whom it is certain the Jewish nation drew much of its influence. The sun was easily calculated to take exactly one
year to complete its cycle and this was seen to be obviously constant and unchanging and thus deterministic in character. The Book of Ecclesiastes (1:9) expounds that, “there is nothing new under the Sun” and King David in the Book of Psalms (100:14) states: “the Sun knows [the regular timing] of its appearance”.

By stark contrast, the Moon was seen to be unpredictable due to the almost impossible task of measuring its phases. Rabbi Hillel Goldberg (2000: http://www.e-eress.org/archives/leap.htm), claims that the Jewish sages (before telescopes or satellites were ever employed) calculated the lunar month to be 29.53059 solar days. It should be noted that modern satellites measure the lunar month at 29.530588, which is a difference of only 00.00002.

Armed with this knowledge the Jewish calendar evolved where it was possible by intercalation (sod ha ‘ibbur) to keep Pesach in the season of Spring (as required in Deuteronomy 16:1), by periodically inserting a leap month (Adar II) into the year. Goldberg explains that by sod ha ‘ibbur the Jews successfully reconciled the deterministic solar calendar with the irresolute lunar calendar. In the modern world, the need for such reconciliation is unique to Judaism.

For the Jews, the calendar is, as it were, a practical, functional and proactive way of reconciling the paradox of mutual free will and determinism. Rabbi A. Lopiansky (s.a.: http://www.e-geress.org/archives/leap.htm) observes that

humanity tends to the one axis or the other, to determinism or to freedom. Either: G-d is in control, human freedom is an illusion, life is a tragedy, moral effort is a waste (or, per Camus, meaningless): determinism. Or: man is in control, divine guidance is an illusion, life glorifies the successful, moral effort is a measure of preference: freedom (sic).

Therefore, the Jewish outlook is not either/or (i.e. determinism or freedom), but both/and. This is an extremely post-structuralist stance, despite the fact that sod ha ‘ibbur (as a practice), is at least two and a half thousand years old.

**Conclusion:**

Judaism can be easily understood as a living embodiment of a relationship between God and humanity, where God is conceived of as the indefinable yet only surety in
human existence who empowers humans with free will to lovingly complete his ongoing creation. Using the analogy of the Solar System, the ethical and moral person still has the same freedom as the Moon, by virtue of his/her very dependency of the gravitational pull and direction of the constant Sun (e.g. determinative and moral principles). By orbiting safely within this gravitational field (Torah) his/her journey is as it were, predetermined to be a relatively smooth ride, symbiotically giving meaning to both God and his/her own existence in a very tangible way.


Marx, K. 1844. *Contribution to the critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right,* in Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher. February 1844.


Introduction:

There has been much media hype concerning Mel Gibson’s recent block-buster film: *The Passion of the Christ*, which is promoted as the accurate portrayal of the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life and which, as the title implies, deals almost exclusively with Jesus’ betrayal, trial, torture and death.

Superficially it could be seen as the latest and most technically proficient (albeit graphic) version of a genre of celluloid portrayals of Jesus made since the beginning of the cinematic age—a worthy successor to a formidable collection of films including such classics as *The King of Kings* (1927), *King of Kings* (1961), *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Godspell* (1973), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Monty Python’s The Life of Brian* (1979), the *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Jésus de Montréal* (1989) all of which have been (in their own turn) subjected to a fair dose of criticism from every conceivable quarter. However, the real difference here, is that even before it was officially released in 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* had already elicited overwhelming responses, both positive and negative on a global scale. After only two months on the circuit, it was already the third biggest earner ever recorded ($361 000 000 at the time of writing). Incredibly it has been hailed by both extremes of the Christian world, including Catholic as well as Evangelical fundamentalists alike, as being a totally accurate portrayal of Jesus’ suffering and death. Here, the Vatican, represented by Cardinal Hoyos, claimed that

This film is a triumph of art and faith. It will be a tool for explaining the person and message of Christ. I am confident that it will change for the better everyone who sees it, both Christians and non-Christians alike. It will bring people closer to God, and closer to one another.  

The popular American tele-evangelist Billy Graham declared that the film was “faithful to the Bible's teaching” and the well-known, South African evangelo-politician Ray McCauley authoritatively pronounced the film to be “historically accurate” saying that the violence was justified: “You have to see what Jesus went through for us.”
Conversely there have been very negative criticisms of the film, with assertions that the film is too visceral, sado-masochistic, homoerotic, gratuitously violent and essentially anti-Semitic. The latter allegation is being taken very seriously in some quarters, with fears of a revival of anti-Jewish hostility from more fanatical Christian groups duly fired-up by Gibson’s graphic message. Chilton in his insightful article on this work expresses this fear: “Mr. Gibson has fashioned a blunt instrument of propaganda, edged with artistry, whose visceral power gives it the potential to become his most lethal weapon of all.”

Then we have the director himself, Gibson, as the self-styled agent of God, claiming to be inspired by none other than the Holy Spirit, promising to keep to the gospels whilst making overtly conciliatory statements in a number of interviews in very recent months. These mostly pertain to his avowed objectives as a filmmaker as well as his intentions as a member of a particular sect of Christianity.

To quote from Pilate “Quid est veritas”? What then is the truth? (John 18:38) Does this film prove Gibson to be one of the paragons of Christian art, a genius who can be compared to say Caravaggio or Grunewald? Or is this simply grandiose Catholic-kitsch, pandering slavishly to the latent materialism and hedonism of a largely complacent and visually illiterate society?

What has Gibson personally risked to make this film and what risks does society face watching it? Does Gibson’s real talent lie in making money or movies? Is this film the magnus opus of Gibson the erudite theologian or the soapbox of Gibson the Catholic proselytizer?

**Objectives:**

This paper attempts to place this film in a more accurate context. However, there are some serious delimitations to it achieving this objective. Indeed, because of the religious subject matter of this film we are also confounded by the fact that (in countries like the United States of America), the vast majority of people take their particular religious belief as the ultimate truth by which they model their lives. These same people, will, more often than not, naively expect others to embrace their faith as a God-given fact. A recent poll in the United States revealed that 60% of that nation’s population believe the Christian Bible to be totally true (i.e. without reservation) and 86% consider themselves to be “committed Christians”. As a
consequence, the assumption must be made that objectivity is going to be difficult to guarantee. It is quite certain that many people in this modern Western world, despite the dominance and avowed hegemony of scientific positivism in their daily lives, will be quite unable to see the superstition, illogicality or contradiction inherent in their respective worldviews and will quickly take offence at anything they perceive to be dishonouring or discrediting their particular brand of faith. In the context of this paper, this is sure to occur despite the fact that this investigation does not propose to point out the shortfalls of any particular religious practice per se. Rather its primary focus is on establishing the real significance of Gibson’s film in the light of Christianity’s theological import and its possible interpretation(s) for a contemporary Western world.

It would be difficult to prove, but one could surely assume that most, if not all, persons who watched this film would have had some introduction to Christianity prior to viewing it. How then do we evaluate such a film objectively? Do we assume that the audience is well versed in the symbolism of most mainstream manifestations of Christianity (e.g. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism etc)? Do we see how accurately it acts as a direct translation of the gospel accounts of Christ’s passion; or do we rather attempt to view it as an historically accurate interpretation of what might have occurred in c. 30 C.E.? We must not resign ourselves to examining it only as a personal (i.e. Gibsonean) interpretation of the Christian faith and its central tenets, especially as these apply to the Passion of Jesus (called the Christ).

This film, which is certainly conceived within a particular theological context, cannot be analysed solely from that perspective, especially if it transpires that it inflexibly perceives itself to be the sole purveyor of ultimate truth and merely requires us to compare its chosen iconography and symbolism with its non-negotiable yardstick. Despite the possible protests, we have to proceed carefully, with the assumption that no one religion or knowledge system, past, present or future, can ever claim any real authority at any level, given the complexity and enormity of the Cosmos. Undeniably, to favour any mythology, even for a moment, would make this proposed act of analysis quite pointless and meaningless. Consequently, for balance, an attempt will be made to evaluate this particular film from a number of interrelated perspectives, viz.: Gibson’s avowed intentions, historical accuracy, written gospel accuracy, Catholic sectarian accuracy, contemporary Catholic accuracy and most importantly, the phenomenon of the film itself.
Christianity in context and as context:

Over the past two millennia, Christianity has evolved quite considerably since its genesis as a blend of Judaism permeated with an assortment of related mystery religions. Both the Egyptian and Greek mystery religions came with a ready-made range of deities (both male and female) that had to die (both figuratively and/or physically) and subsequently be resurrected. Male gods so resurrected always had a female deity in attendance who was either his spouse or mother. This is not a new concept and it is certainly not the invention of Christianity. As one very obvious example, centuries before the Christian myth, the Egyptian Osiris/Isis myth had become the basis for pharaonic power. Here, the pharaoh was both Osiris' representative as well as his incarnation on earth. He descended to earth from him through Horus. Osiris had been sacrificed, dismembered and subsequently restored by his sister/consort Isis. In his resurrected guise, Osiris ruled the netherworld, the pharaoh (as his incarnation) ruled the physical plane, and Horus ruled heaven. Similar undertones can be found in other more important Greek manifestations of the mystery religions extant during the time of Jesus; these include Mithra, Demeter, Persephone, Orpheus and Dionysus etc. All mystery religions differed in terms of the detail but all had the same common denominator: they were concerned with spiritual rebirth and the central role of a God/Man redeemer. Extant depictions of Jesus in art before the fifth century C.E. depict him variously as a clean shaven, Roman noble, complete with neatly cropped hair and a toga, or as Apollo riding his sun chariot through the heavens. It is only from the sixth century onwards that an image of Jesus arises that bears any resemblance to the modern perception.

Halnon confirms that all these mystery religions, including Christianity, shared the following features:

- Ritual meal on a regular basis
- Ritual bath, or baptism, as part of initiation
- A god man who died, or was assumed dead, but was restored
- A goddess in attendance (usually a mother but sometimes a consort)
- Miraculous or remarkable birth and death of the god man
- The god man ultimately ends up in heaven
- While living, the god man is ridiculed (by some, or by many)
Of course the biggest influence was Judaism. In fact it was quite difficult (initially) to distinguish between Jewish and Judeo-Christian practice until the growing church and its many factions increasingly became the domain of Gentiles. It is dangerous to generalise and several papers would need to be written to adequately give a comprehensive comparison of the various manifestations of what could be termed Christianity and the equally diverse schools of Judaism. Suffice it to say that both main-stream Christianity and Judaism accept as fact that all of existence was created by a God who is characterised as being supernatural, all-powerful (omnipotent), loving or all-loving (omnibenevolent), wise or all-knowing (omniscient) and omnipresent. Because of His (non-negotiable) divine characteristics God is unable to tolerate evil. This concept of evil is possibly the single most important factor ultimately separating mainstream Christianity from mainstream Judaism.

From a Jewish perspective one of the biggest misnomers of Christianity is the concept of Satan. To most Christians Satan is synonymous with an independent source of pure evil who is perceived to be a foil to God – his arch-nemesis, the evil one – more popularly known as the Devil. In fact the concept of a supreme manifestation of evil only appears in the New Testament. A review of the Tanach (Old Testament) will show that the original conception (shared by most Jews today) is that God is one, and everything that exists is good. People, as sentient beings have a soul, which is considered to be “pure” and not “fallen” as perceived by most modern Christians. The soul is pure at birth, but humans are born with a “yetzer ha’tov” (an inclination to do good), and with a “yetzer ha’ra” (an inclination to do bad). When Jews do something “wrong”, it may not be that the wrong itself is the source of the sin. Rather, it is the missed opportunity to do something right. In Hebrew, this missed opportunity is called a “chet.” Often mistranslated as “sin,” the word is actually an archery term for a missed shot. Judaism asserts that humanity is given free will in order that it can make rational choices. The Tanach teaches that “chet” is the direct result of making bad choices. Speaking generally, this concept of “chet” should not be confused with modern Christian notions of “mortal sin”. “Chet” is the result of not adhering to the Godly principles as laid down in the Torah (first five books of the Tanach). This code of behaviour (which Jewish fundamentalists believe is God-given) is designed to guide one’s use of free will. In short, if people adhere to the code of godly conduct they will become increasingly godly themselves. The desire here is to become Godlike and any deviation from the prescribed path will ensure that this goal takes longer to achieve. Also, those who are better versed in following Godly advice become spiritually stronger and can endure more testing.
In this latter context, free will is sometimes tested in the *Tanach* by an agent of God personified as the “satan” (e.g. Job 1: 7, 8,9,12 etc.). This personification is in no way equivalent to the New Testament concept of an embodiment of ultimate evil and the resulting popular, dualistic, notion of a struggle between good and evil. Indeed, according to Pagels, this notion was first found in earlier Jewish apocalyptic sources before finding its way into the New Testament (Christian) context. She writes,

In biblical sources the Hebrew term the ‘satan’ describes an adversarial role. It is not the name of a particular character. Although Hebrew storytellers as early as the sixth century B.C.E. occasionally introduced a supernatural character whom they called the ‘satan’, what they meant was any one of the angels sent by God for the specific purpose of blocking or obstructing human activity. The root ‘stn’ means ‘one who opposes, obstructs, or acts as adversary.’ (The Greek term ‘diabolos’, later translated ‘devil’, literally means ‘one who throws something across one's path.’) 11

Thus the *Tanach* does not endow the character of “satan” with the all-encompassing evil image believed by mainstream Christianity. Pagels points out that “satan” is presented as one of God's angels, a member of his royal court who is given permission to test the faith of Job after God boasts about his loyalty.12 However, “satan” never acts as an independent agent and is also given restrictions as to exactly what he can do, and he adheres to them. When Job’s faith has been tested, “satan” (who can walk in God’s presence because he is not evil) concedes that Job's faith is greater than he had thought.

Christianity, maintains that God gave humans free will but as soon as the first human (Adam) made the wrong choice he caused a permanent separation between mankind and God. Judaism does not recognise this in quite the same way, seeing God and humanity in a continual partnership, whereas Christianity sees all humanity as fallen, eternally sinful, and in need of God’s grace. In Judaism it is sometimes explained that humanity suffers mortal death because of Adam’s actions, but the human soul cannot be destroyed and remains eternal. Regardless of the possible interpretations, in Judaism, it is always up to people to make amends, to be responsible and make the right choices, whereas in Christianity, mankind can really do nothing without Christ’s intercession, however hard they try. Further because Christians believe in the actual existence of an opposing force to God (Satan) mankind is constantly subjected to additional pressures in the form of external temptations. This is reminiscent of the decisions made by the Greek fates (Μοιραι) which could upset even the best made plans of humans and which even the gods were not willing to change.
The Christian concept of Jesus being the “messiah” or “Χριστός” (the anointed) evolved directly from the Jewish concept of the “moshiach”, which literally means “anointed one,” and refers to the ancient Jewish practice of anointing kings with oil. This term does not appear in the Torah and played no part in early Judaism. From the time of the prophets, however, the concept arose of a future time when a “moshiach” would be anointed as king in the “End of Days”. The important point here, is the term “moshiach” does not mean “saviour”. As Rich correctly points out:

The notion of an innocent, divine or semi-divine being who will sacrifice himself to save us from the consequences of our own sins is a purely Christian concept that has no basis in Jewish thought. Unfortunately, this Christian concept has become so deeply ingrained in the English word ‘messiah’ that this English word can no longer be used to refer to the Jewish concept. 13

The “moshiach” is not in any way a divine being; he is, at most, symptomatic of the establishment of a “messianic age”, which is only possible when all people act in a Godly way.

Judeo-Christianity, whilst evolving into full-blown Christianity, developed a solution to their manufactured problem of undoing Adam’s original sin. God, because he is omnibenevolent, steps in and assists Man, saving him from eternal damnation (another concept not readily embraced by Jews) and selflessly sacrifices himself in an incarnate form as the “messiah” or “the Christ”. As a result all mankind has to do is to repent of his sin and then accept that his sin has been forgiven and as a result he will be saved from damnation and allowed to reside in paradise with God.

In opposition to this view, Jews point out that God does not want sacrifices but acts of loving kindness: “I desire loving kindness and not sacrifice” (Hosea, 6:6). From a Jewish perspective, the Christian interpretation presents God as anything but omniscient (i.e. he must have known that his creation [i.e. Man] would become sinful from the “beginning of time”). For Jews there is only one God, therefore only one force in the cosmos. Christianity seems to have a God who either directly or indirectly created a duality of Good and Evil. From a Jewish stance, if God created an evil force (an act that was deliberate and well-thought out due to his omniscience) he would be simultaneously contradicting his omnibenevolent qualities. This in turn would make it unnecessary for humans to need to be redeemed since then they could not possibly be responsible for their own (God-decreed) fallen state. The result is a God who speciously demands pain and suffering to mollify his
injured feelings because the outcome of his omniscient creation (i.e. humanity) did not come up to scratch. This oxymoronic belief structure is due to the fact that items of Christian dogma were developed and added *ad hoc*, over time, as each new theological impasse arose and needed an explanation, often with no proper consideration to the theological system as a whole.

**Gospel Accuracy:**

It hardly need be said, that very little of what is contained in the four gospels will necessarily be historically accurate and there are a number of very obvious reasons why this fact cannot be disputed.

The four gospels found in the New Testament (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) did not become in any way canonical literature for the early Christian Church until at least c. 170 C.E. 14 Undeniably, the first mention by contemporary Christians of a collection of what might have been written evangelical accounts, first occurs in c.140 C.E. 15 We must also realize that these quite late writings reflect a well-established religious mythology (albeit superficially based on older oral traditions), which, by necessity, bear little resemblance to what may have originally been factual, historical truth. In addition, all the gospels (including the four presently found in the New Testament) are written within the evolved tradition of a specific proto-Christian or Judeo-Christian community.

For example, Matthew was probably written slightly before c. 80 C.E. 16 and from its contents reflects a Greek-speaking Jewish context. According to Culmann, this particular, early Judeo-Christian community “was trying to break away from Judaism while at the same time preserving the continuity of the Old Testament. The main preoccupations and the general tenor of this Gospel point towards a strained situation [i.e. traditional Jew versus Judeo-Christian].” 17 Specifically, Matthew goes to some length to vilify mainstream Jews as the ones responsible for Jesus’ death because it suited a specific politico-religious agenda for a particular proto-Christian community sometime in c. 80 C.E. It is this gospel that supplied history with those fateful words:

> When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands and said, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this Just person. You see to it.’ And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be upon us and on our children.’ (Matthew, 27:24-25)
Vermez, the world-renowned expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, palaeographer and one of the leading authorities on intertestamental Jewish history sums up this issue well:

The Gospels postdate the events by 40-80 years. They were all compiled after the fall of Jerusalem in AD70. By then the large majority of the readers envisaged by the evangelists were non-Jews. After their revolt against Rome (AD 66-73/4), antipathy towards the Jews grew in the Roman empire, and this affected the depiction of Jesus for new non-Jewish Christians. To admit to them that Rome was fully to blame for the death of the crucified Jewish Christ would have made the fresh converts politically suspect. Christians were an unpopular sect. Hence outside Palestine the Gentile-Christian spin doctors moved in and played down the Jewishness of Jesus and his original disciples. He and his apostles were no longer considered as Jews.  

Thus we have in early Christianity a distinct political need to play down Jesus as a Jew and to remove the blame for Jesus’ death by the Romans. As a result, Christian literature begins to emphasize the innocence of the Romans and posits the blame on the Jews generally. In addition, in the early days of Christianity, many different writings concerning a largely mythical Jesus with attributes that reflected different theological emphases were simultaneously extant. The oral traditions were so abundant that, as even John puts it, “if they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

However, in time (i.e. before c. 180 C.E.), most of these texts, unlike the four that survived as canonical, were subject to the censorship of the early Church, no doubt due to the fact that they were believed to be in grave error. Indeed, the gospels might not fit the political needs of the early Church (already mentioned) or they contained fictional details that by today’s standards appear to be quite ludicrous. These were termed “apocrypha” because they were literally hidden from the faithful so that they would not taint the “true teaching”. Some were even destroyed but others were secretly cherished. Amongst those that have survived (in one form or another) can be counted the fragments called simply Q (pre-gospel?), Gospel of St Thomas (depending on the authority either pre-canonical or post-canonical i.e. c. 70 –350 C.E.), the Gospel of Barnabas (c. 90 C.E.) which was decommissioned in 325 C.E., the Gospel of the Hebrews, (c. 70 – 150 C.E.) the Gospels of the Nazoreans (c. 180 C.E.), and the Gospels of the Egyptians (c. 150 C.E. – 250 C.E.) etc. The irony here is that even the canonical gospels contain passages which are purely fictional, yet today they are considered by the uninformed, to be both factual and God-given.

Here, Boismard warns:
One has only to think of the imaginary description of events that Matthew claims took place at Jesus’s death [incidentally, included in Gibson’s film]. It is possible to find passages lacking seriousness in all the early writings of Christianity: One must be honest enough to admit this (sic). 24

Moreover, it is well accepted by most scholars that the authors of the four gospels, despite their apostolic names were not identical with certain members of Jesus’ retinue. They were, in fact, persons living more than a generation later and who took the names of certain disciples to lend credibility to their writing. In some cases, it is even possible that more than one author may have had a hand in the final appearance of a particular gospel. Certainly, the gospels can by no stretch of the imagination be considered “eye witness” accounts, as is commonly believed.

This fact is also borne out by the incredible number of contradictions found between the four official gospels. According to Remsberg 25 these number at least 610, of which 201 occur in connection with the details of the passion and crucifixion alone. These contradictions make any fusion of the four accounts into one believable narrative nonsensical. The following few examples are pertinent to Gibson’s “Passion”, viz.: Matthew and Mark both state that Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss (Matthew, 26: 48, 49; Mark, 14: 44, 45); whilst John indicates that Judas did not betray with a kiss. Matthew says that Jesus responded to the kiss of betrayal with the words: “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” (Matthew, 26: 50). Alternatively, Luke claims that Jesus said “Judas, do you betray the Son of Man [i.e. me] with a kiss?” (Luke 22: 48.).

Sometimes the contradiction is due to an historical oversight on the part of the gospel author, or the author too pointedly attempts to give some semblance of divine authority to a particular statement by quoting from an Old Testament prophet, making it seem as though prophecy has been fulfilled. One very interesting example (where both an oversight on behalf of the author and a clumsy attempt to fulfil prophecy coincide) occurs in Matthew: “Then what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true: “They took the thirty silver coins, the amount the people of Israel had agreed to pay for him, and used the money to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord had commanded me” (27: 9, 10). Here, this reference in actual fact comes form Zechariah ‘The Lord said to me, “Put them in the temple treasury.” So I took the thirty pieces of silver – the magnificent sum they thought I was worth – and put them
in the temple treasury.” (11: 13). This text, as it turns out, has absolutely nothing to do with the betrayal of Jesus.

On this particular point, Remsberg states

It is evident that the account of the betrayal was inspired, not by a historical fact, but by a desire to ‘fulfill’ a Messianic prophecy. Zechariah did not predict an event, but his words did suggest a fiction. This is the more probable from the fact that Matthew is the only Evangelist who mentions the thirty pieces of silver.

As has been alluded to already, these are but a few of the literally hundreds of examples that can be cited to show the inaccuracy of the four gospel accounts.

As time passed, the status of Jesus increased. At first he was heralded as a great teacher, then a little later, as was perfectly normal in Hellenistic times, he became linked to a deity. At first he was considered subservient to the Jewish God and then by implication, slowly became synonymous with God. However, because the New Testament was composed relatively early to this transition, there is some hesitation in these earlier texts to directly ascribe the title “God” to Jesus, proving that Jesus as God/Man is a post-gospel occurrence. In this connection, Brown points out:

The most plausible explanation is that in the earliest stage of Christianity the Old Testament heritage dominated the use of the title ‘God’; hence ‘God’ was a title too narrow to be applied to Jesus. It referred strictly to the Father of Jesus, to the God whom he prayed. Gradually (in the 50s and 60s?), in the development of Christian thought, ‘God’ was understood to be a broader term. It was seen that God had revealed so much of Himself in Jesus that ‘God’ had to be able to include both Father and Son. (sic)

From the perspective of religious faith, some time before the crystallization of the four canonical gospels (c 80 C.E.), a split occurs between the possibly historical Yeshua bar Yoshef and the certainly mythical, Hellenistic, Jesus the Christ. Jesus starts to be viewed as an aspect of God (i.e. “Jesus is God”) and from here the next logical step was to say that “God is Jesus” – an event that, thanks to Constantine the Great, was finally canonised at the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E.

If Gibson was keeping to the gospels (as he claims) he did not have the textual authority to imply in any way that Jesus was a deity and by default he could not present the message that God was atoning for the sin of mankind by sacrificing Jesus as the incarnation of God.
Undeniably, three of the synoptic gospels do not yet refer to Jesus as God. As has been shown, it was in fact much later that Jesus obtained his present day status as a deity and it is this contemporary perception, which underscores Gibson’s film, not versions found in the original gospel accounts. In other words, Gibson, whilst claiming to be accurate to the gospels, in point of fact chooses to give a more modern spin to them. At no point does Gibson attempt to contextualize his source historically or to look at the enormous amount of scholarly work presently being undertaken to try to restore (however tenuous) a more accurate interpretation of the historical Jesus (Yeshua). Gibson doesn’t seem to be aware that many Christian ministers and priests in the modern world are perfectly well acquainted with these undisputed revelations, and are not unduly concerned with blind dogma as much as they are concerned with focussing on the spiritual benefits of their respective faiths. By stark contrast many practicing Christians, who are not party to such theological rigours are patently unaware of these more accurate interpretations regarding the heritage of their faith. Setzer sums this fact up quite well:

The historical Jesus and the Jesus of the early church bear little resemblance to one another. Even more tenuous is the connection between the historical Jesus and later Christianity. Contemporaries scholar and theologian seem to agree one can be a good Christian without knowing a bit about this Jesus of history. The flesh-and-blood Jesus in the late 20s of the first century gave way to the reconstructed and interpreted Jesus of the gospels in the 70s and 80s and was superseded by the “Christ of faith” of the later church. When believers speak of their faith in Jesus, it is this last figure to which they refer. 28

Of course one could say that all of this is irrelevant since Gibson (perhaps idealistically) assumes that these accounts, apart from being historically accurate, should also be interpreted from a more contemporary and/or popularistic approach. Indeed, in his interview with Neff and Struck, he was asked how he managed to ‘find a balance between staying true to the Scripture’ and his “creative interpretation”. Gibson naively responded:

Wow, the Scriptures are the Scriptures—I mean they're unchangeable, although many people try to change them. And I think that my first duty is to be as faithful as possible in telling the story so that it doesn't contradict the Scriptures. 29

Now, even for someone who believes every “jot and tittle” (Revelation, 1:19) of the Bible to be God’s own truth, any attempt to stick to the gospel accounts is going to be difficult, given the inherent (albeit divinely sanctioned!) contradictions and errors that they contain. Surely Gibson would have done far better, under the circumstances, to have stuck to one of the four gospels for the sake of maintaining some semblance of biblical accuracy (i.e. as attempted in
film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [1964]). Gibson seems to skip over this issue and combines elements from all four as he sees fit. Some insight into his somewhat overconfident and seemingly directionless approach can be gleaned by his continuing response to Struck’s original question concerning the problem of balancing one’s artistic licence and accuracy to the written word. Here, Gibson explains his personal approach as follows:

…so long as it didn't do that [i.e. contradict the gospels], I felt that I had a pretty wide berth for artistic interpretation, and to fill in some of the spaces with logic, with imagination, with various other readings. For example, Judas goes to kill himself and I had him being tormented by children. I made up the children idea and that they were somehow diabolical, so they weren't real children. And that he was on a hillside and he looked at a dead goat, and then he goes and kills himself, hangs himself with a halter. I thought, so where's he going to get the halter? Well wait a minute, it should be a dead donkey with a halter on. I mean there's nothing that said there was a dead donkey there, but why not? It just says he ‘hung himself with an halter’ (*sic*).  

**The Rise of Humanism:**

Gibson’s film has many precursors, all of which were symptomatic of the rise of humanism in Europe (i.e. post-twelfth century). We must also recall that modern Christianity and especially the way Jesus is characterised in modern times is heavily dependant on the achievements of the humanist movement. Before this period, the cult of Christ the King was specifically reserved for kings and emperors and only gradually began to enjoy lay devotion. In addition to this, the growing interest in the centrality of Christ to the Christian faith, as epitomised by the teachings of St Francis of Assisi (died 1226 C.E.), helped to promote the concept that the faithful treat with their Saviour on a one-to-one basis. In this regard, greater emphasis was given to the incarnation of Almighty God as Jesus (Saviour) and as Emmanuel (God with us). In other words, God as man, subject to human temptation and doubt and ultimately the pain and suffering of dying a human death.

This increasingly humanistic approach to the Christian faith may be further attested to by the fact that in 1264, Urban IV granted to the Catholic Church the new feast of the Blessed Sacrament (*Corpus Christi*). Cabrol explains that this feast “rapidly increased in importance as the piety of the later Middle Ages found in it an opportunity for an imposing manifestation of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.”
following excerpt from a prayer in preparation for Holy Mass sums up the feelings of a believer in this humanistic spiritual context:

Hail, noble and precious Blood, flowing from the wounds of my crucified Lord Jesus Christ, and washing away the sins of the whole world. Be mindful, O Lord, of thy creature whom thou hast redeemed with thy Blood. I am grieved because I have sinned, I desire to make amends for what I have done. Take away from me therefore, O most merciful Father, all my iniquities and sins; that, being cleansed both in body and soul, I may worthily taste of the Holy of holies. Grant that this holy feeding on thy Body and Blood, of which, though unworthy, I purpose to partake, may obtain the remission of my sins, the perfect cleansing of my offences...

We should realise, that by the thirteenth century, the transubstantiated bread and wine of the Eucharist were believed by the faithful to be far more important than other relics of saints (regardless of their actual manufacture, authenticity or pedigree). Now, before the thirteenth century, Christ is normally depicted in a very symbolical way and only gradually assumes the more humanistic characteristics we normally associate with Christ's passion, death and resurrection as this century unfolds. The older, more symbolic (two-dimensional) Byzantine portrayals of Christ as Judge (which were normally to be found high in the domes of churches and seemingly out of reach to mere mortals), were slowly supplanted by more naturalistic (three-dimensional) representations of Christ as a man who lived and existed in the world of men. This is most evident in the development of Italian painting between c. 1235-1335 and if we briefly compare the works of such artist as Bonaventura Berlinghieri (active 1235), Cimabue (active 1285), Duccio (active 1311), Giotto di Bondone (active 1320) and Simone Martini (active 1340), we may observe this process quite clearly.

For example, one will notice the increasing emphasis in the depiction of the crucifixion (i.e. in the West after c. 1200 C.E.) of such features as the blood flowing from the wound in the side, the blood flowing from the stigmata and the blood flowing from the crown of thorns. Undeniably, this development in Western art is a direct result of the more christocentric attitudes, which were evolving in the church at this time, attitudes which became prominent at the same time that the teachings of St Francis of Assisi became dominant.

Catholic Mysticism and Tradition:

The rise of passion plays and passion poetry was indicative of this growing phenomenon. Indeed, what defines a passion play is its focus on the humanity of Jesus and its ability to have its audience empathize with Jesus’ suffering.
The themes of the passion plays were fundamentally based on the gospel accounts but in addition they relied on traditional embellishments, many of which are contained in the Catholic rite known as the Way of the Cross. This practice became increasingly prevalent after 1270 C.E. as the Crusading ideal started to lose its momentum and it became increasingly difficult for the Christian faithful to undergo pilgrimages to Jerusalem and retrace Jesus’ steps as he carried his cross along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. By virtue of the Way of the Cross ritual, it became possible to re-enact the passion of Jesus in one’s own church.

These non-biblical narratives find their way into Gibson’s film; for example, when Jesus falls under the weight of the cross, or when Veronica wipes the face of Jesus with her veil on the way to Calvary. In addition, Gibson may have referred to aspects prevalent in mediaeval passion plays and certainly some of the extreme acts of violence are in accord with the humanistic endeavours of painting, passion plays and passion poetry from the 13th century onwards, when Christ's human suffering is particularly stressed.

Also increasingly prevalent at this time were the devotional, meditative images of Jesus as a Man of Sorrows. These were not in any way biblical but served to allow the faithful to meditate on an image of Jesus’ upper torso, which normally depicted aspects of his Passion such as his crown of thorns, his whip marks, his still bleeding nail wounds complete with blood flows along both forearms as well as the wound in his right side. The latter of which, Jesus is normally pointing to with his right hand.

Modern Catholics still refer to the Passion when they recite the Rosary and meditate on the Five Sorrowful Mysteries. Gibson's Passion echoes the key points of this prayer cycle, viz.: The Agony in the Garden, the Scourging of Jesus, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, and Jesus’ Crucifixion and Death. Neff reveals that for Gibson this film was a “kind of prayer”. 34 Indeed, meditation on the Passion of Christ (meditationes vitae Christi) was central to a mediaeval Christian. In this regard, Rieu confirms that this activity was “the best act of faith and work an ordinary Christian could perform. His concentration helped him to understand the divine purpose and to avoid sin”. 35 In the same vein, Owst quotes an unknown fourteenth century divine who states that:
By moche more it is lausom to ous to have the ymage of Crist in the cros, that we in havyngne mynde on the deth of Crist mowe overcome the temptaciouns and the venym of the fende, the olde serpent.\textsuperscript{36}

The following poems (typical of the times) stress the pathos of Christ's human body and his suffering as manifested through the divine symbols, such as the nail wounds, white flesh, scourged body, pricking thorns, and stretched arms \textit{etc}. It should be noted that the examples that follow all derive from the meditations ascribed to St. Augustine.

\begin{quote}
White was his naked breast, 
And red with blood his side, 
Blood on his lovely face, 
His wounds deep and wide. 
Stiff with death his arms 
High spread upon the Rood: 
From five places in his body 
Flowed the streams of blood.\textsuperscript{37}

Look on your Lord, Man, hanging on the Rood, 
And weep, if you can weep, tears all of blood. 
For see how his head is hurt with thorn, 
His face and spear-wound spat on in scorn. 
Pale grows his fair cheek, and darker his sight, 
Now droops on the Cross his body bright, 
His naked breast glistens, now bleeds his side, 
And stiff grow his arms extended wide. 
Look at the nails in hands and in feet, 
And the flowing streams of his blood so sweet! 
Begin at the crown and search to the toe, 
Nothing shall you find there but anguish and woe.\textsuperscript{38}

Man and woman, look on me! 
How much I suffered for you, see! 
Look on my back, laid bare with whips: 
Look on my side, from which blood drips. 
My feet and hands are nailed upon the Rood; 
From pricking thorns my temples run with blood. 
From side to side, from head to foot, 
Turn and turn my body about, 
You there shall find, all over, blood. 
Five wounds I suffered for you: see! 
So turn your heart, your heart, to me.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\textbf{The Visions of Anne Katherine Emmerich:}

We can go still further and confidently state that, Gibson also seems to be (either consciously or unconsciously) favouring a more feminine interpretation of Jesus’ passion. Here Sister Andrea correctly points out that these passion meditations and plays were
originally designed for predominantly female audiences because the Church authorities believed then that women (in particular) lacked the necessary intellect to deal with theological issues. Some of these mystical experiences clearly border on the erotic and the sexual.

Sister Andrea reminds us that a number of very important female mystics produced personalised accounts of Jesus’ passion. One fifteenth century mystic (Elizabeth of Spalbeck) inscribed a passion narrative on her body, wearing the stigmata, or Christ’s wounds, on her own hands, feet and side, and modelled Christ’s death every day in a type of ritual dance. Sister Andrea explains that

> The fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich wrote that she wished to ‘have beene that time with Mary Magdalen and with other that were Crists lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of the compassion our Lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time His peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him.’

Gibson has indicated that apart from the gospels he also referred to the accounts of the early modern female mystic Maria de Agreda (1602-1665) and his personal copy of The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ (1824) by Venerable Anne Katherine Emmerich (1774-1824), hailed as a Mystic, Stigmatist, Visionary, and Prophet. Both of these women’s visionary accounts fall within the meditatio vitae Christi tradition. Incidentally, Gibson apparently carries a relic of Emmerich, which he also showed to Sawyer during his interview with her for the American Broadcasting Corporation on 16 February 2004. This emphasis on the female perspective is well illustrated in this excerpt from Emmerich’s Dolorous Passion:

> I SAW the Blessed Virgin in a continual ecstasy during the time of the scourging of her Divine Son; she saw and suffered with inexpressible love and grief all the torments he was enduring. She groaned feebly, and her eyes were red with weeping. A large veil covered her person, and she leant upon Mary of Heli, her eldest sister,* who was old and extremely like their mother, Anne. Mary of Cleophas, the daughter of Mary of Heli, was there also. The friends of Jesus and Mary stood around the latter; they wore large veils, appeared overcome with grief and anxiety, and were weeping as if in the momentary expectation of death. The dress of Mary was blue; it was long, and partly covered by a cloak made of white wool, and her veil was of rather a yellow white. Magdalen was totally beside herself from grief and her hair was floating loosely under her veil.

The following breakdown of Emmerich’s original meditations (which in many ways are an extension of the fourteen Stations of the Cross plus key events from the four gospels), specifically apply to Gibson’s’ Passion:
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The film also appears to be structured almost predominantly on *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. The only exception is the fact that Gibson ignores the involvement of Joseph of Arimathea at the entombment. Also, although there is no scene or aspect of the movie that relates directly to the appearance of St Joseph as a child, Gibson does include Satan holding a child during the scourging scene.
Mel Gibson as a Catholic Sectarian:

Gibson does not want to be associated with the modern Roman Catholic Church but claims instead to adhere to the tenets of the Roman Catholic Faith as they applied before the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s (i.e. Vatican II). In this context, as a possible member of a relatively small Catholic sectarian group, it is conceivable that he does not recognise the then present pope (i.e. John Paul II) as legitimate, reputedly calling John Paul II an “ass”. and further may even believe at least some of the practices of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church to be heretical. Lawler, who has investigated Gibson’s religious stance in great detail, confirms this fact,

Contemporary Catholic sectarianism is a small, global movement that arose after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, largely in response to the Council’s embrace of a renewed vision of Church, which softens the monarchical papacy Gibson cherished in his youth and continues to cherish, a new theological idea of religious liberty previously unheard of in Catholic circles, and previously-disdained ecumenical dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian religions. The movement crystallized in 1971 with the prohibition of the Latin Mass authorized by and in use since the sixteenth-century Council of Trent.

This fact is most important because it highlights Gibson’ particular (albeit traditionalist) interpretation of what defines Christianity – a stance which is not only poles apart from most Protestant and Evangelical denominations but is also at some small variance with contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine.

The original Council of Trent (1545-1563) had been initiated mainly as an instrument of reform within the Catholic Church, but here, only those issues as raised by the early protestant movement were addressed. For this reason, certain shortfalls in the Catholic Church were not all subject to the same degree of reform during the counter-reformation period, including the very strict hierarchical nature of the Church’s ministry, which was left largely intact until Vatican II. Lawler explains that the core doctrine of this hierarchical model is that the Roman Catholic Church is the one, true Church established by Jesus Christ on the foundation of Peter the Rock. In other words, the Roman Catholic Church is identical to the Body of Christ and by implication all non-Catholic Christians, regardless of their de facto spiritual merits, could not be considered as de jure members of Christ’s body and consequently were not eligible for salvation.
After four centuries the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council finally repudiated this more traditional view. Here, possibly the most important reform of Vatican II was its ecumenism, which declared that all Christians could consider themselves members of the Body of Christ. In addition, in 1965, the council made the consolatory *Nostra Aetate* declaration which renounced the notion that Jews were eternally responsible for Jesus’ death and established at long last that they were not in fact “cursed by God” (Matthew, 27: 24-25). However, the more traditional Catholic views, including the notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church) are still supported by the Catholic sectarian group in question and as it transpires so does Gibson. For example, in a recent article Gibson, in a possibly unguarded moment, commented on the Protestants’ claims to eternal salvation (including that of his own wife). He stated:

There is no salvation for those outside the church. I believe it … [p]ut it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England … She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it’s not fair if she doesn’t make it, she’s better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it. (sic)

**The Setting:**

Gibson chose the same Italian location (Matera) as used for Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) for his crucifixion scene. This was a good choice since the terrain, especially the colour of the natural stone is strongly reminiscent of what one could imagine Jerusalem was like 2000 years ago. Gibson explains that

Certain sections of the city are 2,000 years old … and the architecture, the blocks of stone and the surrounding areas and rocky terrain added a vista and backdrop that we [used] to create the backdrops for our lavish sets of Jerusalem. We relied heavily on the look that was there. In fact, the first time I saw it, I just went crazy, because it was so perfect.

For his other scenes he chose the Cinecitta studios in Rome. There, he had a scale model of inter-testamental Jerusalem recreated, complete with Pontius Pilate’s palace, the Jewish Temple, and other settings. McClure describes the set as follows:

It is a spectacle of truly biblical proportions: giant columns, flights of stone steps, massive wooden doors, weathered Roman emblems, vendors' canopies and pottery … [I]nside the gold-washed temple walls, smoke fills the
air as the cast and crew of hundreds wait for direction, as if posing for a painting. The handcrafted costumes in beige, brown and black are designed by the award-winning Maurizio Millenotti. The special effects, makeup and hair department — which has custom-fitted every beard, hairpiece and braid to the actors — were flown in from Los Angeles, because of their unique ability to create what Gibson needed for the scenes in which Jesus is whipped and crucified. 51

These props make for a visual feast that has the feel of authenticity and here Gibson largely achieved what he set out to accomplish. He wanted the film to be so realistic that the audience would not be aware of their interface with the celluloid medium, which is another reason why he originally did not want sub-titles marring the intended illusion. Gibson was also careful not to produce yet another “cheesy Hollywood epic” 52 as he termed it, and opted for hard-hitting realism, taking his inspiration from the tenebristic qualities of the Baroque artist Caravaggio.

The Key Cast Members:

In order to promote the realism of the film it was important that his actors should not be too tainted by association with other films. Therefore Gibson tended to use relatively unknown actors and actresses for his lead roles. What is particularly significant here is that like Caravaggio, who often used vagabonds and prostitutes to serve as models for divine personages in his paintings (a factor which incensed the Catholic Church during the counter reformation) Gibson also made use of people who do not exactly have unsullied reputations, viz.: Monica Belluci (Magdalen), Rosalinda Celentano (Satan), Claudia Gerini (Pilate’s wife), Sabrina Impacciatore (Seraphia) and Gabriella Barbuti (Herod’s female attendant) are all pornography stars.

Maia Morgenstern, who plays the mother of Jesus is a practicing Jew, which it may have been thought added an element of believability to her role as a Jewish mother. Unfortunately, what detracted from the avowed authenticity was the fact that Gibson constantly panders to a traditional Catholic ethos, no doubt because of his heavy reliance on the insights of Emmerich’s Catholic mysticism. Indeed, he has both Mary the mother of Jesus as well as Mary Magdalen attired in outfits that strongly allude to the habits of Dominican nuns. However, what was most jarring visually was Morgenstern who appeared as a doppelganger of Daarth Vader’s mother (i.e. Shmi Skywalker played by Pernilla August in Star Wars: The Phantom Menace [1999]). It is also a very interesting coincidence that August was herself recently cast as Jesus’
mother in *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (1999). Perhaps both actresses embody some motherly quality that contemporary movie directors recognize.

Jim Caviezel plays the role of Jesus. His “perfectly” symmetrical face, long nose and muscullarly athletic build, together with his shoulder length dark hair and beard make him a perfect choice for what the paradigm of the last 1500 years of artistic depictions of Jesus has dictated. Despite his claim at wanting realism, Gibson obviously chose to go with the flow and chose an idealistic, stereotypical Jesus. One could support the idea that a man with perfectly proportioned physique would be a good symbol for the Hellenistic notion of an incarnation of God in a man’s body. Also, playing on the Christian notion of Jesus’ role as sacrificial lamb and scapegoat (which of course evolved from older Jewish traditions involving the sacrifice of unblemished animals as suitable atonement for the transgressions of the community), Gibson possibly wanted a Jesus who looked innocent to symbolize his guiltless status and to heighten the drama as his beautiful body is methodically broken down under the weight of human’s unbearable sin. Unfortunately for the film, Gibson, almost immediately oversteps the boundary between what is believable and concurrently symbolic with what is purely symbolic, theatrical and simultaneously impossible.

**The Iconography of the Film:**

Gibson, like the passion plays of old, has the Devil/Satan appear “on stage” with his actors. However, in medieval times the Devil (complete with horns and a forked tail) served as part of the comic relief. Gibson, instead has Satan conforming to the New Testament account where Paul describes Satan as “an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Gibson creates this vision of an androgynous being with a beautiful, perfectly symmetrical face, by using an actress (Rosalinda Celentano) but whose voice is dubbed with that of an actor to give her a masculine quality. Gibson wants us to realise that his Satan is as deceptive as he is beguiling. To achieve this he offers the viewer a visual cue by shaving off Celentano’s eyebrows and hair and editing her face so that she never blinks. “Evil is alluring, attractive. It looks almost normal, almost good – but not quite … That's what evil is about, taking something that's good and twisting it a little bit.” 53
The film opens with the Agony in the Garden scene, which logically could never have had any eye-witnesses since they were all asleep at the time! In addition, biblically, this scene has no guest appearances by devils although Luke (22: 43) mentions a comforting angel. Here, obviously relying on Emmerich’s vision, Gibson has Satan attempting to put Jesus off of his divine mission to save the world: “Do you really believe one man can carry this burden? ... saving their souls is too costly.” 54 Gibson’s Jesus, at this point in the film displays distinctly human qualities in that he has to struggle with his own conscience to make the “correct” decision. As Gibson’s Jesus grapples with the decision to take on Man’s sin, he behaves like a petulant child having a private tantrum, an action that sets the very camp tone for the rest of the film. During this theatrical display, Gibson’s Satan then releases a medium-sized boa constrictor, whose head Jesus subsequently crushes beneath his sandaled heel, no doubt to remind us that Jesus will be able to overcome evil in the end, as well as showing us that Jesus is the “second Adam” making a direct reference to Genesis (3: 14,15) “You [snake] will be punished for this; you alone of all the animals must bear this curse … her [Eve’s] offspring will crush your head …” This garden scene, with its blue lighting and eerie shadows, together with the hooded, androgynous, shaven-headed Satan (who at moments looked like a parody of the Virgin Mary) was at such a variance to the anticipated biblical look of the other actors, that he/she came across as a fantasy creature from Star Wars or Lord of The Rings.

After the betrayal, Jesus is captured by the High Priest’s soldiers and right at the outset, he receives such violent treatment that his right eye is closed up. As a result, iconographically, Jesus reads more like Rocky Balboa in the Rocky series (1976 –1990) than a Jewish Chasid or Rabbi. On the way to the High Priest’s house, Jesus is continually beaten by his Jewish captors and even manages to “accidentally” fall off the edge of a bridge (which co-incidentally Judas is cowering beneath). Because he is still chained to his captors, Jesus ends up performing what must be history’s first recorded bungee jump culminating with a chance meeting between an upside-down Jesus and his errant disciple Judas. This scene, far from eliciting a meaningful tension as Jesus and Judas briefly exchange knowing looks in the early morning gloom strikes an inappropriate, even humorous (Monty Pythonesque) note.

At Jesus’ preliminary hearing with Caiaphas we are presented with a scene which is reminiscent of images by Rembrandt, no doubt as a direct result of the strong use of tenebrism and the exotic costumes of the Jewish High Priests. The visual tableau depicts a very large group of Jewish Priests, some with distorted features, who cackle and argue over
Jesus’ fate. Although the strong feeling of Baroque tenebrism and the extremely naturalistic look of the architecture and associated interiors pervade the whole film, these Caravaggesque features are especially prevalent in this scene.

Vermes, also verifies that the Aramaic spoken in the film had a distinctly Hebraic feel to it: “I did not find it easy to follow the Aramaic which was mixed with unnecessary Hebraisms.”65 He also pointed out that the wrong Aramaic word for “God” is employed throughout the film.66

What was also very disappointing, considering the promise of just over two hours of historically correct Latin was the fact that Gibson’s Romans don’t speak anything vaguely resembling what real Romans might have spoken. Gibson, who went to all the trouble to defy his critics and have his actors speaking Aramaic and Latin for the sake of historical accuracy, must surely have considered consulting reputable historians and linguists as regards pronunciation and grammar? Instead, he manages to completely botch the whole experience by having his actors speak modern Church Latin, complete with Italianate, soft “C” and “G” sounds and hard “V” sounds.67 Any sense of suspended belief was totally lost. Perhaps, from a more traditional Catholic/Italian perspective this must surely have helped to make the dialogue sound more familiar, which of course contradicts Gibson’s claim that he wanted to encourage the audience to read the narrative by virtue of the imagery alone as he is also clearly giving the spectator greater access to the Latin tongue by modernising its presentation. This made the scene quite comical – akin to watching Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979). Vermes, echoes this sentiment:

The light element in The Passion of the Christ is supplied by the use of Latin and Aramaic. Not only are Pilate and Jesus(!) fluent Latin speakers, but even the soldiers of the Jerusalem garrison, who were most probably Aramaic- and Greek-speaking recruits from Syria, converse happily in a clumsy Latin with Italian Church pronunciation.68

Greek would have been the most prominent language in this region at this time and certainly would have been used as a regular means of communication between Roman and Jew.

According to Gibson, It also became apparent that whilst Jesus was at this time being questioned for suspected blasphemy, the Jews did not want the Romans to know what they were doing. This is not Biblical. Gibson has two Roman soldiers express concern for the gentle Jewish teacher being victimised by these cruel Jews. This occurs when they
accidentally encounter a growing crowd of Jewish onlookers who for some inexplicable reason have all woken up simultaneously in the early hours of the morning, to visit the High Priest’s house to see what they cannot possibly know is going on. This is also not Biblical. Apart from John, the gospels only confirm one person going specifically to the High Priest’s house, viz.: Peter, who follows Jesus to Caiaphas’ courtyard and there meets Caiaphas’ servant girls and what we must presume to be Caiaphas’ soldiers and/or retinue. One of the gospels does talk about some “bystanders” in connection with Peter’s denial of Jesus, but not of a mob all clamouring to see what is going on and certainly, none mention the Magdalen or Jesus’ mother – both of whom are present in the Gibson version. Apart from the Gospel of St John, there is also no mention of Jesus’ other disciples. In this regard, only John states that Peter went with another (unnamed disciple) who was apparently well known to the High Priest, so that he could obtain special permission to allow Peter to gain entry into the courtyard (John, 18: 15-18).

Gibson’s imaginary mob of irate Jews, intent on seeing the destruction of Jesus, certainly didn’t need any special permission and were clearly allowed full access to Caiaphas’ property. The High Priest’s soldiers tell the two Roman soldiers (not biblical) that what is occurring is none of their business as this is a Jewish matter and that it involves someone who has broken a temple law. Considering that the Jews were under supposedly cruel Roman occupation at this time and are depicted by Gibson as causing a noticeable disturbance at night, one is hard-pressed to understand why the two Roman soldiers are seemingly happy to leave things as they find them.

The meeting between Jesus and Pilate is much closer to the gospel accounts and favours Matthew’s distinctly anti-Jewish stance. Undeniably, Gibson goes further than Matthew and portrays a Pontius Pilate who is at greater variance with the little that is known about him historically. Apart from the gospels we are aware of only three commentators (i.e. Tacitus, Agrippa I as cited by Philo, and Flavius Josephus) who not only make reference to Pilate by name but also give us some insight into his character. He is accused by his detractors as being excessively ruthless, violent, greedy, insulting, proud and responsible for “continual executions without trial, and endless and unbearable cruelty” 59 and it is quite certain, that he was particularly insensitive to the feelings of the Jewish community. 60 Gibson even allows Pilate to mention that the emperor (Tiberius) is displeased with the way he handles things and that next time he makes a political blunder it will be his own head. Gibson presents him as a frightened, fawning, well-intentioned, sincere, even at times philosophical man who
even finds the time to obtain his wife’s feelings about what is supposed to be a political issue.

After the various trials and hearings, Jesus is taken to King Herod (only mentioned in Luke), who appeared as if he had just walked off the set of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Super Star* (1973) complete with theatrical wig and explicitly camp mannerisms.

When the Jews bring Jesus back to Pilate, he bravely attempts to save Jesus’ life from the implacable Jewish mob. Incidentally, the crowd are all almost identically attired in their *tallisim* (prayer shawls) and apart from the Dominican nun look-alikes, each is made to look like a mini replica of the High Priests, giving the distinct impression that we are witnessing an organized stage production (a sequel to *Fiddler on the Roof* [1971]?) rather than a naturalistic scene depicting an informal cross-section of the local citizenry. Pilate makes the decision to have Jesus whipped and from this point Gibson commences his long drawn-out depiction of the scourging. Here Gibson manages to destroy any suspension of belief or empathy with another human’s suffering by loading his Jesus with what are quite simply, unbelievable (i.e. inhuman) burdens.

For example, we have no idea to what extent the Romans took their scourging with Jesus. The gospel accounts do not dwell on this incident that much and in addition are divided in opinion. Matthew and Mark both give the impression that the scourging was part of the total package (i.e. scourging and crucifixion). “… after he [Pilate] had Jesus whipped, he handed him over to be crucified.” (Matthew, 27: 26). “Then he [Pilate] had Jesus whipped and handed him over to be crucified.” (Mark, 15: 15). Luke confirms this but indicates that Pilate was originally thinking of just whipping Jesus (to save his life) but then had no choice but to hand him over for crucifixion. In this version, Jesus is never whipped and does not receive a crown of thorns: “… I will have him whipped and set him free.” But they [the Jews] kept on shouting … and finally their shouting succeeded. So Pilate passed the [death] sentence on Jesus …’ ” (Luke, 23: 22, 23). Only John has Jesus whipped as an ultimate punishment and then subsequently, when the crowd are still dissatisfied, Pilate is forced to have him crucified. As regards the whipping, the text simply states “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him whipped.” John (19: 1).

If the gospel account is based on some element of truth then we may suppose that Pilate had intended Jesus to be flogged as an ultimate punishment in its own right. The gospels give the
impression that Pilate had Jesus scourged to appease the demands of the High Priests and (at least initially) did not want to have him crucified. Three gospels make it clear that the scourging was part of the crucifixion preparation. If so, it is certain that the scourging would not have needed to be so severe since it was not meant (in this interpretation) to be the ultimate sentence. So little (if anything) is mentioned in the gospel accounts, which either means that it wasn’t that important to the gospel writers or they were not prepared to say too much about it. As alluded to earlier, this may have been a political decision at the time (c. 80 C.E. onwards) where it became critical to paint the Romans in a better light. Regardless, most assume that Roman discipline was meted out harshly and cruelly. Even so it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have received more than 39 individual lashes, possibly administered with a flagellum by one or two men. These, depending on how it was administered, had the potential to kill and would most certainly have taken even the strongest man to the brink of death.

Gibson has his mild-mannered Pilate explain to his soldiers that they mustn’t go too far (i.e. they are given a direct order to punish Jesus severely but not to kill him).

Before the scourging commences in the courtyard scene, Gibson, has the audience witness a low granite slab which acts as a table, complete with a range of a dozen or so instruments of torture; whips, metal rods with various attachments and assorted flagelli. This scene is very reminiscent of the opening moments of the gruesome drawing and quartering episode in Braveheart (1989). Then, Gibson, clearly fuelled by the sexually charged, self-indulgent, effusions of Emmerich, has his Jesus (who already at this point, is quite significantly disfigured as a result of his treatment by his earlier Jewish captors), whipped 39 times with canes (exactly as described by Emmerich). Jesus, with trembling hands, does not cry out, as would a normal man, instead, for the most part he stoically and silently flinches and occasionally lets out low moans. The following extract from Emmerich’s Passion is closely aligned in sentiment to the script for this scene:

Jesus trembled and shuddered as he stood before the pillar, and took off his garments as quickly as he could, but his hands were bloody and swollen. The only return he made when his brutal executioners struck and abused him was to pray for them in the most touching manner: he turned his face once towards his Mother, who was standing overcome with grief; this look quite unnerved her: she fainted, and would have fallen, had not the holy women who were there supported her. Jesus put his arms round the pillar, and when his hands were thus raised, the archers fastened them to the iron ring which was at the top of the pillar; they then dragged his arms to such a height that his feet, which were
tightly bound to the base of the pillar, scarcely touched the ground. Thus was the Holy of holies violently stretched, without a particle of clothing, on a pillar used for the punishment of the greatest criminals; and then did two furious ruffians who were thirsting for his blood begin in the most barbarous manner to scourge his sacred body from head to foot. The whips or scourges which they first made use of appeared to me to be made of a species of flexible white wood, but perhaps they were composed of the sinews of the ox, or of strips of leather. 61

After this quite unbelievable cruelty (where each blow was counted off), Gibson’s Jesus (still looking like Rocky Balbalo at this stage), miraculously manages to straighten himself up, overtly defiant, it would seem, of his tormentors’ quite feeble efforts to subdue him. At this point, one gets the impression that despite the significant loss of blood, Jesus is not really human. One would be forgiven at this point for thinking that they were perhaps watching a science fiction/fantasy film- a celluloid blend of *Planet of the Apes* (2001) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The two soldiers (exclaiming their disbelief in Church Latin) are visibly flummoxed themselves at this utterly implausible turn of events, which heightens again the notion that this character played by Jim Caviezel is something more than a mild-mannered Jewish Rabbi. He must be Superman.

Gibson should have stopped the scourging at this point as there was still enough of Caviezel’s intact body to allow the audience to feel some empathy for him. But he does not stop here. The two soldiers now return to the torture smorgasbord and select a pair of *flagelli*, which bear little resemblance to their Roman counterparts. Indeed, instead of the expected lead ball couplets attached to three leather thongs, these came equipped with what looked like futuristic, stainless steel, razor-sharp hooks (apparently they were made from sheep bones) attached to at least seven thongs. One of the soldiers, breaking with the accepted notion that Roman soldiers were disciplined and surely listened to the commands of their superiors, tests his space-age *flagellum* out on a small wooden table, which is situated directly in front of his seated *decurion*. He violently lashes out at the table, narrowly missing his superior (who unbelievable is not that perturbed by the incident) and gouges out large splinters of wood in order to demonstrate to the audience how effectively this particular instrument of torture works.

The pair now set upon Jesus with even more determination. Again the blows are counted off, starting yet again with “únus, duo, trés, quattuor etc.” In an attempt, no doubt, to heighten the drama and possibly give the audience the female mystic perspective, Gibson increasingly concentrates the camera on Mary’s emotional response to what is happening to her son while
in the background we are only allowed to hear the sickening sounds of the flagellum tearing into what is left of Jesus’ flesh. This is punctuated by individual camera shots of specific blows to Jesus’ body and as a result one loses count of this second round of beatings. This description by Emmerich is perfectly in accord with Gibson’s scene:

Two fresh executioners took the places of the last mentioned, who were beginning to flag; their scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow. What word, alas! could describe this terrible—this heartrending scene! 62

By carefully concentrating on the action it becomes apparent that there are in excess of 60 additional blows, remembering that each strike is at least seven-fold which makes about 420 additional (often bone deep) wounds on top of the initial 39 lashes. Here there is a slight deviation from Emmerich in that the soldiers do not tire to the point that they need to be swapped for fresher men and they do not complete a third round of flagellation. What the soldiers do do however, in accord with Emmerich’s text, is to turn Jesus over onto his back after some 40-odd lashes and whip his chest, his face and all parts of his body previously protected by the column. At this point, Gibson has his Daarth Satan figure continue to weave in and out of the crowd scenes, holding a creature that resembles something between the mutant Martian, Kuato from *Total Recall* (1990) and Uncle Fester from *Addams Family* (1991). Gibson has no justifiable symbolic reason for this bizarre intrusion into the scourging scene. It is true that Emmerich mentions demons being amongst the crowd, but Gibson has Satan assume his Virgin Mary mode (already noticed in the Gethsemane incident) and parodies the concept of Madonna and Child. Gibson was (understandably) asked why he included this alien baby in his film. He replied as follows:

It's evil distorting what's good. What is more tender and beautiful than a mother and a child? So the Devil takes that and distorts it just a little bit. Instead of a normal mother and child you have an androgynous figure holding a 40-year-old ‘baby’ with hair on his back. It is weird, it is shocking, it's almost too much—just like turning Jesus over to continue scourging him on his chest is shocking and almost too much, which is the exact moment when this appearance of the Devil and the baby takes place. (sic) 63

This is a circular argument. There was no logical reason why the Devil needed to be holding a baby except to serve as comical relief, which may be in accord with medieval customs when used as an interlude between scenes but is hardly appropriate when juxtaposed with the main action of the scene itself. The result, as in the Garden of Gethsemane scenes, was to destroy any suspended belief on the part of the audience. The illusion jumped from a Roman historical context to a science fiction/horror movie context. What Gibson does achieve,
however, is the visual cue that the Jewish crowd are to be identified with Satan. The implication at the very least is that the Jews are somehow possessed by evil and act accordingly.

Now, it is also highly unlikely that the Romans would have delivered direct blows to the heart area of a man whom their Procurator wanted kept alive. Indeed, a normal man would have easily died many times over with the treatment Gibson gives Jesus. At the end of the scourging scene, Jesus is miraculously still alive and even capable of some movement. The soldiers drag his completely blood-soaked, lacerated body off to the next scene leaving behind a courtyard completely covered in his blood.

Gibson now slips in another piece of fiction, viz.: the two Marys (who for some reason have unlimited access to the Roman barracks) are handed a pile of linen towels by Pilate’s wife so that they may wipe up Jesus’ blood in the courtyard. It transpires that Emmerich’s vision is yet again the inspiration for this scene:

[A]fter the flagellation, I saw Claudia Procles, the wife of Pilate, send some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God. I know not whether she thought that Jesus would be set free, and that his Mother would then require linen to dress his wounds, or whether this compassionate lady was aware of the use which would be made of her present. … I soon after saw Mary and Magdalen approach the pillar where Jesus had been scourged; … they knelt down on the ground near the pillar, and wiped up the sacred blood with the linen which Claudia Procles had sent.

Of course, unless the viewer was au fait with these visionary accounts they would have wondered why Gibson wandered so far from the gospel accounts he promised. Indeed, this unoriginal dependence on Emmerich’s vision has pervaded the whole film with a strong female perspective, where every important scene in the film (except the action in the Garden of Gethsemane) involves either Jesus’ mother or the Magdalen, very often both. This is not at all in keeping with the four gospel accounts and certainly from an historical perspective women would not have been allowed to be present in many of the situations either Emmerich or Gibson depict.

Visually, one gets the impression that this scourging scene required Gibson’s Jesus to shed at least four to five pints of blood. A normal person would be unconscious with half that blood loss. Given that Jesus is by now unrecognisable as a human being, we are presented with an impossible, totally unbelievable situation epitomised by a character that has now been completely dehumanised. The blood does not read as blood at this point. It is obviously phoney. One can now see the stage make up, the fake plastic scars, the tomato sauce blood.
There is no more pain, no more suffering. Gibson is literally flogging a dead horse. He has lost the plot. From this point on it is difficult to empathise with Caviezel’s performance. He appears almost clown-like, coated as he is in red paint and extraordinary latex wounds. After the flagellations, every additional blow Jesus receives detracts more and more from his humanity.

Finally after the equally excessive crowning with thorns scene, Jesus (in accordance with John) is taken before Pilate and shown to the angry mob. After the “Ecce Homo” scene where Pilate washes his hands of Roman guilt, Matthew’s judeophobic pronouncement is made in direct contravention of Gibson’s promise to exclude it. Maybe he thought we wouldn’t notice. Vermes confirms this point:

One point is worth noting. It has been said again and again that the fateful curse "His blood be on us and our children!" has been cut from the film. This is not so. The Aramaic words are there; only the English subtitle has been removed. 65

In the many interviews that have been recorded concerning Gibson’s attitude to the blood curse issue, it is perfectly clear that either he is trying to do something surreptitiously or he simply forgot the details of his own film. For example he intimates very strongly at one time to have excised all reference to the blood curse and even states:

I wanted it in … My brother said I was wimping out if I didn't include it. It happened; it was said. But, man, if I included that in there, they'd be coming after me at my house, they'd come kill me. (sic) 66

This comment, as it transpires, was a political way of merely giving the impression that he was going to remove it. He obviously had no intention of doing so. Perhaps, Gibson might claim that he had no choice and his hands were tied, because, for example, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to stick to gospel authority. If so, then he should have been more consistent. For example, as already pointed out earlier, Matthew has the whipping take place after the blood curse pronouncement but for this “divine insight” (amongst many others) Gibson doesn’t see the need to comply.

There can be no doubt that the only reason that Gibson emphasizes one event over another is because he is intent on getting the message through that the Jews are cursed – a sentiment clearly echoing the view of Emmerich, his actual spiritual mentor:

WHENEVER, during my meditations on the Passion of our Lord, I imagine I hear that frightful cry of the Jews, 'His blood be upon us, and upon our
children,’ visions of a wonderful and terrible description display before my
eyes at the same moment the effect of that solemn curse. I fancy I see a
gloomy sky covered with clouds, of the colour of blood, from which issue
fiery swords and darts, lowering over the vociferating multitude; and this
curse, which they have entailed upon themselves, appears to me to
penetrate even to the very marrow of their bones,— even to the unborn
infants. They appear to me encompassed on all sides by darkness; the
words they utter take, in my eyes, the form of black flames, which recoil
upon them, penetrating the bodies of some, and only playing around
others. The last-mentioned were those who were converted after the death
of Jesus, and who were in considerable numbers, for neither Jesus nor
Mary ever ceased praying, in the midst of their sufferings, for the salvation
of these miserable beings. 67

Gibson’s Jesus is finally given his cross to bear. Again Gibson borrows from artistic
misconceptions rather than using the opportunity to be historically accurate. Roman
prisoners who were condemned to die by crucifixion were made to carry the patibulum
(cross beam), a piece of wood weighing a little over 50 kilogrammes. The stipes (upright
stake) was normally kept in situ at the place of execution. The patibulum was fitted with a
recess so that it could be hoisted to the top of the stipes and slot on top forming a T or Tau
cross. Criminals had their offences written on a titulus (placard) that was attached to a thin
pole and which was in its turn nailed to the middle section of the patibulum. Once the victim
was in place, the titulus, now situated above the condemned man’s head, could be read from
below. It is highly unlikely that the Romans had much call for a Latin cross as represented
in much Western art, but it is not impossible that on occasion they were employed. The fact
is though, that Gibson’s Romans had no need to mete out more punishment on Jesus than say
either of the two thieves condemned with him. Therefore logically, each condemned man
would have been treated more or less equally and each would have had to carry a similar
item. In this context, this would have had to have been an entire Latin cross (if the director
wanted to employ a western artistic tradition) or just the patibulum (if he had wanted to be
historically accurate). Again, because Gibson is so dependent on Emmerich, he has Jesus
carrying a huge, super-sized Latin cross (perhaps to symbolize the enormous weight of the
sin of humankind and/or as a symbol of the supreme authority of the Roman Catholic
Church?) and his thieves only get to each carry a small patibulum.

The design of Gibson’s cross is very revealing. Apart from it conforming to Emmerich’s
description he places three studs (as the corners of an imaginary equilateral triangle) at the
point where the patibulum intersects with the stipes. So arranged they appear slightly above
Jesus’ head when the cross is raised and act as a visual reminder that Jesus is a member of
the triune God as emphasized by the dogma of the “Blessed Trinity”. Incidentally, had this in
fact happened historically (as Gibson clearly intimates) then it would have been quite prophetic of the Roman soldiers, since the very concept of the “Blessed Trinity” was not canonized by the Church until 325 CE (i.e. three centuries after the supposed date of the crucifixion event).

The traditional 650 yards of the *Via Dolorosa* seems like three kilometres in Gibson’s version and it is here, if one did not know better, that one might think they were watching a black comedy. Jesus is lashed at least 45 more times with implications of more than this number as the camera occasionally leaves the scene of Jesus’ tribulations to focus on such things as Seraphia’s (Veronica) preparations to wipe Jesus’ face with her veil or the Roman’s commandeering of Simon of Cyrene to assist Jesus with his cross. Gibson has his Jesus fall six times (Emmerich mentions seven falls) as opposed to the traditional three falls and uses each fall to try out a different choreographed movement. Thus we get Jesus falling down whilst going down hill; Jesus falling down whilst going up hill; Jesus falling onto the cross; Jesus falling under the cross etc. Each fall is shown in slow motion with Jesus looking like a bizarre scarlet rag doll dodging invisible bullets in a new sequel to the *Matrix* films.

We also witness the Roman soldiers being unnaturally vindictive towards Jesus, considering how unduly concerned they were for his fair treatment at the beginning of this film. Again, there is simply no logic for their brutal conduct. If for example these were particularly cruel Romans than they would be treating all their prisoners in the same way and not picking unduly on just one. The crowds for the most part are also hateful towards Jesus. Again there would not have been any need for this. Why would even the most barbaric men constantly make things even more difficult for themselves by continually slowing down and impeding a man who they can see is not in any state to carry the cross to the end? According to Gibson only the *centurion* manages to work this out, quite near the end of Jesus’ tribulations. The other two prisoners (i.e. the thieves) obviously had slaves carrying their *stipes* for them.

If the film is bizarre up to this point, it palls by comparison with the climax of the film: The actual Crucifixion. Here, Gibson manages to briefly get his forearms and hands into the action by temporarily playing the role of the soldier who places and hammers the nails into Jesus’ hands. These nails are very long and sharp and are hammered into predrilled holes in the very thick *patibulum*. As occurs often in passion plays and also Emmerich’s vision, these holes are pre-drilled too far apart. An interesting phenomenon in itself because, apart from creating a convenient excuse for the soldiers to play out their brutality by stretching Jesus
beyond his limits to line up his palms with the holes, it also manages to show that Gibson’s very tall Jesus must have been quite a bit shorter than the more average criminals that used that particular cross on previous occasions! The ridiculousness of the situation is confirmed by the fact that the two thieves, both smaller than Gibson’s Jesus, seemingly had no problems getting onto their respective crosses.

It was also interesting to take note that as many modern Catholics believe the *Shroud of Turin* to be the fifth gospel, Gibson might have tried to duplicate the distinctive tripartite whip marks found on the *Shroud* image, as well as make some reference to the nails being placed in the wrists and not the palms of the hands. Instead, Gibson made an especially pointed effort to show Jesus whipped in his heart region, as well as the inhuman extent of the scourging, both of which are antithetical to what the *Shroud* shows. Gibson shows Jesus’ hands bound at the wrists to the *patibulum* and shows the nails being placed in the palms and not the wrists, making it seem that Gibson rejects the *Shroud* as a forgery.

Not that he had to bring the *Shroud* into the debate but considering the large (primarily Catholic) following for that relic’s legitimacy and Gibson’s obvious interest in conversion, one might have assumed he would have synchronized the imagery of his film with that of the *Shroud*. Perhaps there are two interrelated reasons why he didn’t refer to the popular *Shroud* image. The first is that he wanted more artistic freedom to concentrate on a more traditional Catholic imagery and/or he recognizes the previous supremacy of the *Veil of Veronica* image which the modern Catholic Church, after nearly twelve centuries of regular, annual expositions, suddenly refuses to display. This was co-incidentally at about the time that the *Shroud of Turin* became popular (i.e. from c.1898 onwards), when Secondo Pia took the first photographs of this relic and revealed its supposedly miraculous characteristics. The impression one receives is that as the *Shroud of Turin* is a better relic than the *Veil of Veronica*, the Church doesn’t want to have to explain the fact that there are two conflicting images of Jesus on two different but equally sacred cloths. For this reason the modern Catholic Church eschews the *Veronica* and promotes the *Shroud* as one of its top icons, including images of the Pope, Padre Pia and Mother Theresa.

Bearing in mind that it is the bindings that are keeping Gibson’s Jesus attached to the *patibulum* and not the nails (in the palm of the hands) their primary function can only be to cause pain. Also, considering that these nails have been hammered some 15cm or more into the wood (albeit pre-drilled) there is no chance that they are going to fall out. Yet the
soldiers, who are obviously very obsessive about their carpentry skills, waste much time and energy by turning the cross over so that they can turn back the points of the nails. Perhaps being new at the job they did not think what problems they were creating for themselves when it came to getting those same nails out before the next victim could be crucified. Most amazing of all is the fact that when the cross is flipped over by the soldiers it magically hovers off of the ground just high enough not to crush Jesus’ head or body.

Considering that Jesus at this stage has been racked to the point where at least one of his arms is dislocated he is stretched so taut that even when the cross is positioned upside down, parallel and horizontal to the ground, the weight of Jesus’ body has absolutely no effect on his bindings. It is as if he was glued onto the cross along the entire length of his spine with his head lying almost exactly at the point where the patibulum intersects with the stipes. Yet when the cross is raised up, Jesus’ hands magically move both the predrilled holes and nails closer to the stipes by at least 15 – 20 cm allowing him to now hang with his arms at an acute angle and his head a good 20-25 cm lower than before. Unless Jesus’ arms magically grew by, say, some 10 cm each, this is surely, quite impossible. Perhaps the fact that the filming took 15 days on this scene alone, meant that some of the continuity aspects were overlooked. The end result is that as the crucifixion scene develops, Jesus keeps shifting his position on the cross and his head is never allowed to stay at the same height.

The titulus bearing the legend Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum which is mentioned in one form or another in all four gospels, is referred to as being written in “Hebrew, Latin and Greek” in John (19: 19, 20) and when asked to change the text, Pilate said “What I have written stays written.” (John, 19: 22). Obviously he did not count on Gibson who has the titulus written only in Latin and Hebrew. The distinct impression is created that Gibson is marginalizing anything Greek up to this point, apparently forgetful of the fact that the very gospels he supposedly wants to honour were written in that language. This makes this final piece of evidence very telling because it confirms that this was not simply a minor oversight but a verification of something quite deliberate on Gibson’s part.

Gibson again lets slip that he is very dependant on Emmerich’s text when he offers his interpretation of the narrative dealing with the two thieves. Biblically, this scene is presented as one where the two thieves are crucified after Jesus and where they both insult him. Matthew and Mark both confirm this and John (although not being very specific) seems to support this notion. In all four gospels the impression is given that one thief is crucified to
Jesus’ left and the other to his right. However, Luke (23: 36 – 43), writing sometime later than Matthew and Mark, gives the only version that indicates that one thief is good and the other evil. Catholic tradition has made much of this latter interpretation and art works have constantly depicted this scene in such a way that the thief on Jesus’ left is evil and the other (i.e. to Jesus’ right) is good. Emmerich, breaks with tradition and swaps this relationship around. So does Gibson.

After Jesus utters the famous “eloi, eloi lema sabachthani?” (Mark, 15:34), and subsequently dies on the cross, we are allowed to witness the scene where the Roman soldier pierces Jesus’ side with a *pilum*. Instead of the expected flow of blood and water, Gibson gives us what can only be described as a shower. In fact, so much liquid pours from his side that the Roman soldier concerned has enough time to kneel down, convert to Christianity and have his sins literally washed away. Even Jesus’ mother, the Magdalen, and at least one disciple manage to get a share of the life saving liquid, which would have to have been well over two litres in volume to achieve the visual effect Gibson created. Again, the film leaves reality and becomes unbelievable – even comical. When Jesus is finally taken down from the cross, it is interesting to note that despite the whippings and the crucifixion he still has enough blood to completely saturate the lower half of the cloth used for the deposition. The crucifixion scene ends with Mary holding the dead Christ, both mimicking certain key aspects of Michelangelo’s Pieta, except that Mary looks towards the audience as if to say “here is my son who died that you might live”.

Although the film was advertised as dealing with the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life, after his death on the cross there is a brief pause followed by a brief reference to the resurrection. Here, in what must have been slightly over two minutes, we are taken into Jesus’ tomb on the third day (i.e. Sunday morning), we see the stone blocking the doorway roll away allowing light to enter into the cave revealing the winding cloth a few moments after Jesus has miraculously evacuated it. The wound cloth, again deliberately avoiding any reference to the *Shroud of Turin*, is shown as it collapses under its own weight. The camera pans to an extreme close-up of Jesus’ head which acts as a repousoir to the rest of the scene and then pulls back to reveal a naked, but perfect Jesus. Well almost perfect; the resurrection of his body was very selective in that it does not have a single blemish related to his inhuman scourging, but does bear testimony to the nail wounds in his hands. Jesus stands and walks off camera. One hopes that he will find some clothes before meeting Mary Magdelen, who
according to the gospels should be waiting just outside the tomb in good time for Jesus to say “noli me tangere”.

Conclusions:

Gibson has explained that he wanted to employ the languages spoken in Jesus’ time because “[they] will lend even more authenticity and realism to the film”. Gibson intended for the acting and the imagery to hold the audience’s attention and originally even wanted to do this without the aid of subtitles:

Subtitles would somehow spoil the effect that I want to achieve. It would alienate you and you'd be very aware that you were watching a film if you saw lettering coming up on the bottom of it. Hopefully, I'll be able to transcend the language barriers with my visual storytelling. If I fail, I fail, but at least it'll be a monumental failure.

From an historical perspective, it is quite apparent at the outset that despite Gibson’s claim to “present the historical truth”, even going so far as to have all the characters in his performance speak in Aramaic and Latin, he utterly wastes what could have been a golden opportunity for a scholarly reconstruction of Roman occupied Judea in the reign of Tiberius. Ignoring for a moment that his source is the gospel accounts of the evangelists, real people are social animals, who gesticulate, speak inaccurately at times and even throw in filler words during the course of conversation. In Gibson’s re-enactment, people conduct their lives like robots, and only speak when spoken to, more often than not speaking in carefully apportioned segments where everyone else not concerned with the import of the situation keeps quiet until it is their turn to speak. This is quite frankly unbelievable and detracts immediately from any attempt at naturalism. It is also surprising, given that the gospels were written in Greek, and given that Greek was the de facto lingua franca of these times (even the Romans spoke Greek in Judea) that no one, not even Jesus (who according to Gibson could speak fluent Church Latin), utters a single syllable of Greek? Perhaps Gibson secretly felt that the effect of having the characters speak modern Church Latin and Hebrew-style Aramaic would give the audience the false sense that this is authentic and sanctified by God. It is an interesting religious phenomenon that even when people cannot understand a foreign language, they are still more likely to accept the truth and/or validity of something if it is spoken in an ancient and/or sacred tongue.

We must also be aware that despite Gibson’s claims that he only wanted to present the gospel truth, this particular film has been overtly made to be viewed within a very specific
religious context, where certain tenets of a particular denomination of the Christian cult are assumed to be understood by the prospective viewer. In this regard, we can only surmise the outcome, in the unlikely event that this film was actually viewed by persons who knew absolutely nothing about the various manifestations and claims of Christianity (during say the past 1900 years or so). Here again, we might surmise that these hypothetical innocents would be hard pressed to make any sense of this film. For example, they might understandably think that they were witnessing a re-enactment of Ancient Roman cruelty involving an extremely passive yet clearly demented madman who spoke in riddles. What is more likely is that, if they knew nothing about Christianity they would think that they were watching a bizarre comedy.

We can obtain a sense of this hypothetical kind of response when we view Christian artworks which do not contain overtly Christian symbolism, be it a play, film, painting or sculpture, and which cannot be viewed accurately by uninformed persons. For example, a person who has no Christian-based training, if confronted by Caravaggio’s *Conversion of St Paul* (1601), a painting which does not contain a single reference to any Christian symbol or overt metaphor, would be forgiven for thinking that he/she was viewing an incident in a stable where a drunken man had just fallen off of his mount.

However, where the film (i.e. *The Passion of the Christ*) is literally brimming over with very explicit Christian symbolism and metaphors, it is highly unlikely for anyone living in the modern world, dependant as it is on its long association with the history and development of the Christian faith to be completely unaware of at least some of the implications. Thus, the assumption has to be made that most if not all viewers will be versed in at least some aspects of Christian symbolism but unfortunately not necessarily the most accurate historical interpretations we have today concerning the history and establishment of the Christian faith. The result will be that most people who are already converted will probably enjoy the film and even believe that all the gross errors are either explicable, justified or somewhere in the bible. Very few are likely to want to check the facts and because of the distinctly anti-Jewish sentiment of the film, there should be real concern that certain people’s unfounded attitudes and bigotry will be firmly reinforced by the time that they leave this film. And here, despite Gibson’s protests to the contrary, there can be no doubt that Gibson has some issue (not only with Jews) but also with the Greek-speaking Christian community. 71 What this is is anybody’s guess. Perhaps, Gibson felt that it would detract from the medieval claims of the Catholic Church to be the only true body of Christ and give unwanted hegemony to the
Greek Orthodox Church? The fact is that his symbols are all very Western in that he emphasises the stereotypical Latin-cross, the Roman Catholic emphasis of the Blessed Trinity, the use of Church Latin (as spoken in Italy and the Roman Catholic Church), the references to distinctly Western forms of art, Bosch, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Velasquez, and Rembrandt, as well as the deliberate avoidance of the Greek language either written or spoken.

Apart from the flash-backs, where Gibson attempts (albeit briefly) to spread the Christian gospel of love, the snake incident, and the healing of Malchus’ severed ear, Jesus is predominantly presented as being entirely passive and non-reactionary. He is, in many ways portrayed as a mindless, puppet designed to bear all the brutality that the actors can throw at him – a factor that ultimately destroys this film’s avowed message. Gibson presents a Jesus who no one would want to follow. We can only feel pity for Jesus until we realise that we are being conned by the special effects department.

We should also understand that Gibson is not exactly naïve when it comes to making publicity. Any film dealing with Jesus as one of the leading cultural icons of our age is going to be noticed. Gibson can claim that he is only humbly doing God’s work but let’s not be fooled: a violent, special effects movie, focussing on the torture of Jesus is going to illicit some comment and ultimately sell tickets. He also made very sure that selected Christian groups and organisations were given pre-release viewings to further generate an enormous amount of free publicity for the film when it premiered earlier this year (i.e. 2004). Matthews puts this in perspective when he states:

Hypocrisy hovers over this enterprise like the mother ship in “Close Encounters.” Gibson chooses the most divisive Biblical account of the Crucifixion, one that includes the “blood libel” of the Jews, and makes its predictable controversy the centrepiece of his marketing campaign – all under the guise of spreading the Word. 72

One should not condemn Gibson for wanting to make some money. One should not believe that he is being dishonest in his claims of wanting to share the message (albeit bigoted) that he finds personally meaningful. However, where Gibson may have been somewhat ingenuous is where he has missed the golden opportunity to do the following, without in any way compromising his faith or his message of conversion:

- Realise the historical reasons why early Christian texts were anti-Semitic and attempt to reconstruct a more balanced view of what it was like to be alive in Judea under
Roman occupation. The modern Christian message does not need to refer to political issues (and associated outdated propaganda), which were only relevant to certain Judeo-Christian communities some 1800 – 1900 years ago. One doesn’t have to worry about offending the Ancient Romans any more, but one does need to consider the feelings of people who are totally innocent of any crime against Christianity or Christians and who in addition have had to bear the brunt of Christian brutality for far too long now. Gibson should know that you are more likely to catch flies with honey than you are with vinegar.

- Due acknowledgement needs to be given to the important role of the early Greek-speaking church and Hellenisation during the period in question. Roman Catholicism cannot claim to be the only true church. It is also not the oldest manifestation of Christianity. In fact Judaism was, closely followed by predominantly Greek speaking Christians.

- Historical details needed to be far better researched, especially as these apply to Jewish clothing, Jewish customs and interpretation of Jewish Law, the actual practices of Romans in occupied Judea, the interaction between Roman and Jew, Roman mercenaries and Jews etc.

- Anatomical facts like the effect of scourging, crucifixion etc. on a human being needed to be closely looked at. Gibson’s Christ would have been far more convincing had he been treated as a real human being. The proof of this is the fact that the two thieves looked like they were suffering far more than Jesus due to their recognizability as human beings in appearance, gesture and reactions.

In the final analysis, Gibson seems to have focussed on the needs of a public that is largely incapable of responding to subtlety because it has become visually punch-drunk by so much celluloid brutality and technological special effects. As a result, it is not impossible that this film will do much to undermine the potential of Christian conversion due to its message of hate, violence and bigotry. Certainly, this film will do absolutely nothing to reinforce the extremely positive reconciliation between Jewish and Christian groups in recent years. Because it is so slavishly dependant on stereotypical depictions of Jesus, consumer-level theology and the achievements of previous works of art, (including film), it is safe to say, that apart from its use of the latest film technology and beautiful Rembrandtesque pastiches,
it says absolutely nothing original. It is for these reasons, destined to become hailed as one of the most pretentious (albeit atrophied) films made to date on the persona of Jesus.

Notes:

1) http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/passion.htm


4) Yolandi Groenewald in her article entitled: South Africa and Mel Gibson's movie: The Passion of the Christ in Mail and Guardian: http://www.africamission-mafr.org/gibsonmovie.htm


6) Terry Lawson in his article entitled Mel Gibson unleashes an unholy uproar over movie about Christ's life. states: “If you believe Mel Gibson, he has been divinely inspired. While he will be credited with directing and co writing ‘The Passion,’ he says that his upcoming film about the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus of Nazareth -- who Gibson believes is literally the son of God -- is actually the work of the Holy Spirit, expressed through him.” http://www.freep.com/entertainment/movies/q1lawcol17.htm


8) David Morris states that “Six in 10 in this ABCNEWS Primetime poll say the Biblical accounts of Moses parting the Red Sea, God creating the world in six days and Noah and the flood happened that way, word for word. Evangelical Protestants are even more apt to hold this view; about nine in 10 of them take these accounts literally.” http://abcnews.go.com/sections/primetime/US/views_of_bible_poll_040216.html


10) See Dennis J. Halnon in his article: Christianity and the ‘Mystery Religions’. http://webpages.charter.net/djhalnon/index.html


14) The History of the Gospels: [Website Link]

15) The History of the Gospels: [Website Link]

16) The Four Gospels: [Website Link]

17) See O. Culmann in his article entitled: The Gospel according to Matthew. [Website Link]

18) Geza Vermes in is article entitled: Celluloid Brutality. [Website Link]

19) [Website Link]

20) [Website Link]

21) [Website Link]

22) [Website Link]

23) [Website Link]

24) M. E. Boismard in his article: Synopsis of the four Gospels[1] General Diagram. [Website Link]

25) John E. Remsberg in his article entitled: Gospel Oddities. [Website Link]

26) John E. Remsberg in his article entitled: Gospel Oddities. [Website Link]

27) Brown, Raymond E. Jesus: God and Man.

28) Claudia Tikkun Setzer in her article entitled: The Historical Jesus. [Website Link]

29) David Neff and Jane Johnson Struck in their interview with Mel Gibson: Dude, That Was Graphic! [Website Link]

30) David Neff and Jane Johnson Struck in their interview with Mel Gibson: Dude, That Was Graphic! [Website Link]


33) Cabrol, p. 16.

34) See David Neff ‘s article entitled: The Passion of Mel Gibson confirms that the film is a kind of prayer for Gibson. [Website Link]


37) Medieval English Verse, p. 36.

38) Medieval English Verse, p. 38.


40) Sister Andrea in her article entitled: *At Last... The Passion.*

41) Berit Kjos in his article entitled: *Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’.*
    http://www.cuttingedge.org/articles/db036.htm

42) Anne Catherine Emmerich: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*
    http://www.emmerich1.com/DOLOROUS_PASSION_OF_OUR_LORD_JESUS_CHRIST.htm#PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20FRENCH%20TRANSLATION

43) Anne Catherine Emmerich: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*
    http://www.emmerich1.com/DOLOROUS_PASSION_OF_OUR_LORD_JESUS_CHRIST.htm#PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20FRENCH%20TRANSLATION

44) Michael J. Lawler in his article entitled: *Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson* states: “It is unknown how large this Catholic sectarian group is in global terms but Noxon in his article which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* (March 9, 2003), estimated the number in the United States at 100,000. Lawson, believes this figure to be inflated, and states “… extrapolating from my personal knowledge of a number of Traditionalist groups, I believe that number [100,000] to be inflated. The real number may be closer to half that, though their financial support, as in Gibson’s case, provides them a voice well beyond their numbers.’”
    http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm

45) Michael I. Niman in his article entitled: *Terrorist Teachers, Mel Gibson’s Nazi Dad, George Bush’s Crusade Against [Gay] Marriage and the Tragedy of Haiti.* states “As for the Pope, who has strongly condemned such anti-Semitism, the elder Gibson told his radio audience that his son told him the Pope is an ‘ass’. Mel Gibson, who in an earlier interview said his dad ‘never lied to him,’ has so far declined to distance himself from his father’s statements.”
    http://mediastudy.com/articles/av3-4-04.html Michael J. Lawler states that “The most radicalized of the Traditionalist group are so incensed by John XXIII and what they perceive as the Council’s betrayal of true (by which, unwittingly, they mean Tridentine) Catholicism that they adhere to a bizarre doctrine of *sede-vacantism*, which means literally the Chair [of Peter] is vacant and embodies the ludicrous doctrine that all the Popes since Pius XII have been false Popes. It is not clear that Mel Gibson adheres to *sede-vacantism*, though he does repudiate Vatican II, but it is clear by self-confession that his father does, and the temptation to visit the sins of the father on the son is powerful. For the sake of justice, of course, that temptation should be resisted, a restraint from which the press has absolved itself in the present debate.”
    http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm

46) Michael J. Lawler in his article entitled: *Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson.*
    http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm

47) Michael J. Lawler in his article entitled: *Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson.*
    http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm

48) Michael J. Lawler in his article entitled: *Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson.*
    http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm

49) Berit Kjos in his article entitled: *Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’.*
    http://www.cuttingedge.org/articles/db036.htm


52) Holly Mcclure in her article entitled: *First-Person: Mel Gibson's 'Passion' For Jesus*. http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304


54) See the Beliefnet Staff’s report in ‘The Passion’: *What’s not in the Bible?* http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14097_1.html

55) Geza Vermes in is article entitled: *Celluloid Brutality*. http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,00.html

56) Stephen Bates and John Hooper quote Vermes in their article entitled: *Gibson Film Ignores Vow to Remove Blood Libel*. http://film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,12589,1157484,00.html

57) To be fair to Gibson, many experts warn that Latin pronunciation is not an exact science. We do not unfortunately have any direct record of how it was spoken at any epoch except from the 4th century C.E. onwards. In addition it is certain that there were many regional varieties throughout the Roman World, yet alone on the Italian peninsula. Regardless, most linguists would still agree that based on how Romans wrote and especially the commentaries made by certain authors on the pronunciation of their contemporaries it is possible to ascertain how it was most likely spoken at the time of Christ even if not in all regions of Roman occupation. It is widely accepted that before c. 130 C.E. Latin was spoken with a hard “C” and “G” and a soft “V” (pronounced as “oo” and “W”). Surely a person who is really intent on historical accuracy, would have chosen so-called “Silver Latin” or “Classical” Latin, which was prevalent in intertestamental times as a preferred model?

58) Geza Vermes in is article entitled: *Celluloid Brutality*. http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,00.html


64) Anne Catherine Emmerich: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. http://www.emmerich1.com/DOLOROUS_PASSION_OF OUR_LORD_JESUS_CH RIST.htm#PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20FRENCH%20TRANSLATION
65) Geza Vermes in his article entitled: *Celluloid Brutality.*
   http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,00.html

66) Peter Boyer in his article entitled: *Mel's 'Passion'-ate defense gives offense.*

67) Anne Catherine Emmerich: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*
   http://www.emmerich1.com/DOLOROUS_PASSION_OF OUR LORD JESUS CH RIST.htm#PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20FRENCH%20TRANSLATION

68) Holly Mcclure in her article entitled: *‘First-Person: Mel Gibson's 'Passion' For Jesus.*
   http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304

69) Holly Mcclure in her article entitled: *First-Person: Mel Gibson's 'Passion' For Jesus.*
   http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304

70) Holly Mcclure in her article entitled: *First-Person: Mel Gibson's 'Passion' For Jesus.*
   http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304

71) Gerry Berard in his article entitled: *The Period between the Testaments* writes “Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the common language after the Babylonian exile. Hebrew is the language of the Old Testament. By Jesus time, it was only a religious language and was understood by the priests and rabbis. Latin was the language of Rome but not of the Empire. Greek was the common language of the world coming into the New Testament. The Apostles wrote in Greek. The Jewish Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) because many Jews were fluent in Greek and Aramaic but not in Hebrew.”

72) Jack Matthews in his article entitled: *Selling the Savior.*
   http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/166887p-145572c.html
Selected Source List


Selected Internet Resources:

http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,00.html
http://film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,12589,1157484,00.html
http://mediastudy.com/articles/av3-4-04.html
http://members.cox.net/galatians/oddities.htm
http://members.iinet.net.au/~quentinj/Christianity/Gospel-Timeline.html

http://tftb.com/deify/originof.htm
http://webpages.charter.net/djhalnon/index.html,
http://www.africamission-maf.org/gibsonmovie.htm
Embracing the linguistic paradigm: Creating thinkers; healing the digital divide:

*The limits of language means the limits of my world.*
Wittgenstein.

South Africa has recently completed ten years of democracy and currently many are beginning to give this period of rapid change and transformation an honest appraisal. By and large, most agree that a miracle has occurred here in sub-Saharan Africa and if one considers the huge social inequality prevalent only a few years ago, this is especially true as far as it applies to social services, primary health care, water supply, sanitation and the promotion of human dignity and self-worth. However where there has been a most notable decline in standards due largely to ideological mismanagement and political posturing is in the area of education and ultimately its impact on job creation and entrepreneurship. Despite the ongoing attempts to develop our SET (Science, Engineering and Technology) and business sectors, our learners (as a whole) continue to struggle with (*inter alia*) business, mathematics and science literacy.¹

This should be seen as quite surprising, given the enormous effort put into our educational system and considering that we even have the assistance of the digital-based technologies (albeit not wide spread enough), which are highly advanced in South Africa. Indeed, ten years ago, we even dreamed of an information highway with which we could fast-track eradicating the enormous educational backlog in South Africa as well as assist students who are academically under-prepared for secondary and tertiary education. However, to date, the best we seem to have mustered is a 52kb/sec side road.

Now in a recent paper² Le Grange quotes Dreyfus (2001:33) who maintains that any skill acquisition beyond basic competence requires the physical presence of a human being. He reminds us that learning is a ‘deeply social process’ which necessitates dedicated time whereas distance education and/or alternative delivery mode teaching, which employs digital technologies are not really capable of supplying the requisite one-on one contact that only more traditional lecturer/student interactions are capable of providing (Le Grange, 2003:92).
Dreyfus, (2001:34-48), in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Bloom’s taxonomy \(^3\) proffers seven stages for skill acquisition: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise, mastery and practical wisdom. The novice stage concerns the acquisition of facts and procedures that will eventually assist the student in acquiring a personal understanding of a particular ‘discourse’. Le Grange explains that for Dreyfus, the novice learner is merely a ‘consumer of information’ and does not necessarily need one-on one contact with a human teacher. This level is perfectly suited for the present day digital technologies. However, as the student progresses through the advanced beginner stage to the competence level, he/she increasingly needs the input of a human teacher. For example, even at the advanced beginner stage, a student needs to start to contextualize data and requires the interaction of a human teacher to assist him/her to organize and interpret the information learned at the novice stage (Le Grange, 2003:92). Certainly, at the highest level of skill acquisition, Dreyfus’s concept of ‘practical wisdom’ can only be achieved by a student who literally sits in the presence of an expert who performs some difficult skill. Dreyfus gives the examples of the student who is attempting to perfect surgery or play the violin, by imitating a particular skill whilst being coached by the master.\(^4\)

The upshot of all this is that as a pragmatic and hermeneutic philosopher, Dreyfus believes that the present day digital-based technologies cannot hope to ever replace the human teacher because the evolution and development of a person’s language, their psyche, and their community are lengthy, multifarious, and (what he terms), ‘embodied social processes’. By ‘embodied’ Dreyfus (possibly influenced by Merleau-Ponty), refers to the act of physically inhabiting a body and socially interacting with other embodied persons through language (2001:16). Dreyfus goes further and states that ‘the sense of community evident on the Internet is only a kind of residue left from embodied, linguistic, social processes.’ (2001:17).

Rothfork explains this point well:

Like other pragmatists, Dreyfus does not believe we can develop thoughts, meaning, or character without embodied social experience. What we know is always more than what we can say or write, more than we consciously have in mind. For example, since we were toddlers we have known how to maintain balance to walk. Unless we are congenitally blind, we learned how
to construct gestalt visual patterns to render depth perception. We know ten thousand other such tacit things through embodied social experience.  

Dreyfus believes that because the best a computer can do is imitate our tacit knowledge by means of artificial intelligence it falls far short of what is required to take the student beyond the competence level in skill acquisition.

Indeed, the only way technology could assist is if it could somehow organize a particular society’s commonsense knowledge, acquired after long periods of shared communal experience (which is only possible through embodiment) and communicate this in a tacit manner that normally relies on human experience. Here, Dreyfus complains that ‘[m]ost of our understanding of what it’s like to be embodied is so pervasive and action-oriented that there is every reason to doubt that it could be made explicit and entered into a database in a disembodied computer’ (2001: 25).

Rothfork sums this point up well when he states that ‘[a]n unconscious background or context that informs computer actions to make them meaningful does not simply emerge; it is always imposed by a programmer’s judgment.’ Thus, Dreyfus maintains that such technologies and techniques as distance education or alternative delivery mode education can only ever address skill acquisition to a level of mere ‘competence’, while ‘expertise and practical wisdom will remain completely out of reach’ (2001:49).

Even digital technology’s ability to deal with incredible volumes of data does not make it useful in Dreyfus’s view, because it only provides an immense library sans supervision and sans educational facilitator. Furthermore, unlike a traditional library, such technologies as the internet, can only offer the student countless pages-worth of largely uncollated data, which are rarely linked in any significant manner due to the fact that information can at best be ‘sourced’ as a result of a Boolean search. Indeed, the Internet cannot act on the level of meaning, judgment, or relevance, all of which are characteristics of Dreyfus’s concept of ‘embodiment’ and/or knowledge enabled by means of embodiment.

Now Dreyfus has been criticised by Rothfork as relying too much on his own largely anecdotal experience. For example he prioritizes the role of elite universities over so-
called lesser institutions in the United States, which are only good for basic training and competency. 7

Le Grange, drawing from Blake (2002:380) also points out that there are at least three criticisms that could be levelled against Dreyfus the pragmatist, viz.:

- Not all students need to acquire skills beyond the so-called competence stage, perhaps the most pressing needs in say a developing country may still be met quite adequately by digital technology.

- ‘Disembodied’ teaching methods were and still are prevalent in more conventional/traditional educational institutions not only alternative delivery modes involving digital technology.

- The student does not only gain an ‘embodied’ learning experience through a human teacher he/she may still be affected emotionally through other linguistic mediums such as the written word.

Now if one embraces a linguistic paradigm and accepts that everything we interpret and ultimately understand is mediated solely through language 8 we should immediately realise that there is an even more fundamental hurdle to successfully educating our citizens through digital - based technologies and undeniably, even our more traditional educational methodologies. Here we must accept that without language we cannot think. Many do not grasp this simple point because they view language as that which only refers to speech and text. Obviously these are eminently important and are indeed the focus of this paper, but by language we should also include everything that can be interpreted. This includes gestures, body language, smells, mental imagery, even genetic code. It would seem that many educators today are unaware of the real importance of language because they are still largely trapped in the nineteenth century paradigm of consciousness, a worldview which was founded on a more traditional epistemology which champions the naive hypothesis that we construct our knowledge of the world from inside out. Here, it would seem, many persons still believe that we manufacture our knowledge and our communal language on the grounds of our inner subjective considerations; where we devise
personal inner definitions of private experiences and then assemble a vocabulary of words to explain or express them.\footnote{9}

We can go further and say that not only is thought (thinking) a linguistic phenomenon but in addition a particular language (or language game) has the ability, by virtue of its very structure, to modify or influence the very way we think. This seems to be (at a certain level) in accord with the well known Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the notion postulated variously by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf that language is the very means by which humans control and interpret their world.

A good contemporary example here is the impact that political correctness has had on the nature of academic outputs in the last decade or so.\footnote{10} In this context, the very architecture of a person’s mother tongue seems to have a profound influence on the worldview and perception of a particular person.

Language literally does embody a person’s culture and accurately defines a person’s sense of self. For example, research has shown that native Chinese speaking children automatically grasp mathematical concepts far faster than their English-speaking counterparts. This is because Mandarin Chinese speakers, who incidentally make up more than a billion of the world’s inhabitants\footnote{11} count in units of ten whereas native English-speakers (by comparison) have to negotiate around additional concepts like ‘twenty’, ‘thirty’, ‘forty’ etc which apparently confuse young minds when they attempt to grasp the rudiments of a decimal system.\footnote{12}

The long and the short of it is that different languages have different strengths and different weaknesses. Here we should not fall into the trap laid by avid ideologists and the more politically minded who fear that the many indigenous languages, currently spoken in (for example) South Africa are being marginalized because they are perceived to be somehow inferior. This is blatantly not true and it is not the intention of this paper to undermine the pivotal importance of mother tongue language and its benefit to education.

As an aside, it must be stressed that the ideal would be multilingualism as the more languages (or language-games) one knows; the better one can negotiate the entire complex terrain of culture, knowledge and learning.
Unfortunately not all languages are equal in this regard and every language and/or language game be it English, Xhosa, international sign language or even visual literacy has its own distinctive direction and hegemony for certain beneficial purposes. Being intelligent beings we should put our political agendas aside and for the sake of our ailing learners, capitalise on the various advantages that each language offers and yes, even exploit it, where appropriate.

Here Dreyfus is in fact vindicated, in that language is really linked to the phenomenon of community. Borrowing his metaphor of ‘embodiment’, the only way we could develop a set of words/gestures for talking about a phenomenon, say ‘love’, is through the fact that ‘love’ arises in specific social situations and results in publicly accessible behaviour. As has been alluded to already, we always assimilate words/gestures/symbols etc. within a given communal context. Vocabulary is thus constantly checked and verified against communal usage; even the rules of grammar are ultimately, socially authorized. Indeed, being part of a linguistic community informs the very rules we possess in our particular language. In the final analysis our most private thoughts are based on a language, which embodies communally sanctioned criteria. Now according to Rex, the specific community of a person’s birth gives rise to a linguistic ethnicity.

Dealing first with ethnicity in communities of birth. I would suggest that all human beings in the early years of life find themselves caught up in a network of social relations, which has a peculiarly strong emotional strength, even of sacredness. In analysing these connections the following elements appear important: (1) kinship, (2) neighbourhood or shared territory, (3) shared religious beliefs, (4) shared language, (5) shared customs, (6) a shared history or narrative of origin. Taken together the ties involved in these elements create a profound sense of belonging to a group. This is why there is a certain credibility in speaking of a ‘primordial’ ethnicity ... Language is a means of ensuring communication within the group but it is also more than this. Language makes thought possible and, in doing so, not merely describes the world; but also interprets and evaluates it, and the shared evaluations which are implicit in it constitute an important bond between those speaking the same language, beyond the bonds created by other ties.  

Regardless of the spoken or written language employed, generally speaking, it would seem that, the larger the vocabulary the more complex the levels of thinking that are possible. At the Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition Colloquium held in Leiden in 2002, a strong correlation between measures of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension was confirmed. Studies by Schoonen and Verhallen (1998)
and Qian (1999: 282-307) have shown that vocabulary depth – as measured by Read’s word associations test – accounts for a significant amount of the variance in reading test scores in addition to that predicted by a vocabulary size test. Since we should by now know that the very ability to think is dependent on one’s mastery of a particular language(s), the evidence seems to support the notion that those citizens of the world who have great vocabulary depth and mastery of the more vocabulary-extensive and inclusive languages will be able to conceptualize and process data to an extremely high degree and ultimately have the best potential to empower themselves in ‘literally’ anything they choose to do.

English, the world’s leading global language, by virtue of its enormous vocabulary, is still viewed by some ideologists in South Africa as being an oppressive colonial language. They choose to ignore the fact that (apart from being the second most spoken language in the world), it is the major means of communication in the modern scientific and technological milieu, having the world’s largest vocabulary. Estimates range from 500 000 to 750 000 words. This does not include technical terms which add another 300 000 words to its credit. Its closest rival, for sheer volume of words, is German which clocks in at a relatively meagre 185 000.

English should not be viewed as merely some European-biased language. Indeed, the reason why it has such a large vocabulary is because it has borrowed shamelessly from most of the world’s civilizations, is consequently quite accommodating and due to its global usage is amassing additional terms internationally at an average rate of some 2500 words a year. Some of these are themselves taken from South African indigenous languages. We are indeed fortunate that in South Africa we already have the potential to make use of this valuable resource. Instead of vilifying it we should, in the interests of life-long learning, be encouraging all our communities to make better use of its enormous potential without in any way detracting from the importance of anyone’s cultural identity as embodied in their own particular mother tongue.

What must also be assumed is that most persons only speak a single language at a mostly rudimentary level. In this context it is important for the rudimentary speaker who desires to empower themselves for further development to become far more proficient (ideally) in their own particular language. What is becoming clear, however
is that the speaker’s language must also have the necessary structure and scope of vocabulary to take the aspirant speaker to his/her highest potential level of conceptual ability.

If one’s sole spoken/written language is limited in any way it will guarantee that that speaker will never fulfil their full potential – certainly not in a world which is determined by the very vocabulary of a few dominant all-encompassing, vocabulary-rich, languages.

The problem, in a South African context at least, is that many are not reaping the benefit of having just such an all-encompassing language (i.e. English) literally on their doorstep. The majority of our citizens only speak English as a second-language and here, their linguistic proficiency really lies in their mother tongues. Because they are still largely limited to the African context, and are traditionally bound to specific communities and ideologies, the South African indigenous languages (in general) are extremely limited as far as size and scope of vocabulary are concerned and indeed, have themselves relatively large auxiliary vocabularies which have been taken from the so-called colonial languages, principally English. Here, we should immediately realize that unless we can increase the linguistic proficiency of our citizens, we will not develop a critical mass of people who are problem solvers, yet alone mathematicians and conceptualizers; and we will not be able to address the shortfall of graduates in science, engineering, technology and business in a South African context.

It is interesting as an aside, that despite the fact that the South African Government has tried its utmost to increase SET and business in this country and despite the many strategies formulated including a very sound plan for transforming both learning and teaching through ICT (integrated computer training), if the matriculation results of the past decade are any indication, it still cannot deliver.

According to the former minister of Education: Kader Ashmal, and as quoted in a recent Draft White paper on e-Education Transforming learning and teaching through ICT:
The introduction of ICT to our schools will create new possibilities for learners and teachers to engage in new ways of information selection, gathering, sorting and analysis. In addition ICT has the potential to enhance the management and administrative capacity of schools.  

This is a commendable sentiment and an admirable goal. But how do we achieve this? Although this document briefly mentions the need for local language content and does warn that ‘[d]eployment of ICT does not guarantee its efficient utilization. Capacity building and effective support mechanisms must accompany it’, nowhere is it stated that the most important support mechanism is going to be first and foremost ensuring that our citizens master a spoken and written language as well as a sound grounding in a global language (like English) that already embraces the mechanisms to conceptualise in (inter alia) mathematics and science. Nowhere does it spell out how we might ensure that our citizens become functionally literate to the point that they are able not only to communicate with each other but more importantly, are also able to conceptualize for themselves; where learners are able to embrace mathematical concepts, systems and abstraction, laying the basis for the possibility of becoming lateral thinkers. Furthermore, only when they are placed firmly on the road to linguistic mastery of a global, technologically enriched language will they be assured the ability to use literally any ICT system to its fullest potential rather than be academically incompetent and easily put off by its apparent lack of responsiveness as claimed by Dreyfus. The inability to think flexibly caused by a lack of linguistic proficiency creates the so-called digital divide as well as ensures that the linguistically crippled learner never develops beyond the more basic levels in skill acquisition.

The irony of this simple oversight is that the same document states:

The Department of Education will promote the generation of new electronic content that is aligned with outcomes-based education priority areas for national roll-out include South African History, Technology, Mathematics, Sciences and the biology of a social behaviour associated with HIV/AIDS.

Without appropriate language skills, none of this is likely to happen. Regardless, the Department of Education wants to make sure that when eventually our largely illiterate citizens are exposed to a functional ICT system, unbelievably, they will have their information screened for them:
While there is a large number of curriculum material and resources available on the Internet, it is desirable to evaluate this online content for educational relevance prior to adaptation and possible translation into indigenous languages.\(^{21}\)

Firstly, if the learners were properly empowered to be able to work things out for themselves they would not need this paternalistic interference. Secondly, any learner proficient in a language like English would not always need to have it laboriously translated for them. Thirdly, where a particular concept does not exist in a specific mother tongue the translation will more than likely be some invented, artificial term, which is not available to many of the other mother tongue speakers, or indeed the concept in question, will be directly lifted from its language of origin (a practice which is admittedly, as pointed out earlier, part and parcel of language development, generally).

There is further evidence that low literacy levels in mother-tongue languages (including English) is the real reason for the lack-lustre matriculation results we experience each year in South Africa. This in no way underrates the fact that since the demise of apartheid, the matriculation pass rate for previously disadvantaged communities has grown exponentially. But this was largely due to the fact that before 1995, many black communities were under-funded and simply did not receive the appropriate schooling. Indeed, the educational infrastructure has materially improved by leaps and bounds since then. In addition, South Africa spends an enormous proportion of its national budget (e.g. 7.5% in 2003)\(^{22}\) on education. So why do so many school-leavers, especially black school-leavers, still fail to obtain a higher grade pass in mathematics? Indeed, in 2003, for Grade 8 mathematics, South Africa only managed to come 39\(^{th}\) out of 43 countries internationally. For Grade 12 (matriculation) it came 20\(^{th}\) out of 23. For science aptitude, South Africa ranks 20\(^{th}\) out of 23, internationally.\(^{23}\)

By comparison, the country, which came 1st in the world for Grade 12 mathematics, was the Netherlands, which co-incidentally has the following literacy scores: Adults with at least a moderate level of literacy: 4\(^{th}\) out of 17; adults with a moderate level of literacy: 1\(^{st}\) out of 17; and adults with high literacy levels: 6\(^{th}\) out of 17. Here it would seem that there is some correlation between a nation’s literacy rate and its mathematical ability.\(^{24}\)
In addition it would be good to find out what affinities any of our official languages have for assisting mathematical or scientific development. For example many of the Nguni languages in Southern Africa employ a quinary counting system. We need to undertake research to determine whether this fact has any major impact on math development with indigenous mother tongue speakers. In the same vein, we need to determine the various strengths and weaknesses of our official languages (including English) in the various learning contexts. It may well transpire that certain languages encourage specific cognitive development faster than in others and vice versa.

The retention rate of South Africa’s potential graduates in SET and business at universities and universities of technology is also a matter of grave concern. The Department of Education (2000) made it clear that it had no real idea why this was the case, but proffered the following hypotheses:

- Students completing their qualifications have moved out of the HE system.
- High dropout rates, due to financial and/or academic exclusions.
- Successful students leaving the system for more attractive options.
- Fewer than normal numbers of students entering postgraduate studies immediately after completing their first qualifications.
- A number of factors of a more speculative nature.

The DoE also warned that ‘[t]here is no evidence to suggest either that the decline in retention rates will be reversed or that the annual intake of new undergraduates will increase in the short to medium-term.’

Despite every effort to increase the study in SET and business fields coupled with a corresponding dramatic and alarming marginalisation of the very sector that is needed in this crisis (i.e. liberal arts and humanities), there are simply not enough academically prepared learners to enter successfully into these mission-critical knowledge areas because so few school-leavers obtain higher grade passes in mathematics.

If language (and by implication its linguistic manifestations found in the liberal arts), is in fact the key to turning things around in South African education, as well as increasing our SET and business quotas at the tertiary level, as well as the most obvious means to gaining more leverage from existing digital-based technologies, surely we should act accordingly? Certainly an acknowledgement and a concerted
effort from all dedicated stakeholders will, I believe, not only vindicate the humanities that have been so carelessly overlooked in recent years but also ensure that we become a nation of thinkers and leaders.

However, even if this was acknowledged it does not mean that this will be an easy task. There are, contrary to the promises made with many on-line language courses, no quick fixes for learning a new language. A language like English is extraordinarily difficult to master as a second language. Certainly, the more successful approaches include building up a vocabulary based on the student’s tacit knowledge of his/her mother tongue. However this approach fails when the new language contains concepts/terms either not available in the student’s own language or whose interpretation is approximate at best. Put simply, without complete submersion in the language of adoption the student is not likely to achieve a point where he/she can (a) think in the adopted language and (b) become empowered conceptually by the possibly new terms or concepts embodied in the adopted language.

It may interest readers to know how long it actually takes to master a new language, especially one as complex and as large in scope as English, remembering that people who speak a language like English fluently and have extensive reading habits (e.g. academics) may in rare cases employ up to 60 000 words. However, more normally the typical English-speaking Briton with 16 years of education will use about 5 000 words in his/her spoken language and only employ up to 10 000 for writing.29

Cummins (1989) cites research that reveals that there are different time periods required for achieving conversational skills (which are age-appropriate) as compared with say academic language where the student is able to conceptualise. For example, students who learn English as a second language often come very close to having conversational skills on a par with their own mother tongue before two years are up. But this finding is deceptive because in actual fact for the same student to have academic mastery in the adopted language (i.e. to the extent that rigorous thinking may take place) a further five or even more years of study are often needed.

The greatest misconception regarding second language acquisition is that when a [non-English] student speaks English fluently in social settings, possibly without an accent, it means that he or she is proficient in English. When such students do not perform well on cognitively demanding language tasks that are typical of many academic contexts, they are often misdiagnosed as learning disabled (Cummins, 1989).
These time scales for academic proficiency are supported by the work of Collier and Thomas. In addition, they discovered that students who had already received up to two years of education through the medium of their mother tongue (i.e. before they immigrated into the United States) needed a further five to seven years before they were able to match their English-speaking American counterparts academically. For those who received no formal training before they adopted their new language, this period of assimilation (embodiment) took far longer – up to ten years (Collier, 1995).

Briefly, Collier (1995) formulated *(inter alia)* the following predictors for long-term academic success in the case of second-language learners:

- Academic instruction through students’ first language for five to six years, if possible, to provide uninterrupted cognitive development and process complex thoughts,
- Second language taught through challenging academic content,
- Interactive educational approaches that stress student problem-solving and discovery learning through thematic experiences, and
- A supportive sociocultural context, for example, the perception of bilingual classes as enrichment rather than remedial.

Collier (1995) also advises the following:

The emphasis on 'uninterrupted cognitive development' is important. To perform well on grade-appropriate academic tasks, students need opportunities to develop the language and knowledge required to process complex thoughts. One cannot think without language. If all school instruction for young children is received in the second language, it is difficult for them to learn a language for thought. The students who have the opportunity to develop literacy, cognition, and knowledge in the home language have not only a basis for second language literacy development but are better prepared for the kinds of thought processes required above fourth grade.

As should be expected, linguistic development (under normal circumstances) starts in the home. Children are far more likely to succeed academically if they grow up in an enriched environment wherein cognitive development takes place within a language that has a large vocabulary with a wide conceptual reach. Such a language must also be able to accommodate conceptualization requisite for understanding in the sciences.
In addition, children who interact socially with children from another language group are far more likely to fast track their age-appropriate conversational skills. However, their ability to employ their adopted language for conceptualisation and academic tasks will depend largely on the abilities of the role-models he/she emulates. Fortunately, natural assimilation of the various cultural groups has occurred very successfully at most South African schools and children of all races and cultural backgrounds interact socially without preconceived notions of race and/or cultural ethnicity.

Learners need to be educated in their mother tongues from the start. Moreover, they should ideally, be equally introduced to a global language (like English) as soon as possible in their life experience to ensure that their academic development; grasp of complex concepts, philosophical, mathematical, business and scientific skills may continue far beyond the more local and regional contexts that most indigenous mother tongues offer, without in any way undermining the cultural embodiment that all mother tongues give to developing minds. In this way our future citizens may still ‘embody’ their respective traditions whilst simultaneously giving themselves the real possibility to embrace and understand the more international contexts, where they will be able to solve critical problems and deal with complex conceptualisation. Only in this way can we ever hope to fast track growth in SET and business, thereby creating wealth and sustainable development for our many impoverished communities whilst simultaneously making South Africa a far more competitive global player than she presently is.

These findings strongly suggest that a major paradigm shift on the part of South African educators and policy makers is urgently needed. Ideally we will need a concerted effort from government and educational role-players to devise ways to dramatically increase the global language proficiency of our school leavers. At the very least we desperately need the current policies which clearly relegate the humanities to be reversed, since the evidence shows that it is principally the liberal arts and humanities that promote critical language skills and ultimately such things as maths and science literacy. If not, the desire to bridge the digital divide, close the poverty gap and increase South Africa’s SET and business potential will unfortunately have to remain a pipe-dream.
1. According to the Department of Education there is an ‘endemic shortage in South Africa of high-level professional and managerial skills. Particular shortages are in the science and economic-based fields, and especially in information technology, engineering, technological and technical occupations, economic and financial occupations and accountancy and related occupations. These are also the fields in which future demand is likely to be the greatest.’ The Department of Education also reported that in 2000 only 19 327 school-leavers obtained higher grade passes in mathematics out of a total of 68 626 school-leavers who managed to gain matriculation exemption (i.e. university entrance status). (http://education.pwv.gov.za/DoE_Sites/Higher_Education/HE_Plan/section_2.htm). In addition, only 17% of the 2002 matriculants (South Africa) secured the ‘exemptions’ necessary for higher education admission. (Statistics South Africa, 2002).


3. Benjamin Bloom formulated his well-known taxonomy for the purposes of categorizing levels of abstraction apropos questions that commonly arise in educational contexts. It is widely accepted that this taxonomy offers a valuable structure in which to classify test questions. In this regard the hierarchy runs from low-order skills to high-level competencies, viz.: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.

10. Jernigan, in his article entitled The pitfalls of political correctness: euphemisms excoriated, gives good examples of the effects of political correctness on the way we articulate ideas in language: ‘As civilizations decline, they become increasingly concerned with form over substance, particularly with respect to language. At the time of the First World War we called it shell shock—a simple term, two one-syllable words, clear and descriptive. A generation later, after the Second World War had come and gone, we called it combat fatigue. It meant the same thing, and there were still just two words—but the two syllables had grown to four. Today the two words have doubled, and the original pair of syllables have mushroomed to eight. It even has an acronym, PTSD—post traumatic stress disorder. It still means the same thing, and it still hurts as much or as little, but it is more in tune with current effete sensibilities. It is also a perfect example of the pretentious euphemisms that characterize almost
everything we do and say. Euphemisms and the politically correct language which they exemplify are sometimes only prissy, sometimes ridiculous, and sometimes tiresome. Often, however, they are more than that. At their worst they obscure clear thinking and damage the very people and causes they claim to benefit. (http://www.blind.net/bpg00005.htm).

11. Estimates vary but most agree that in excess of billion people speak Mandarin Chinese as apposed to English, which is spoken by some 512 million people in the world. (http://worldatlas.com/geoquiz/thelist.htm).


15. Ibid.

16. It is estimated that an additional 90,000 words were added to the English language during the twentieth century. Cf. WebSpot.com. (http://www.wordspot.com/electricsymbols.html)

17. English is presently (2004) considered to be a mother tongue by only 9.5% of the citizens in South Africa.


19. Ibid p. 10

20. Ibid pp. 34

21. Ibid pp. 33-34


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


27. Ibid

28. Ibid
29. If one includes scientific terms this figure could well exceed 2,000,000 lexemes (words). Many similar statistics may be found to support this finding. Cf. Dictionary.com FAQ: How many words are in the English language? (http://dictionary.reference.com/help/faq/language/h/howmanywords.html).
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The pivotal role of the liberal arts and language in the development of an international curriculum.

*If Wisdom be attainable, let us not only win but enjoy it.*
Cicero

The internationalisation of any university’s curricula is certainly an essential part of the higher education experience in the new millennium. There exists a pressing need for us to engineer new resources and opportunities for both academic staff and students alike. In this regard, it is generally considered important to the respective missions of modern universities to investigate contemporary international trends, acquire knowledge *vis-à-vis* cultural, economic, socio-political and trans-national relations, whilst simultaneously raising awareness about the bearing that international issues have on the lives of individuals and their respective communities.

In this context and with deference to the insights of Dr. Sheryl Bond (in *International curriculum development and the internationalization of the curriculum*, s.a.: http://athena.uwindsor.ca/units/international/Curriculum.nsf/ Printer Friendly View/ F22CE76A770FBC1C85256CF000710305), the internationalisation of the curriculum may be defined as a means of:

- developing curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for living and working (professionally and socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students.

Prof Jim McNab’s call (2005) for us to embrace internationalisation with a “surrealistic cry of joy” rather than with Sartrean “nausea” is quite apt since many of our academics (both in the sciences as well as the beleaguered humanities) need to be convinced that far from this being the moment when the last nail is placed in the coffin of humanism, it can be clearly demonstrated that for internationalisation to be really effective, far from eschewing its more traditional principles and values, the international university sector will in many fundamental ways need to revitalise its commitment to a liberal arts ethos. This will of course be sans McNab’s “ivory towers … absent-minded professors, and sequestered academic monks and nuns”, which surrealistcally if not paradoxically contradicts what certain of our more politically-motivated national leadership are in fact advocating will need to happen. In short, the university of the twenty-first century will not survive nor will it continue to play a
meaningful role in modern society if it does not move with the times but at the same time the tried and tested formula of an educational system founded on the humanities should not be axed along with everything else, merely for the sake of change.

There is of course nothing that politics cannot destroy but what is even more surprising is that knowing as we should, the pivotal role that the liberal arts play in the total spectrum of education, history will repeatedly show that in the case of most western societies and the developing world, when the money runs out the humanities and especially the liberal arts are normally first in the firing line. This does not mean that we must not be “mean and lean” as McNab (2005) reminds us. Indeed, the onus on us all is to get the maximum value for our taxpayers’ rands. But, what I am constantly surprised at is that despite the adverse societal and appalling educative results of undermining a liberal arts ethos at a university, it still remains a common practice. I am reminded of Bernard Shaw’s legendary platitude: “We learn from experience that men never learn anything from experience”.

This seemingly knee-jerk reaction is even more astonishing given that we now live in the so-called information age, a period in human history when never before have have the role of international language and the necessity for interdisciplinarity been so acutely manifest. Regardless, living as we do in the early twenty-first century, equipped as we are with the latest technological advances, seemingly poised at discovering the grounds of the origin of life itself as scientists probe the secrets of the human genome, we continue to measure the value of our undertakings and achievements in purely materialistic and financial terms. Indeed, our global civilization has arrived at the momentous stage where everything, be it the latest technological invention or our most outstanding cultural achievement is ultimately evaluated in terms of someone’s profit margin.

We also live in a world where science (or more correctly the language of science) dominates the throne of knowledge. This is perfectly acceptable as long as we do not attempt to place the entire spectrum of human experience exclusively under the lens of science, thereby losing sight of the fact that it is but one of a wide range of language games we play in our attempt to understand the universe around us. Panayot Butchvarov (s.a.: http://sztybel.tripod.com/quotes.html) puts this well when he states:
The currently fashionable supposition that the world can be described only by science is due either to a pedestrian conception of what it is to describe or to a romantic view of the powers of science.

Indeed, many models may be employed for understanding reality; however, what seems to be constantly missed is that in the final analysis everything that we interpret and ultimately understand is mediated solely through language. Indeed, without language we cannot think. This is not the place perhaps to belabour this obvious point (cf. Allen 1990; 2004), but it must be stressed that few academics seem to have grasped this simple truth, believing that language is but a tool with which we can firmly grasp reality. Indeed, society at large, it would appear, is still imprisoned within the nineteenth century paradigm of consciousness, an episteme based on the unsubstantiated hypothesis that we create our understanding of the world from inside out. Here, the more logocentric notion is that the term “language” only refers to speech and text. Whereas “language” in fact, includes literally everything that can be interpreted by human beings, including body language, smells, images, sounds, etc. The more convincing argument is that we can only ever have but a provisional understanding of reality, mediated as it is through language(s) (cf. Allen 1990).

In addition, if one only focuses on the written and spoken word, it has been clearly established that the larger the vocabulary of a specific language the more complex the levels of thinking that are possible. At the Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition Colloquium held in Leiden in 2002 (http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/ulcl/events/confs/vocabacq), a strong correlation was confirmed between measures of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Studies by such authorities as Schoonen and Verhallen (1998) and Qian (1999: 282-307) have backed up these findings.

Coupled to this, we should also be mindful of the generally accepted finding that an average educated English first language speaker (as an example of a mother tongue speaker) only employs somewhere between 5-10 000 words\(^1\) Certainly, it would seem that at a university level a student will not get by with much less than this.\(^2\) By way of example, a student wanting to be equated with someone of the calibre of a Shakespeare would need to be able conceptually to employ well over 30 000 lexemes (http://www-math.cudenver.edu/~wbriggs/qr/shakespeare.html), and the possibility exists that more highly advanced intellects may be able to handle as many as 50 – 60 000
lexemes.³ Moreover, the potential vocabulary for an English–speaker is immense. According to McCrum et al (1992:1):

The statistics of English are astonishing. Of all the world's languages (which now number some 2,700), it is arguably the richest in vocabulary. The compendious Oxford English Dictionary lists about 500,000 words; and a further half-million technical and scientific terms remain uncatalogued. According to traditional estimates, neighboring German has a vocabulary of about 185,000 and French fewer than 100,000, including such Franglais as le snacque-barre and le hit-parade.

Estimates vary, but other findings suggest that English, together with its scientific and technical terminology, could well have a total vocabulary that exceeds 2-3 million words (Allen, 2004).

Since we should know that the very ability to think and scope of thinking is solely dependant on one’s mastery of a particular language(s), the evidence available supports the notion that those citizens of the global society who have the greatest vocabulary depth and mastery over the more extensive and inclusive languages (such as English, Mandarin Chinese and German) will be able to conceptualize and process data to an extremely high degree and ultimately it is they who will have the best potential to empower themselves in ‘literally’ anything they choose to do.

This issue, of course, goes somewhat beyond the point intimated by Prof Jim McNab, that international languages, as important disciplines in their own right, would also need to feature highly in any internationalisation thrust and here we should take note of the improved employability and mobility of students, regardless of their avowed discipline who are able to converse in at least one other international language. In this regard, it is generally accepted that the global language is English.

In addition to the empowerment gained by being able to conceptualise in an international language one also needs the educative and ethical value of the liberal arts as a whole. The Liberal Arts are often mistakenly referred to as “soft” options as if they were in some way lesser than “hard” options like mathematics and science. In point of fact without a good conceptual grasp of reality through the medium of an adequate language plus the critical thinking skills made available by such disciplines as philosophy and history which are themselves dependent on the very mastery of an
international language(s), a person is hardly likely to be able to become proficient (yet alone ethical) in say a scientific or technological milieu.

Should we not want this proven liberal arts approach for all of our students, not only in the Arts but also the Sciences, Engineering, Technology and Business and Economic Sciences? Certainly, much of the present curricula, which, due no doubt to the ever increasing demand for more vocationally-relevant information that must be crammed into a typical three-year degree or diploma programme, will not allow for the inclusion of the seeming luxury of a more liberal arts content/approach. It is thus critical, that in the process of internationalising our curricula and with due deference to the mounting evidence in favour of the critical role the liberal arts play, we should be aware of the golden opportunity presented to us to address this most serious oversight and truly become international leaders at ensuring that our students become not only vocationally functional but also life-long learners.

What should concern us here, is that if this hypothesis has even some merit, we should realise that our own (South African) students, because they are mostly English second language speakers, will have similar language problems to certain of our foreign students. The real irony here is that when a foreign student, with (at best) rudimentary English skills enters our tertiary environment they are far more likely to succeed than our own English second language students, because very often the foreign student’s home language (a) has a larger vocabulary than the more localised Southern African languages, making it easier to translate from the mother tongue directly into English and/or (b) their language is also an international/global language. For example, Mandarin Chinese speakers have access to a language with a recorded written tradition dating back at least 4 000 years with several hundred thousand lexemes, making it far more equitable to a language like English (Wikipedia website, s.a.: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_written_language; http://www.iis.sinica.edu.tw/~whm/publish/papers/mei-tdt3.pdf).

What do we do with our own students, especially those who cannot conceptualise in even one international/global language? What about the hard reality that many of our students can only conceptualise in their “localized” mother tongue and are not privy to the expansive vocabulary of international languages such as English and Mandarin? We have already seen that a large comprehensive international vocabulary is required to be a global player. The only way students who only speak a
more localized mother tongue may access international levels of conceptualisation is by embracing an international language like English, Spanish, German or Mandarin etc. Here it is simply not sufficient that they have rudimentary conversational skills in one of these languages. Only if a person can think in an international language will they be truly empowered.

An extended debate on this issue is probably called for, and it is dangerous to generalise, but the literature supports the notion (accepting the fact that no one person’s particular situation is equal to that of any other) that (a) people are mostly better able to master second languages as youngsters, and not if they leave this task until when they reach university age (http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/myth2.htm; http://ivc.uidaho.edu/flbrain/earlylang) and (b) a person who starts to learn a new language may with hard work and dedication speak the adopted language (conversationally) with great skill, even acquiring an accent, but on average, it takes at least five to seven years beyond this point before such a person can even hope to compete on a conceptual level with his or her peers who have already mastered that tongue from birth (Collier, 1995).

Of course mother tongue/international tongue bilingualism is one solution, where the mother tongue is employed for important formative development. A point still comes, however, when the localized mother tongue does not hold the requisite scope of vocabulary to allow the speaker to cope with the rigours of a tertiary environment and/or the international scene. Here, it would seem that the average student who speaks a localised mother tongue needs to be able to change horses, so to speak, and make the natural transition into the wider vistas of a second language with a larger, international and technologically relevant vocabulary as soon as possible.

If this is in any way an accurate observation then it is simply not possible to translate what does not even exist in one particular language into another (global) language that has (by default) the larger vocabulary with its international, high order conceptual and/or technological capacity.

Here there has been much politicisation, not only in South Africa but elsewhere in the world, that has understandably blamed English for being the top cause of global linguicide in the past two centuries. Indeed, many local languages have become extinct through internationalisation, especially via the medium of English, which
simultaneously contributed to undermining the respective local cultures and traditions.

We should not fool ourselves that this “inevitability” although beneficial for fast-tracking a global society wreaks havoc for minority cultures. It is a two-edged sword. Olivier (2004:107) expresses this concern well when he states

> It is true, of course, that such homogenization offers the advantage of all cultures being able to avail themselves of the knowledge-dissemination that is occurring by means of the largely global accessibility of English as a medium. But the threat posed to linguistic diversity by this phenomenon should not be underestimated, especially when one remembers that every extant language represents a system or repository of indigenous knowledge accumulated over centuries. To lose any of these languages is tantamount to losing cultural ‘biodiversity’.

There is no easy answer here, but it should be remembered that English is no longer the domain of the English race alone. It is no longer the language of colonization or global domination by one culture over another. English is now (like it or not) the *de facto lingua franca* of the modern world.⁴ Even localised languages that strive to retain their unique identities already contain a large corpus that is either directly lifted from other international languages (including English) or is derived from other languages. If it is any consolation, English itself is absorbing terminology from other languages at a rapid rate ᵅ as well and if one includes all influences on it one can safely state that since its known inception, some 80% of its fabric is now made up from “foreign” input, including Latin and Medieval French, Arabic, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu etc.

We now unfortunately witness what is quite possibly the gravest error in the history of education in South Africa, as the present minister of Education (Naledi Pandor) gives the option to South African learners to complete their matriculation in any two of the eleven official national languages. From now on English (the only global language in South Africa) will no longer be mandatory. The effect that this will have for those students who are unfortunate enough to follow this latter route (i.e. only able to master two localised languages with, by comparison, smaller/less international vocabularies) is that they will be seriously disadvantaged when seeking access to a university; trying to access the knowledge held captive in what will remain for them a foreign and inaccessible tongue. For these students, the university experience and
the promised benefits of internationalisation will be a formidable obstacle if not a book closed forever.

Western civilization has, since the inception of the first universities, always embraced liberal education in the broad sense of imparting to students a united spectrum of linguistic, conceptual and numerical skills and abilities, to enable them to traverse the terrain of culture knowledgeably and critically. Indeed, the emphasis of liberal education has been on the development of the whole individual whereas more focussed occupational training has not. (A factor, incidentally, that seriously damaged the state of higher education in the previous USSR.) The noted political philosopher Irakly Areshidze (1999) described what happened under the Soviet system:

Upon acceptance [at University], for the next five years students would pursue an education focused on giving them [a] specific, limited set of vocational knowledge in their given field. Students would memorize information from textbooks and be lectured at by the Professors. Students would seldom engage in analytical, critical thinking, class discussion and writing.

This all sounds too familiar and of course, we might state that the problem lies with the school system alone. However, for many years now, the university and technikon sectors have fortunately embraced the reality that academic development is also their responsibility – certainly until we start to receive learners who are totally prepared for the tertiary experience, we will continue to need to bridge this academic chasm.

Bloom and Rosovsky (http://www.aacu-edu.org/liberaleducation/le-wi03/le-wi03feature2.cfm) point out (albeit ironically) that in many developing countries, those in power might often have welcomed this lack of critical thinking:

As Lao-Tzu said in *The Way of Lao-tzu* over 2,500 years ago, ‘People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge.’ Many post-colonial dictators have, for the sake of their own survival, understandably been keener to invest in vocational education than in liberal education.

This touches on another oft undervalued aspect concerning the importance of literacy from a more global perspective and although it is not the main thrust of this paper, it is certainly one of the key benefits of embracing a liberal arts educational slant for the successful production of critical ethical thinkers. Here I refer to the analytical and judicious values that are imparted to students who benefit from a programme of study that exposes them to the “other” with every nuance of that concept. In short what we
require are individuals who neither use their mastery of science, technology and entrepreneurship to maintain the status quo replete with its inculcated injustices nor produce situations or phenomena that have not first been thoroughly interrogated as regards their fairness, humanity and long-term benefit and/or impact on society or the environment. The creation of the atomic bomb is one very good example of where science acted without due ethical consideration. Just because we can do something does not mean that we should do something. Too often we reap the whirlwind of actions that have been made without due ethical considerations – where the end justifies the means and where the real interests of often mainly first world players are entrenched at the expense of the world’s less successful nations.

Olivier (2004:107) encapsulates this concern aptly when he states:

> [T]he homogenization-process goes hand in hand with the threat to linguistic diversity in the world by the ever-increasing internationalization of (especially American) English via satellite communications and the global hegemony of (American) English television programming. And with linguistic domination comes cultural domination, to which many of the world’s less powerful, sometimes fragile cultures are simply not resistant.

This is not intended in any way to undermine the critical importance of vocational and professional programmes; what it does say is that we need a liberal arts approach for even these, especially at a foundational and formative level, to ensure true life-long learning and considered ethical thinking. This broad-based liberal arts approach has a long and successful track record and may be traced back as far as ancient Greece. Where that tradition has continued (in one way or another), liberal education remains an important segment of higher education where its function in producing an educated, ethical and conversant society is certain.

There is also an interesting correlation between literacy rates and associated mathematics and science literacy (Allen 2004). The hypothesis here is that SET and business need the formative development of language acquisition and mastery, without it they cannot possibly grow and develop. If the South African matriculation results (Country Report of South Africa, 2004), are anything to go by, only 4.3% of all students who entered for the secondary certificate exam in 2001 passed maths at the higher grade. In the same period, only 5.4% of students passed physical science at the higher grade. On average, less than 1% of African matriculation candidates
achieve A or B symbols for Mathematics Higher Grade. This finding does not even begin to consider rural schools and/or the specific fate of female students.

According to a recent HSRC report (1999), if one refers to the international top 10% as a benchmark of accepted norms for maths achievement at the third, fourth, seventh, eighth and twelfth grades, which is recognised by a score of 616 out of a possible 800, less than 0.5% of South African learners featured compared to Singapore where 46% of its learners attained the highest level.

Only 1% of South African learners reached the International Upper Quarter benchmark which equates to the average score achieved by the top 25% of pupils internationally (i.e. a score of 555 out of 800). By stark contrast 60% of students from Japan, Hong Kong and Korea achieved this level with Singapore boasting 75% of its learners at this level. The top 25% of South Africa's learners only achieved 337 out of 800.

It should be pointed out that the most reliable data shows that as a nation our literacy rate is 86% where (as compared to the international community) we specifically score 123 out of 202.5 Here we are only talking about basic literacy, not high level proficiency in an international language. On the other hand countries like the Netherlands and Sweden who scored highest in grade 12 mathematics and science proficiency both have high literacy rates of 99%. 6 Specifically, the Netherlands as one of the top scorers for grade 12 mathematics and science also boasts an adult literacy rate (for high level literacy) which identifies them as the sixth highest nation. For moderate literacy they are the top nation.7

One country that seemingly understands this point and is currently attempting to turn things around is Indonesia (http://www1.rad.net.id/Hi-Ed-Seminar/paper/aris.html). In the late '90s they realised that the need for a national curriculum and national accreditation were important. However what was more important to them was international accreditation and international quality assessment in order that their universities could compete favourably in the global arena. By the late '90s statistics confirmed that the Indonesian system provided no training in writing and although they offered advanced training in mathematics, generally speaking their students could not apply mathematics when attempting to solve problems and independent study skills had to be developed (Karhami in Ikranagara, 1998). Realizing their error they opted for a
change in their educational policy. What was very interesting here was the recommendation to employ either English or English and Indonesian (bilingualism) as the international media of instruction. Also, Universities were encouraged to promote second language competence, as a basis for the fuller understanding of other cultures. Lastly, they realised that the only way for their learners to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of at least one other culture was by means of economics, history, language, literature, philosophy, and politics (Karhami in Ikranagara, 1998)

The apparent failure of our own educationalists (albeit well intentioned), is that they focus on the dire need for mathematics and science literacy but totally neglect to make effective use of the conceptually empowering liberal arts with their emphasis on acquiring high level language, judicial thinking and problem solving skills to prepare the student fully for the very remedial activities they suggest. A recent (2000) submission by the Mathematics Education Community to the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) (http://academic.sun.ac.za/mathed/AMESA/NGO.htm), highlights this continued oversight:

It should be noted that mathematics acts as the filter for students progressing to higher levels of study. Almost without exception acceptance at a tertiary education institution requires a minimum qualification in standard grade mathematics. Poor and declining pass rates in mathematics has a dramatic domino effect both within and outside of the education system. Failure to prioritise mathematics education will undermine economic stability, growth and the effective functioning of a democracy.

Mathematics is indeed the “filter” because we use it (not as an indicator of conceptual ability but) because we know that mathematics, as a skill is a vital key to gaining access to the majority of programmes at university which require maths literacy to one degree or another and of course the job market that lies beyond. Certainly, mathematics alone will not make someone better informed to function in a democracy, that is surely the realm of disciplines such as philosophy and history.

Since we are now embarking on the process of internationalising our curricula and we seem to be claiming to want to reap the benefits of “integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” as Knight and De Wit (1997:8) so aptly put it, in the light of what has
been shown thus far, how can we possibly achieve this without the full participation and integration of the liberal arts, especially history, philosophy and language?

With the further assistance of Bloom and Rosovsky (http://www.aacu-edu.org/ liberaleducation/le-wi03/le-wi03feature2.cfm) allow me to conclude with a citation from the report of the Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000), which evaluated the current and future predicament of university education in developing countries.

Here, a liberally educated person (as opposed to a regurgitator of facts) is described by Bloom and Rosovksy as a person who:

- can think and write clearly, effectively, and critically, and who can communicate with precision, cogency, and force;

- has a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves;

- has a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times, and is able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it;

- has some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems; and

- has achieved depth in some field of knowledge.

All South African should agree that we want to create a nation of ethical and critical thinkers and not merely citizens who mimic their peers and have opinions. After all, all people have opinions, but few people think (with apologies to George Berkeley) or as George Bernard Shaw quipped “few people think more than two or three times a year; I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week”.

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To create more scientists, engineers and technologists we need to ensure that we nurture more critical thinkers. As an important key aspect to internationalising the curriculum we will have to not only preserve the role of language and conceptualisation but share its benefits with the other disciplines we are attempting to expand, especially science, engineering and technology. Our current debate on the benefits of emphasising a programmic direction to our academic offerings at the NMMU bodes well for this possibility, since both issues may be addressed at the same time. This should surely be the desired goal of internationalization, especially as this applies to creating a curriculum at the NMMU that will be able to reflect social change and social needs accurately as well as imparting the requisite ethical awareness of international inequities, injustices and global problems that may be addressed on the basis of a shared understanding among different nations. To be able to achieve this mutual international linguistic understanding is indispensable.

However, any attempt to promote any meaningful expansion within the university of (inter alia) science, engineering and technology which does not simultaneously preserve and expand the liberal arts and their indespensable contributions apropos ethics and linguistically will be doomed to certain failure.

Notes:

1) A similar finding explains that: "The English language contains about 490,000 words - plus another 300,000 technical terms, the most in any language, but it is doubtful if any individual uses more than 60,000. British people who have had a full 16 years of education use perhaps 5,000 words in speech and up to 10,000 words in written communications."

2) Prof. David Qian explains that Chinese students as English second language users need to be able to employ "a minimum of 4,000-5,000 word families for comprehending a single university economics textbook in English, which contains 5,438 word families."
(http://www.utpjournals.com/product/cmlr/562/562-Qian.html). Also see Du Hui’s comments at

3) According to a MHW Communications Newsletter (January 2002): "The English language contains over 615,000 words, with 5,000 new ones coming into the lexicon every year. It is said that the mature, educated English speaker can call on at least 50,000 words."
4) Ling explains that: “Today, more than 750 million people use the English language. An average educated person knows about 20,000 words and uses about 2,000 words in a week. Despite its widespread use, there are only about 350 million people who use it as their mother tongue. It is the official language of the Olympics. More than half of the world's technical and scientific periodicals as well three quarters of the world's mail, and its telexes and cables are in English. About 80% of the information stored in the world's computers (such as this text) are also in English. English is also transmitted to more than 100 million people everyday by 5 of the largest broadcasting companies (CBS, NBC, ABC, BBC, CBC). It seems like English will remain the most widely used language for some time." (http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2001/JohnnyLing.shtml).

5) It is estimated that an additional 90,000 words were added to the English language during the twentieth century alone. Cf. WebSpot.com. http://www.wordspot.com/electric symbols.html).

6) According to TIMSS (1995): “The Netherlands and Sweden were the top-performing countries in mathematics and science literacy. Iceland, Norway, Switzerland Denmark, Canada, New Zealand, and Austria also performed above the international average of the 21 countries…[c]ountries performing below the international average were: Hungary, the Russian Federation, Italy, the United States, Lithuania, Cyprus, and South Africa.” (http://timss.bc.edu/timss1995i/HiLightC.html).

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