

*Collaborative scholarship bringing together religious leaders, believers,  
and those who are simply curious, in a shared enterprise of enlightened learning.*

*From the Desk of the Executive Director*

*What is the “advance” in “Advanced Theology”?*

People often ask me a question along those lines; I am happy when they do. That curiosity brings us to the heart of what the Institute does.

Our purpose differs from the approach taken in seminaries and divinity schools. Courses of study for clergy are rightly devoted to confessional theology: aspiring pastors, imams, priests, and rabbis learn the basic data and normative doctrines of their various faiths. We have never attempted to teach confessional theology.

When I first arrived at Bard College in 1987, local clergy in the Red Hook Ministerium asked me to offer them a seminar during the season of Lent. (That was to be their penance.) I agreed,

and the doors of the Institute have always been open to the Ministerium.

I obviously could not teach experienced ministers in the same way I once taught aspiring clergy at the Yale Divinity School or the General Theological Seminary in New York. My job was not to deliver a body of knowledge or a structure of theology: members of the Red Hook clergy already had that. The challenge of working with advanced students from diverse backgrounds was to offer them an analysis of topics that they could assess themselves, and adapt within their own theological thinking.

The “advance” in “Advanced Theology,” in other words, came with the

clergy who attended those early seminars. My approach involved developing a critical analysis, as I would offer in any academic setting. But when it came to the theological assessment of a topic, my emphasis fell on explaining my own insights, not as normative in any way, but as offering the seminar an occasion to move with me or against me in theological directions of its own. I remember, for example, a rich and rewarding discussion of the diversity of meanings, ancient and modern, in referring to Jesus as God’s “son.”

As time went on, some clergy in the seminar asked whether some of their congregation might attend. That was the opening that  
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*Photo credit:  
Tania Barricklo*

*“The ‘advance’ in ‘Advanced Theology’ . . . came with the clergy who attended those early seminars. My approach involved developing a critical analysis, as I would offer in any academic setting”.*

**Institute of Advanced Theology  
at Bard College**  
P.O. Box 5000  
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504  
T: 845.758.7279  
E-Mail: [iat@bard.edu](mailto:iat@bard.edu)  
[www.bard.edu/iat](http://www.bard.edu/iat)

**Bruce Chilton, Executive Director  
Dr. Nancy Leonard, Editor**

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*Chat with the Chair: More on the Gibson Movie*

I just want to add some thoughts of my own to the in-depth commentary on this film by Bruce Chilton in this newsletter (see page 6).

My first concern with the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, is its blinding brutality, obviously meant to arouse and inflame the

viewer who sees blood and suffering in sickening proportion in most of the frames. Perhaps the truest characterization in the movie is the Roman soldier. In dress, demeanor, and attitude the soldiers were true to historical form. Pilate and his wife, on the contrary, were close to fictional characters. We know

nothing of her and little of Pilate, himself, except that in real life the prefect was noted for his harshness, brutality, and intolerance. Although the movie portrays him otherwise, he was finally recalled to Rome

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## News from the Institute

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

#### BRUCE CHILTON

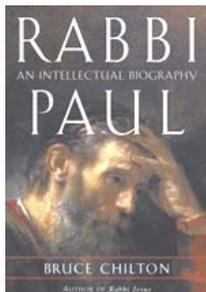
During fall of 2003, Bruce Chilton gave a series of lectures at the House of the Redeemer, located at 7 East 95th Street in Manhattan. This fall, on Tuesdays in October, he will also participate in a weekly series there. A fee is required to attend. For further information contact the House of the Redeemer at 212.289.0399; e-mail [info@houseoftheredeemer.org](mailto:info@houseoftheredeemer.org); or visit the website [www.houseoftheredeemer.org](http://www.houseoftheredeemer.org).

In late February, Reverend Chilton appeared on the CNN special report, *The Mystery of Jesus*. He also appeared on *Joy in Our Town* in March, a program of Trinity Broadcasting of New York, debating Rev. Bill Banuchi, executive director of the New York State Christian Coalition, on the topic "Valley Leaders Divided on Gay Marriage: Local Mayor Charged." An interview with the BBC is planned for late spring on the topic of "James the Brother of Jesus."

Reverend Russell Allen, a Bard alumnus and Institute member, invited Reverend Chilton to speak on the topic, "Who is Jesus?" during the Lenten season at the Hull Memorial Parish House of the Episcopal Church

of the Holy Advent in Clinton, CT.

From May 23–29, Bruce Chilton will be teaching in an intensive course offered by the University of Creation Spirituality in the New York area. For further information, call 510.835.4827, e-mail [gracehogan@csnet.org](mailto:gracehogan@csnet.org), or visit [www.creationspirituality.org](http://www.creationspirituality.org).



In August 2004, Doubleday will release Bruce Chilton's latest book, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography*. From the publisher: "Rabbi Paul is at once a compelling, highly read-

able biography and a window on how Jesus' message was transformed into a religion embraced by millions around the world."

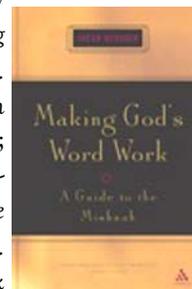
### SENIOR FELLOW, JACOB NEUSNER

Recent publications by Professor Jacob Neusner include, *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism* (E. J. Brill, 2004); the second edition of *The Presence of the Past, the Pastness of the Present. History, Time, and Paradigm in Rabbinic Judaism* (CDL Press, 1996; reprinted



Photo credit: Anne Hall

2003), including eight revised chapters and five new chapters; *Making God's Word Work. Guide to the Mishnah* (Continuum, 2004); with Alan J. Avery-Peck *The Routledge Dictionary of Judaism. London and New York* (Routledge, 2004);



and as editor of the *Dictionary of Ancient Rabbis. Selections from the Jewish Encyclopaedia* (Hendrickson, 2003).

### INSTITUTE EVENTS

The fall 2003 semester was a busy time for the Institute. In late September, the Institute welcomed world-renowned author and mystic Andrew Harvey in his first visit to Bard. Harvey lectured on "The Vision of the Gospel of Thomas," the topic of his recent book.

In October, Bruce Chilton offered the fall lecture series, "Mary Magdalene: A Feminist Biography," which was developed in response to a request by several members for further information about this important figure of the Gospels (see Andi Novick's *A Member's View*).

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## A Member's View: Scholarship on Credit

In the tenth week of my life, on my baptismal day, my life as a sinner became complicated.

Aside from all the other things that baptism is and does, I was then baptized a Lutheran. What that meant for me for a long time, and probably still hangs on, is that I am not a Catholic, a Roman Catholic, that is. Being any kind of Catholic never came to my mind until much later. In a largely French-Canadian New England city, that meant that I was part of a proud minority. In fact, that pride—even arrogance—defined my religion. My simple sin of selfishness became complicated by arrogance.

While neighbors and playmates had to attend Mass, eat fish, do "the sign of the cross," or have a pope's picture on a bedroom wall, I was free to be a Protestant, which was to "protest" whatever that other religion was. Being a Lutheran meant not being a Catholic—and later I could be a happy non-Baptist, non-Jew, non-Episcopalian, etc.

What escaped me then was that I was very much a Catholic, in that Catholicism was a great deposit of credit which I could use as if a credit-card defined my Lutheranism: whatever was not Catholic. Catholicism was collateral to use in a negative way. So if the Catholic

tradition didn't exist, I didn't either. I would have no credit against which to describe my faith. I later learned that my Catholic playmates were just as happy and learned in not being Lutheran. Much later, by the grace of God, I learned that the Lutheran "movement" is imbedded in a catholic substance and history from which I cannot escape and to which I am heavily indebted. That meant that I could deposit positive and critical resources in learning and in articulating my own faith, both with and against that credit.

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## *A Member's View: Fall Lecture Series "Mary Magdalene"*

I have long been wedded to the belief that the way in which we perceive our personal and social paths has direct impact on our choices as we proceed along those paths. I have always been interested in examining the myths which have guided or influenced our lives. We could ignore the stories of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, which I consider to have created an imbalance in the masculine/feminine dynamic, at the expense not only of women, but ultimately at a cost to all living creatures. I am aware, nonetheless, that there is great wisdom to be derived from these books, both of a spiritual and of an historical nature. So instead I embrace these writings for what we can glean from them.

In these texts, there are to be found myths and stories worth focusing on as appropriate guides in our lives. If we are willing to engage them openly and honestly, we can reconstruct our myths based on the values which enhance our humanity, not limit its potential.

Jesus embodied the best of the Judaism of his time. There are many stories of his kindness, compassion, and nonviolence—stereotypically feminine values. There are also many accounts of his courageous defiance of the norms of his time, as when he freely associated with women. His relationship with Mary Magdalene is one of the richest examples of Jesus' understanding of the spiritual

equality of all people.

So who was Mary Magdalene then? Was there any basis for the 2,000 year old myth that she was a prostitute who repented and became a disciple, or was she in fact a prophet, a spiritual collaborator, and perhaps Jesus' closest friend? Indeed, if Mary Magdalene was an important, influential figure of her time, at least as much as any of the other disciples, we can reconstruct our stories in a way that is consistent with what we inherently know to be true; the sacred truth of our oneness— in which all members are equally valued and respected.

We can rail against those in power who at any moment in history rewrite the rules and the stories in order to mold our 'beliefs' that women are naturally inferior creatures and men should abandon those values of love and empathy which make us our most human. Or we can recognize the historical prejudices that would subvert sacred truths and reach a deeper understanding by reading between the lines.

As always, Bruce has helped us to read between those lines. In the fall Mary Magdalene lecture series he talked about what the texts had to say about who Mary Magdalene was and the inconsistencies contained therein. He helped us to understand the significance of those inconsistencies and to draw conclusions based on his understanding of the

history and culture of that period, contrasted with what is contained in various writings and what is omitted. Through his willingness to pursue a more honest story, we are better able to restore Mary Magdalene in history and in so doing reconstruct our myths to understand the beauty and wisdom of all of us.

I would like to take this opportunity to suggest and encourage further exploration of this subject, perhaps next fall, looking more closely at the suppressed Christian scriptures and the role Mary Magdalene played as a leader in the early Christian movement after Jesus died. I am most interested in what was going on historically during the times Christian writings were composed and later canonized (or suppressed), which might shed light on how half of humanity got excluded and with it, the sacred feminine, and the understanding of spirituality and brotherly love Jesus so cherished. ■

— Andi Novick  
Rhinebeck, NY

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*(Scholarship on Credit, continued from page 2)*

I have noticed this habit among some jet-set theologians and scholars in religion. For instance, recent books and lectures on The Gospel of Thomas use the credit-deposit of 2000-years of Christian teaching (disparate and broad as it is) to get across whatever that long-lost testimony carries, except in a negative way. This teaching is usually "absolutely new," and "astonishing." If the Christian religion never existed, and all we had about Jesus was The Gospel of Thomas, I suspect that gospel would be

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as popular as Zoroastrianism today—interesting, even exciting, but it wouldn't sell.

So some scholarship is a sort of Archie Bunkerism (arch=chief; bunker=one who deflates, belittles, hides as in a strong defensive place) living on credit, requiring the conventional thing to look foolish, even when that conventional thing is superficially grasped. (Recall Archie's critique of visiting clergy or his son-in-law.)

For instance, Professor Andrew Harvey's IAT lecture on Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup> exhibited passion for the material and learning in the great mystical traditions. But his

barbs directed at the Christian tradition were either arguable or superficial. Although he said that his "conventional" Christian rearing consisted of learning how to make good cucumber sandwiches, he had no end of complaint with church, hierarchy, teachers, and scripture of any Christian sort.

So now I have spent all the credit these scholars have set aside for me. I hear Edith Bunker's voice over my shoulder: "O, posh, can't we all just get along?" I am still a complicated sinner. ■

— Albert Ahlstrom  
Kingston, NY

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## *A Member's View: The Divine Feminine*

The weekend of March 5-7 marked the beginning of a four-part lecture series by Andrew Harvey entitled "The Mystical Revolution." This first session was called "The Return of the Mother." Its captivating title evoked many different ideas and emotions. I was not only drawn to it by its topic but also by the presenter whom I had heard of many years ago and who has been widely described as a "contemporary mystic." The setting for the series is Miriam's Well in Saugerties, which has distant views of the Hudson and lots of positive energies within. We were a group of about 20.

Andrew set out by relating the masculine aspect of spiritual consciousness to clarity and the feminine to abundance, an abundance that includes a tenderness that serves to counteract the violence and brutality in the world and within ourselves, and that can give rise to renewal, wholeness, and healing. We should be capable of discovering that reservoir of fruitful sweetness within ourselves, he explained.

One of the ways to connect with and reinforce the feminine aspect of the divine is through devotion: approaching the divine in humility and with knowledge and dedication in order to permit growth. At the center of this process is love, understood as wisdom in thought and in compassionate action, which is transformative and not just an emotion, as Andrew emphasized. This growth needs a passion, a dedication, but one not directed towards brutality or violence or negativity of thinking. The feminine holds the freedom to awaken us; to compassion towards each other. But, he warned, compassion should not be sentimentalized. We need another feminine quality as well, to speak and to act in truth, with passion and wisdom.

He stressed the importance of the coexistence of both the feminine and the masculine in each of us regardless whether female or male. Historically the

masculine has often rejected and relegated the feminine to a subordinate role, allowing for a patriarchal society to evolve. We need fierceness to fight for a greater acceptance of the Mother, the feminine force, in order to change and balance oneself, each other, and the planet as a whole. In this process, we open our heart to the light of the divine to expand it and be purified. Andrew

us to recognize our own power and our central responsibility to contribute to others. Andrew continued to emphasize the need to celebrate both the radiance of the feminine as well as that of the masculine.

At carefully planned moments, we were presented with different kinds of music that appealed to and addressed our emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual aspects. To me, the effect was purifying and uplifting; at times an emotional embrace and at other times a simple break to process responses to the seminar at the depth of my being. The group was encouraged to express concerns of both a general and a more personal nature. Andrew emphasized the importance of facing our own shadows, which can be humiliating and scary.

Before we started the last session, we were asked again to share our dreams or visions and my personal experience was a vivid metaphor—filled with hope. Andrew also invited personal reflections on the whole weekend.

The hour drive home allowed me somewhat to process what Andrew so vividly

tried to convey, namely, the urgency to consciously invite into and participate in all aspects of the feminine in our own lives for the betterment of ourselves and others, and of the universe. Courage, compassion, and wisdom would be necessary companions for this adventure.

After having been breathless from the intensity and speed of Andrew's leading us through this journey, I tried to transition to normalcy. Albeit a normalcy altered and filled with anticipation of new adventures assured by the experience of the Returned Mother. ■

—Liso Starrett  
Millbrook, NY



*Andrew Harvey with seminar participants. Photo courtesy of Miriam's Well*

personally engaged the group throughout the weekend and we were charged to meditate and reflect upon the feminine aspect of the divine.

At one point, Andrew led one of the participants through an emotional healing process. First, we listened to the tragically painful experience of this young woman. Then four women interspersed with four men, related to her a major experience of their own suffering and what they learned from it. It was moving and amazing how the group dynamics unleashed enormous constructive energies. The young woman said the experience had sacralized her heart and impacted her soul in a healing way. It was a powerful demonstration, allowing

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## *The Institute of Advanced Theology and Miriam's Well*

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*The Institute of Advanced Theology and Miriam's Well in Saugerties have joined together with the aim to offer programs of interest to members and friends of the Institute. Please see the schedule of upcoming events for further information.*

Miriam's Well is a spiritual educational center located in Saugerties, N.Y. The mission of Miriam's Well is to support spiritual evolution through personal and collective transformational experience. The relationship between Miriam's Well and the Institute of Advanced Theology is based upon a joint belief that these times call for an opening for caring concerned citizens to go beyond the limits of our materialistic culture and worldview. The Institute offers that opening through lectures and course work, which opens the mind to new possibilities. Miriam's Well offers transformational experiences aimed at opening the heart to direct experience of the Divine.

This year we will be cosponsoring several events. Andrew Harvey, author of *Son of Man: The Mystical Path to Christ*, conducted a seminar here in March. His series, "The Mystical Revolution," will continue on June 25-27, with a weekend titled "Rumi & the Way of Passion." On

September 24-26, "Jesus and the Way of Love in Action" will be presented. The series will culminate on November 19-21 with Harvey presenting, "Mystical Activism and the New Human Being."

The Institute and Miriam's Well will also be cosponsoring a weekend with Huston Smith, August 20-22, the title of which is "Religion-Based Activism: Religious Wisdom and Social Change." Smith is an internationally recognized philosopher and scholar of religion, whose book *The World's Religions* has been the most widely-used textbook on its subject for a third of a century. ■

—Richard Rosen  
Coexecutive Director of Miriam's Well

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*(What is the 'advance' in "Advanced Theology"? continued from page 1)*

resulted in our mounting numbers over the years. My own interests have been focused in the New Testament, and Frank Crohn's involvement has permitted us to let our meetings become more widely known (and to offer a soup that has become our trademark).

Frank's friendship has meant a great deal to the Institute in another way, as well. In addition to our Lenten meetings (which have been partnered with an autumn series), the IAT, since 1996, has been convening scholars from around the world to devote themselves to James, the brother of Jesus. He is fascinating both for his relationship to Jesus and for his continuing practice of Judaism after the resurrection; both Jewish and Christian sources attest his importance and his prominence in Jerusalem. This Lent I'm dealing with James and his importance for the development of Christianity, but the Institute's team is already responsible for the most reputable in-depth

scholarship on James available in print. In this field of work as well as in our public discussions, the adjective "advanced" is appropriate.

I have thought of our public series and our consultation on James as being the principal programs of the Institute, with occasional lectures seasoning them. But for the past three years, with the help of several key administrators of the College, Jacob Neusner and I have been crafting a proposal for a third principal program of the Institute.

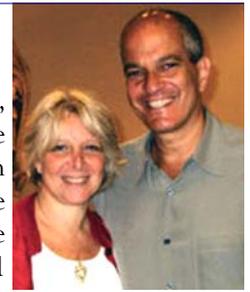
The third program is aimed to offer a doctoral degree to practicing clergy and to those with equivalent qualifications. As far as I am aware, it would be unique in exposing professional ministers to other religious perspectives in depth, and the degree in comparative theology we have in mind would be rigorous and practical. The details of the curriculum are coming together as I write this, but we hope to be able to share our work with members of the Institute during this new

year as we prepare to submit our proposal to the Regents of the State of New York.

From the outset, Bard College has been supportive of these efforts, particularly in their last phase. Andrew Harvey's visit last autumn was crucial, because at that time he joined the Institute as a consultant, to help us gather the resources to move all our programs ahead. The proposal for graduate work will prove expensive and challenging, but in my opinion it also represents the third leg on the Institute's stool: not just a desirable option, but a support necessary for the balance of the whole. With that in place, we will be "advanced" three times over, offering our members a range of opportunities for involvement and growth. ■



— Bruce Chilton  
Executive Director



Susan and Richard Rosen  
Photo courtesy of Miriam's Well

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## Review: Mel Gibson's Lethal "Passion"

At last cornered into viewing *The Passion of the Christ* by an invitation to review the film, I made my way to the "Lyceum 6" in Red Hook, New York. Nothing I heard during the weeks beforehand, from Mel Gibson's boosters or his detractors, prepared me for what I saw. This film has nothing to do with historical debates; it is a passion play, both successful and abysmal in representing that genre. Mr. Gibson has fashioned a blunt instrument of propaganda, edged with artistry, whose visceral power gives it the potential of becoming his most lethal weapon of all.

Medieval passion plays entertained their audiences and at the same time drew them into the sufferings of Christ. These efforts indulged flights of fancy and superstition, manufacturing perfidious Jews, assorted demons, buxom Magdelenes, gargoyle-faced demons, and the like, but they also offered vivid realizations of how Christ, by following the way of the cross, was transformed into his resurrected glory. The intent was to open the path of Christ to all believers.

That pattern of transformation was embedded in Christian theology long before the Middle Ages. Cyril of Jerusalem during the fourth century made Jerusalem a site of international pilgrimage by urging Christians to follow the way of the cross in the city where Jesus died. In the Gospels Jesus himself tells his followers, "If anyone would follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The Passion in the Gospels reflects the liturgical practice of Christians during the first century, who recollected Jesus' suffering during Lent, when they prepared new believers for baptism and committed themselves afresh to walk in the footsteps of Christ. The Passion is at the heart of Christian identity, and Mel Gibson is wise to focus on it.

The pace of the film is courageously slow throughout, so the viewer

can see and reflect on the beautiful tableaux that are created, beads of Caravaggio-like images strung on a thread of relentless pain and violence. In medieval style, Satan plays a prominent role, calibrated so that the film embodies the doctrines of the Catholic Reformation (prior to Vatican II) that Mr. Gibson is committed to. The opening scene features Satan mocking Jesus in Gethsemane, ridiculing the belief that one man can suffer so as to expiate the sins of others.



Jesus' psychic pain is at its height at this point. In fact, the film reaches its climax within three minutes or so; everything that follows is denouement. This is a very brave dramatic gamble, and a success. Jesus' hands tremble manically, as they will later during his pitiless flogging, because the savior of the Counter Reformation knows everything that is going to happen to him in advance, and has to embrace that pain as his personal sacrifice and payment for the sins of the world. This theory that Jesus ransoms the sins of the whole world has also made its way to becoming one of the "fundamentals" of Fundamentalism, which is presumably why Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell have taken up positions in support of the film. Once that payment is made, salvation is secure. If Jesus fails, all is lost.

But he will not and cannot fail. As he lies on the ground in his prayer to God in Gethsemane, Satan releases a snake. But once again on his feet, Jesus crushes the snake's head, and marches out to meet his tormenters. No, of course that scene is not in the Gospels; Satan and his snake are imported from

medieval imagination. They represent a Christological reading of Genesis 3:15, tinged with the imagery of the Revelation. That is allowed in a passion play, as are all the scenes Mr. Gibson invents from legend and imagination. And as in the case of any passion play, the artistry consists in what is invented, not in fidelity to the Gospels, and history is beside the point.

There are many more Jewish tormenters than in the Gospels. Satan weaves in and out of their midst as Jesus is betrayed, mocked, and denied. Satan's hairless face and head somehow seemed familiar to me, but I could not quite place him at the beginning of the film. I lost my curiosity about that for a while, diverted by the baroque portrayal of the violence inflicted on Jesus by the high priest Caiaphas and his colleagues. They are all opulently but darkly dressed; their interior corruption is manifest. If we have any doubt about the moral standing of the high priesthood, one of Caiaphas' colleagues wears an eye-patch. *Pirates of the Caribbean* meets *Ben-Hur*.

These vivid images do tip into camp from time to time. Judas hangs himself by taking the rope off a rotting donkey, a rope big enough to pull a barge. He ties himself to a tree overhanging a cliff. The viewer is left wondering how he got up there: Did Satan levitate him? Caiaphas seems to sleep walk through the action, a stock villain driven by no specific complaint against Jesus, simply miming hatred, and finally whimpering in his destroyed temple after the crucifixion, when an earthquake destroys the place. Herod Antipas wears a wig, and has kitted out his palace as brothel. One of his hookers—a black lady—shows sympathy for the battered Jesus in the only gesture towards political correctness that Mr. Gibson

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(Mel Gibson's *Lethal "Passion,"*  
continued from page 6)

allows himself. Pilate, on the other hand, is a wise but ineffectual ruler, who not only asks "What is truth," as he does in John's Gospel (18:38), but takes up the question in a private seminar with his wife.

Pilate's wife plays a big role in this film. She tells Pilate first thing off that Jesus is a "holy" man, and does what she can to intervene. When she can't stop the execution, owing to Caiaphas' manipulation of the crowds with the "Pharisees" (with whom he is supposed to be allied, despite being a high priest), she hands out big sheets of linen to Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene. That way, they can mop up huge quantities of blood after Jesus' scourging, just as Veronica is later placed on the Via Dolorosa to have her famous piece of linen imprinted with the bloody image of Jesus' face. Reliquaries of nails and crown are also conveniently left by the cross, so that they can be "discovered" during the fourth century.

When Jesus finally dies, people in the audience with me have been reduced to loud weeping on several occasions. Some of them have even stopped eating their popcorn and drinking their cokes. (When they do cry, it is pretty obvious, because they are as supersized as their drinks.) Jesus, however, pursues the resolve forged in the crucible of Gethsemane, so they can go back to eating and drinking while he is raised from the dead. Jesus stands apart from the altar-like stone on which he had been laid in his monumental tomb. The burial, by the way, completely eliminates the role of Joseph of Arimathea that is pivotal in the Gospels: an opportunity to portray crucial sympathy by one of Jesus contemporaries in Judaism is squandered. In any case, his immaculate linen shroud trembles in the breeze, awaiting shipment to Turin. He stands, his face, butt, and punctured right hand in profile. He marches out of the tomb much as he marched

out to his tormenters in Gethsemane, but to the marshal beat of a drum.

As a passion play this film is a hokey but reverent meditation on the death of Jesus. The music sustains the stately pace through what amounts to the Stations of the Cross that Cyril developed in Jerusalem and that Christians still use for devotion today. The score is derivative, sounding much like some of the work in *Gladiator*, but it comports well with the film's tableaux and occasional bursts of violence and splattered blood. (Acting in this case requires no comment, because there is no room for it in between static images and violent outbursts, most of which involves flaying latex skin.) More successfully, the camera work effects the aim of a passion play. We look on the action, appalled and uplifted by the various characters. The blind hatred of



Caiaphas, the crazed disorientation of Judas, the mute betrayal of Peter, the dithering good will of Pilate, the magnificent loyalty of Jesus' mother, the smoldering devotion of the Magdalene, the chaste quasi-conversion of Pilate's wife, the sadistic pleasure of the Roman soldiers, the clueless cross-bearing of Simon of Cyrene, all reflect and heighten our own responses. We ask, as we should, Where would we be and where are we in this action? As the film's deliberate rhythm proceeds, Jesus himself looks up from his agonies to fix his gaze on the characters and on us, so as to underline that question.

As I looked into his face and his latex wounds, however, I found myself more and more distant from this Jesus and his torments. The action finally

became so removed from any reality that the film lost its way. The power of this passion play is dissipated and finally undermined by its claim to authenticity. Much has been made of the "Aramaic" spoken in this film, alongside Latin. In fact, the Semitic-language scenes are a wild brew of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Syriac with grammatical mistakes in all three. The Latin is pretty good, but to have Jesus conversing learnedly with Pilate in that language is just too funny for words. There is not a word of Greek in this film, not even in the titulus on the cross, although John's Gospel specifies that the charge against Jesus was written in Greek (19:20) as well as in Latin and Aramaic.

But this mistake is no lapse. Gibson uses the conversation between Jesus and Pilate to preview the future that the Counter Reformation desired: a Latin-speaking extension of the Roman Empire into the world of spirit. What is wrong with Pilate in this portrayal is not that he is corrupt and violent and anti-Semitic (all of which is historically attested), but that he lacks backbone. Jesus is there to give him that, and Pilate's wife is present to help with the transplant. The fact that prefects of Pilate's lowly rank were not permitted to bring their wives with them on postings is as lost on Mr. Gibson as the simple truth that, as prefect, Pilate lived in Caesarea Maritima, not Jerusalem. Pilate and Jesus together, and then Pilate with his wife, provide the only moments of tranquil power in the midst of mob violence.

Only Latin counts, not Greek (only Roman Catholicism, not Orthodoxy), and Roman sympathy outweighs Jewish sympathy. There are Jews who care for Jesus, chiefly his mother and the Magdalene. Both dressed as peasant versions of Dominican sisters, they have a unique insight into Jesus. His mother is with him in Nazareth in a truly bizarre

(Continued on page 8)

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(Mel Gibson's *Lethal "Passion,"* continued from page 7)

flashback, in which Jesus, pottering in his shop like a suburban householder in Los Angeles, completes a handsome but high table in a Swedish contemporary style. He predicts he will make chairs to make it serviceable: prophesying the use of kitchen tables ('round which his followers will presumably one day sit and discuss this film with admiration). The Magdalene does not have big breasts, but a pouty mouth from an earlier profession: she is the woman taken in adultery in John 8, and her big earrings mark her as a prostitute. (This identification, of course, contradicts what is said about Mary Magdalene and the woman taken in adultery, a triumph of pious imagination over the biblical text.) She is nearly stoned by a ring of people with rocks, much as in the stoning scene in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, rather than by the method of being thrown from a cliff and crushed with a large rock, which both the New Testament and the Mishnah refer to. When Jesus is about to be crucified, the crowd also turns back in his favor, if inarticulately and half-heartedly, and the beloved John is sympathetically portrayed. But on balance the power of the Romans makes their support of Jesus more magnetic than Jewish sympathy, and even one of the sadistic soldiers that torment him converts at the end, awed as much by Jesus' mother as Jesus' himself.

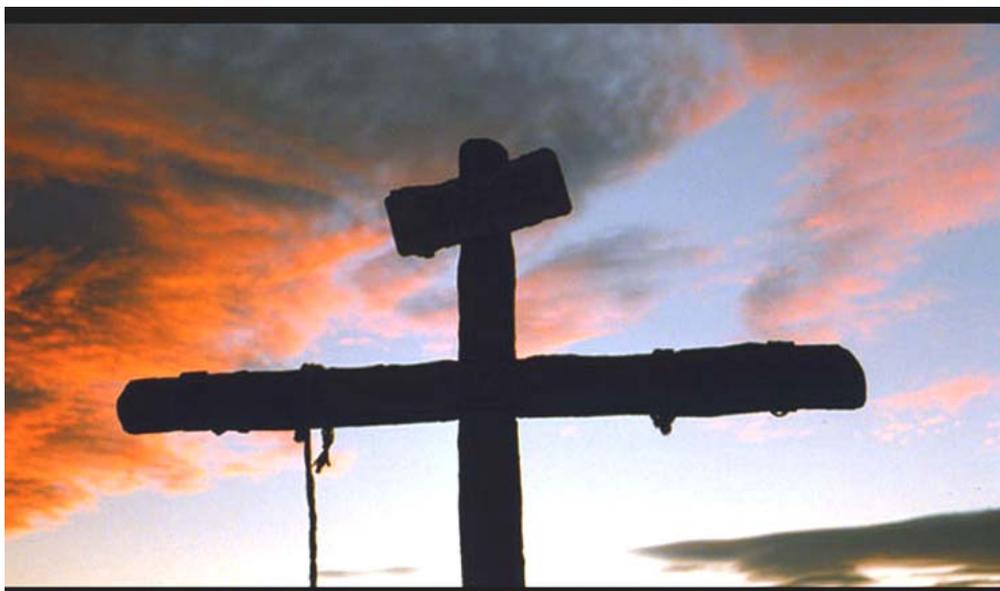
In the scourging scene, I finally realized who Satan reminded me of. Although the Gospels place this scene in the pretorium, Mr. Gibson locates it in a square with easy access for disciples, high priests, and for the two Mary's to mop blood up. Satan makes his way among Jewish high priests and sadistic Roman soldiers. This time alone among his several cameo appearances, Satan is carrying a child, a truly ugly

tot with a face somewhat reminiscent of the children who taunt Judas prior to his suicide, seeming sometimes to be demons. The child also is bald and hairless, his head shaped like Satan's. And I am transported to the *Austin Powers* series my sons are fond of: Dr. Evil and Mini-Me incarnate, assisting at the torture of Jesus.

In consideration of the weeping popcorn chompers around me, I did not laugh aloud. But reflective silence only confirmed my conviction that this is the funniest Jesus-movie since *The Life of Brian*.

Monty Python tried to be funny, and succeeded, because *Brian* was not about Jesus, but Brian. Putting this cockney hero into situations like those Jesus faced, under obviously phony historical circumstances, makes for brilliant parody. In Mr. Gibson's case, the parody is equally powerful, although unintentional. By mixing together the genre of the passion play with the pretension of historical accuracy, Gibson has inadvertently made his passion play into pious vaudeville. Claims that this film reflects the Gospels or history are cynical. Critics who treat it as an historical work have confused their profession with self-promotion. Were this film directed by Mel Brooks, we would have something to watch with pleasure. But Mr. Gibson's *Passion* is libelous farce, poor art, and an incentive for credulous viewers to confuse Christian faith with hatred. After I went home, I watched *Die Hard* with my younger son, and felt morally restored. ■

— Bruce Chilton



Images from *The Passion of the Christ*

(News From the Institute, continued from page 2)

On Saturday, October 4, the Institute sponsored the symposium, "Miracles in the World's Religions," with keynote speaker Kenneth L. Woodward, contributing editor of *Newsweek* (where he was religion editor for 38 years) and author of *The Book of Miracles* and *Making Saints*. Bard professors Bruce Chilton, Richard Davis, Jacob Neusner, Nerina Rustomji, and Kristin Scheible, joined him in discussing the role of miracles in Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.



Kenneth L. Woodward



Richard Davis



Nerina Rustomji



Kristin Scheible

Images of the symposium participants  
Photo credit: The Services

In December, Professors Chilton and Neusner, spoke about "Making Time Holy," and how the Jewish and Christian calendars intersect and diverge in ways that powerfully evoke what makes these two religions irreconcilable in their claims of absolute truth—and indivisible in their common inheritance of faith in a single God. On Saturday, December 14, several Institute members participated in the Christian meditation workshop led by the Reverend Chilton in John Bard Hall.



February 2004 offered two lectures for Institute members. "Defining 'Religion' and 'the West,'" by William Scott Green, professor of religion, Philip S. Bernstein Professor of Judaic Studies, and dean of the college at the University of Rochester. This was part of the "Religious Foundations of Western Civilizations," series. Jodi Magness, the Keenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism at the University of North Carolina, spoke about "The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls." This lecture was presented in conjunction with the Institute's annual consultation of scholars, focusing this year on Jerusalem between Jesus' death and the Jewish war, with particu-



Jodi Magness

lar emphasis on the interactions among religious communities. Participants included professors Chilton, Magness, and Neusner, as well as Karl P. Donfried of Smith College, and Frank T. Crohn.



Spring Lenten Series  
Photo credit: The Services

In March, the annual Lenten lecture series was offered on Fridays by Reverend Chilton. This year's topic was "James the Brother of Jesus." Also, the Institute joined with Miriam's Well in jointly offering a series of four weekend lectures by Andrew Harvey, the first, "Return of the Mother," was given the first weekend in March. This was a special chance for members of the Institute to explore the mystical side of the "sacred feminine," through of four major sacred practices of the Christian, Hindu, Sufi, and Tibetan traditions. This series took place at Miriam's Well in Saugerties. Three other weekends will be offered in 2004 (see Liso Starret's *A Member's View* and upcoming events).

Over 70 people attended the symposium, "The Death of Jesus and Anti-Semitism," held at the House of the Redeemer in Manhattan, cosponsored by the Institute, Auburn Theological Seminary, the Interfaith Ecumenical Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and the House of the Redeemer. Professor Neusner spoke about "Good Friday and Easter, or how, in the Mishnah, the Death Penalty Is Merciful." Professor Chilton discussed "Pilate, the Politics of Rome, and Evangelical Politics." Peter Feinman, director of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Education of Purchase, N.Y., addressed "What Can the Archaeology of Masada Teach Us about the Death of Jesus?" ■

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## SPRING 2004 INSTITUTE EVENTS

### “Religious Foundations of Western Civilization”

The series, developed by Professors Chilton and Neusner, is held in conjunction with the undergraduate theology course of the same title. The series surveys principal points in the history of the west at which religion (mainly Christianity, but also Judaism and Islam) defined the social order and dictated the shape of culture. **Free and open to the public.**

*All events held in the Weis Cinema, Bertelsmann Campus Center, 4:30 p.m.* Topics covered in the series are as follows:

Thursday, April 8, “The Modernization of Christianity: Renaissance and Reformation,” Bruce Chilton

Thursday, April 22, “Media of Culture: The Moving Image,” film screening,

and Tuesday, April 27, John Pruitt, associate professor of film at Bard, will discuss on the film.

Thursday, April 29, “The Modernization of Judaism,” Jacob Neusner.

Thursday, May 6, “The Secularization of Culture: The Case of Music,” Leon Botstein, president of Bard College.

### “When Is Love? The Song of Songs and the Effects of Chanting on the Human Spirit,”

Monday, April 19

The 2004 Anna Jones Fellow at Bard College, Rabbi Shefa Gold will lead this workshop for Institute members. Rabbi Gold is a leader in Aleph: the Alliance for Jewish Renewal, received her ordination both from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and from Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi. She is the director of C-DEEP, the Center for Devotional Energy and Ecstatic Practice in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. Gold composes and performs spiritual music and has produced nine albums; her liturgies have been published in several new prayerbooks. She travels the world teaching workshops and leading retreats on the theory and art of chanting, devotional healing, spiritual community building, and meditation. Gold combines her grounding in Judaism with a background in Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and Native American spiritual traditions that make her uniquely qualified as a spiritual bridge celebrating the shared path of devotion.

*Free to members of the Institute, \$10 for the general public. Chapel of the Holy Innocents, 5:30 p.m.*



### “The Mystical Revolution”



The Institute of Advanced Theology (IAT) and Miriam’s Well present the second of a four-weekend seminar series from **Friday, June 25, through Sunday, June 27,** with noted author and mystic

**Andrew Harvey.** Part two of the series: “**Rumi and the Way of Passion,**” will explore the work of Rumi, the 13th-century Persian mystic and poetical genius who was the founder of the Mawlawi Sufi order, a leading mystical brotherhood of Islam. Rumi wrote, “run my friends run far from all false solutions/let divine passion triumph and rebirth: You in Yourself.” Beginning with a presentation of Rumi’s life and sacred initiation into divine love by Shamz of Tabriz, Harvey will unfold his vision of the Sufi path of divine transformation and present major Christian and Sufi practices of the Sacred Heart. This will allow direct contact with what Rumi calls divine passion, and the ability to sustain its call in the heart of everyday life.

At the age of 21, **Andrew Harvey** became the youngest person ever to be named a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. He has written and edited more than 30 books, including *The Direct Path: Creating a Journey to the Divine through the World’s Mystic Traditions*; *Son of Man*; *A Journey in Ladakh*; *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (coauthored with Sogyal Rinpoche); *Mary’s Vineyard: Daily Readings, Meditations, and Revelations* (photographs by Eryk Hanut); *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic*; *The Way of Passion: A Celebration of Rumi*; and *Hidden Journey*. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Body Mind Spirit*, *Quest*, and other publications. Harvey has taught at Oxford and Cornell Universities and Hobart and William Smith College. He was the subject of the 1993 BBC documentary *The Making of a Mystic*. He continues to study a variety of religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

The weekend series will continue on **September 10–12** with “**Jesus and the Way of Love in Action**”; and concludes on **November 19–21** with “**Mystical Activism and the New Human Being.**” Seminar admission is \$225, \$125 for members of the IAT, or \$50 for Bard students, faculty, and staff. Preregistration is requested: call 845.246.5805, e-mail [richard@miriamswell.org](mailto:richard@miriamswell.org), or visit the website [www.miriamswell.org](http://www.miriamswell.org).

“*Andrew Harvey is the most prominent teacher of comparative mysticism in the United States, combining critical expertise with passionate commitment,*” says Bruce Chilton. “*He uniquely succeeds in preserving the individuality of different perspectives, while drawing their wisdom together to explore common spiritual and political agendas.*”

(More on the Gibson Film, continued from page 1)

precisely for these traits.

But my main complaint is how the film treats the Jews, making it seem that not just the Sadducees, but all Jews were antagonistic to Jesus, which was not the case. This was a time when in order to be a "Christian" you first had to be a Jew. This was a dispute between Jewish sects—traditionalists against reformers—with the Romans acting as enforcers for their Temple appointees, the Sadducees. It was an uneven battle. Jews of all persuasions abhorred crucifixion as a punishment, which the Romans used frequently as their worst

torture against the Jews.

Any Jew hung "on the tree" was a reminder to all Jews of the consequences of defying Rome. There is no historical evidence of their being a Sadducean trial here—just another typical Roman court preceding in their role of keeping order and responding to Sadducean requests—a deadly combination.

The movie plays unfairly with the facts. ■



—Frank Crohn  
Chairman of the Board

The Institute wishes to thank the members who contributed to this newsletter.

If you are interested in submitting an article for upcoming newsletters, please call the Institute office at 845.758.7279 or e-mail [iat@bard.edu](mailto:iat@bard.edu).

### MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION 2004 INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED THEOLOGY AT BARD COLLEGE

*The Institute welcomes as members all who are interested in religion, biblical history, or in the betterment of relations between peoples of diverse beliefs and cultures. Actively promoting a better understanding among people of all faiths, including nonbelievers, is a vital component of the Institute's mission.*

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Edited by Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner  
Published by Westminster John Knox Press
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by Jacob Neusner, published by Penguin Press  
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Phone: 845.758.7279 E-mail: [iat@bard.edu](mailto:iat@bard.edu)

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Video and audio recordings of Institute lectures and events are available from The Services of Red Hook. For further information, call 845.758.1591, e-mail [sales@theservices.org](mailto:sales@theservices.org), or visit the website [www.theservices.com/chilton.htm](http://www.theservices.com/chilton.htm)



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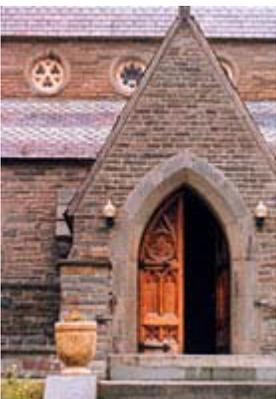
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**Bard College**  
Institute of Advanced Theology  
PO Box 5000  
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504-5000

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