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## Mel Gibson's 'Passion' may be 'preaching to choir'

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Hype about Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" appears to have fired up the faithful in America's Evangelical heartland while leaving others largely unmoved, a new survey shows.

Despite a heated debate about the film among clergy, academics, and media commentators, few in the general population of this state – where Evangelicals represent 69%, compared to 32% nationwide – reports unfavorable attitudes about the film or criticizes it either for historical inaccuracies or for promoting anti-Jewish attitudes.

In short, pre-release publicity and news coverage about Gibson's "controversial" film engendered little controversy here among most Tennesseans. It seems likely that many of those crowding to see Gibson's cinematic sermon are already singing in the choir.

The survey, conducted Feb. 16-28 by the Middle Tennessee State University Survey Group, measured opinion during a two-week period covering both the start of the film's mainstream marketing and its Ash Wednesday opening. Just over 700 randomly selected Tennessee residents age 18 or older were interviewed by telephone.

A solid majority (57%) of Tennesseans reported having either very or somewhat favorable attitudes toward the movie. Most of the rest (25%) offered no opinion. Eleven percent reported having "mixed" feelings about the movie, and only about 6% said they hold either very or somewhat unfavorable opinions about the film. But attitudes apparently were not affected by the film's publicity, as they remained constant throughout the survey period.

By the survey's conclusion, only about 3% of respondents had actually seen the film. Accordingly, these attitudes are based primarily on the film's marketing messages and on what, if any, cues people had received from their social groups and the news media. A follow-up study planned for the fall will measure attitudes toward the film at a time when more people will have seen it for themselves.

Favorable attitudes toward the film were most prominent among the state's self-described Evangelicals, 64% of whom gave Gibson's movie a general thumbs up. Reflecting the trend among all Tennesseans, most of the remaining Evangelicals (22%) said they simply don't know how they feel about the movie. By contrast, 44% of non-Evangelicals gave the movie favorable ratings, and 28% of them said they didn't know.

Christians who identify themselves as "born" again or "Evangelical" constitute the majority in most Tennessee Christian groups, including 92% of Southern Baptists and even 54% of Roman Catholics.

Evangelicals with Republican sympathies were the most impressed of all with Gibson’s movie, a pattern that reflects the growing national alignment between religious and political conservatives. Overall, Tennesseans describing themselves as Evangelicals tended to go to worship services frequently, be somewhat less educated than the average, and be more likely to than others to report having encouraged someone to “believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior.”

Similarly, 69% of the state’s self-described “fundamentalists” deemed the movie to represent an accurate historical portrait of Jesus’ last 12 hours – even though scholars have pointed out the fact that some movie scenes vary from Gospel accounts or are missing entirely from the Gospels, that each Gospel contains somewhat different details, and that non-New Testament historical evidence suggests different interpretations.

About a quarter (25%) of respondents said they don’t know about the historical accuracy. Those who applied the term “fundamentalist” to themselves also tended to be Bible literalists, male, and politically conservative.

By contrast, 55% of non-fundamentalists considered the film faithful to history, and a third (33%) said they did not know. Overall, 56% of the state’s population deemed the movie accurate, and most of the rest (36%) did not know. A scant 8% of Tennesseans said the movie does not accurately portray history – despite challenges from scholars and theologians.

Nor do state residents feel that the film will make other people more anti-Jewish. Fully 60% asserted that the movie will not make others more anti-Jewish, while just over a quarter (28%) said they don’t know, and only about 12% said the movie will make others more anti-Jewish. Here again, Republicans who often attend worship services are most likely to defend the film against suggestions that it will promote anti-Jewish attitudes.

About a third (37%) said the film blames Jesus’ death on “all humanity,” and about another third (34%) don’t know. Sixteen percent said the film blames the Jews, 9% said it distributes blame equally among the Romans and the Jews, and 3% say the film blames the Romans exclusively. The “all humanity” answer was most popular among church-going Bible literalists and is also considered normative by most Christian denominations. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church – adopted at the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s – is that all humanity, not Jews in particular, is to blame. Gibson, however, belongs to a group of “traditionalist” Catholics who do not accept the views of that Vatican Council.

Asked about connections between today’s Jews and the death of Jesus, over three-fourths (76%) said today’s Jews are not guilty of Jesus’ death. Still, 11%, who tend to be males with no more than a high school education, said today’s Jews are guilty of Jesus’ death, and another 11% say they don’t know who bears the guilt. Gibson’s father, incidentally, is on the record for denying that the Holocaust took place.

“Passion” enthusiasts here are more – not less – likely to say that the Holocaust happened. Eighty-seven percent of Tennesseans favorable to the movie said the Holocaust occurred, compared to 65% of those who have no opinion about the movie or who have an unfavorable opinion. Among the movie’s enthusiasts, blacks are more likely than whites to doubt the Holocaust, although doubters are a minority in both groups. Among the movie’s critics, doubt is most common among the poorly educated.

Having Jewish friends does make some difference in reactions to the film, although more than half of the sample (54%) reported having no Jewish friends.

Even among those with Jewish friends, assessment of the film's impact on Jews was mixed to positive. Nearly one-fifth (19%) said they felt their Jewish friends would have a very or somewhat favorable attitudes toward the film. About one-third (32%) said attitudes would be mixed. Just 12% thought their Jewish friends would hold somewhat or very negative attitudes. Still, more than a third (36%) said they did not know. Respondents with some college or above were more likely to report having Jewish friends and more likely to perceive their attitudes toward the film as negative.

Seventeen percent of Tennesseans with Jewish friends said they thought Gibson's movie blames Jews for Jesus' death. Among state residents with no Jewish friends, 10% said the film blames Jews.

Similarly, among Tennesseans with Jewish friends, 43% said that, today, responsibility for Jesus' death rests with all humanity. Among Tennesseans without Jewish friends, 37% say all humanity is at fault for Jesus' death.

About two-thirds (61%) reported following news about Gibson's "Passion" either "very" or "somewhat" closely. Most of the remaining third (35%) followed it either "slightly" or "not at all."

Attention to news about the movie jumped significantly on Feb. 23, the Monday before the movie's Ash Wednesday opening and the same day most news organizations published the first critical reviews of the movie. But this jump in attention caused by the publicity did not translate into changed attitudes, which remained constant regardless of the amount of publicity.

This indicates that publicity centering on the reactions of scholars, religious authorities, and critics had little effect on audience attitudes, perhaps because such publicity was balanced between the film's defenders and detractors. Audience members, hence, likely perceived commentary selectively to confirm their own attitudes, though such publicity did increase awareness of the film.

The survey was conducted by students in the College of Mass Communication working under the direction of the Office of Communication Research, part of the MTSU Survey Group. Journalism professors Robert Wyatt and Ken Blake directed the effort.

All respondents were contacted using telephone numbers in a commercially generated random digit dialing sample. The findings have an estimated error margin of  $\pm 4$  percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the state population within 4 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. Other factors, such as question wording, also affect the outcome of a survey. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups.

The sample varied somewhat from the U.S. Census Bureau's latest available projections for race and gender proportions within the state. Such variation commonly occurs because certain demographic groups are more difficult to contact. The data were thus weighted to more closely match Census projections for these demographics.