"The Passion of the Christ," the film focusing on the Crucifixion of Jesus, opens to the general public on Wednesday. Already it has generated interest and discussion in a variety of faith communities. Here are two essays by members of the metropolitan Atlanta community that offer a unique look ahead to the film by Mel Gibson.

"The Passion of the Christ" will be seen by millions of people. Many will view it reverently as movie theaters become houses of worship. Others will condemn the director's interpretive spin in portraying Jews as unrepentant Christ killers or imposing a unified narrative on the numerous and varying biblical portraits of Jesus.

Already, legitimate worries about arousing anti-Semitism have been expressed by Jewish and Christian leaders, and I hope the filmmakers have taken this concern seriously. Indeed, it would be an unfortunate irony to use a film about Jesus to inspire hate and harm toward anyone.

I'm intrigued by another possibility of response. Based on the excerpts that I have viewed, I think the movie will offend many mainstream white religious audiences but resonate deeply with most blacks. The icons, art and Passion plays in most white churches present Jesus as the subject of a radical makeover. The rugged, sunbaked Palestinian Jew of the Bible gets morphed into a manicured, middle-class model citizen. Almost like one of the neighbors. The theology that underwrites this sanitized Jesus avoids the brutal manifestations of oppression and violence he experienced. Even when Crucifixion scenes appear in Anglo-American religious art, you may see a little blood and a wound or two, but almost never the dirty and broken body that endured torture for several hours. This film's lingering gaze upon the grotesque will be difficult for viewers accustomed to such art.

But most black audiences will see things differently. Since the slave period, blacks have understood and portrayed Jesus as a suffering savior and a grass-roots leader who was the victim of state-sponsored terror. Black theology has focused on the humanity and socially marginal status of Jesus. More than that, blacks have been attracted to the Jesus who experienced unjust victimization by the authorities and the community, but
found empowering comfort in the conviction that a just God would someday even the score. This spirituality and faith generated the Negro spirituals, gospel music, prayers, sermons and religious art that embraced the graphic reality of political death and dying.

In his book "Jesus and the Disinherited," Christian mystic and black theologian Howard Thurman said that whenever we sanitize the grotesque image of the suffering servant, we again inflict violence upon his identity and mission. He endured each moment of that suffering; we dare not minimize it to suit our sensibilities. Not surprisingly, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. always carried that book in his briefcase.

Black viewers may also find themselves revisiting painful memories of young men from our communities who were hanged from trees with drenched, bloodstained clothes as the local townspeople looked on with satisfaction. Billie Holiday captured the horror of these scenes in her heartbreaking song "Strange Fruit."

When African-Americans revisit the Passion scene, we know what that young Jewish mother Mary felt. We know the agony of those disciples who yearned to avenge their leader but were too powerless and afraid to try. We feel this grief and indignation deep in our guts.

Although white and black viewers may sit in the same theater and feel many of the same emotions, there will be some differences in the meanings they attach to what they see. If the film inspires conversation across the color line, it could open windows of understanding into the varying religious perspectives and sensibilities that animate our wonderfully diverse nation.

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