

Interview with Terry George, Director of *The Promise*

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Dr. Christopher DiCarlo

In Director Terry George's latest movie, *The Promise*, an Armenian medical student (Oscar Isaac), an artist (Charlotte Le Bon), and a worldly American journalist (Christian Bale) are involved in a love triangle in and amongst Constantinople set against the backdrop of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian genocide during the First World War.

I sat down with Terry George during the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) at his hotel and we had a conversation. After telling me that he was imprisoned twice for his alleged connections to the IRA in Belfast, we two former Catholic boys had the following discussion (edited for length and clarity):

CD: In *The Promise*, I liked how the main character, Michael (played by Oscar Isaac) says that he wants revenge for the atrocities committed against his family by the Turks. Was that a key element of human nature that you were trying to consider in this film; how war and hatred can be perpetuated because of personal loss?

TG: Yes, with Michael's character at that point we see that he has the opportunity for revenge when he is armed but cannot pull the trigger when confronted with imminent danger

CD: Apparently a lot of soldiers in WWI could not pull the trigger.

TG: Yes, and from Michael's perspective he always was a Humanist. He was an apothecary in a small town and moved

to Constantinople to become a medical doctor.

CD: Yes, as a man of compassion. And it played out really well. It was a good balance and didn't come off too preachy. With your film *Hotel Rwanda*, and now with this movie, regarding historical backdrops, why the backdrop or theme of genocide?

TG: This was something that Kirk Kerkorian (Executive Producer) wanted whose foundation basically financed this. He was ninety-six when we started this and he died in the process. Much of it came from a book by Samantha Power, who's now the US Ambassador to the UN, called *A Problem from Hell*, which started off with the Armenian genocide. In fact the word was coined Raphael Lemkin [in 1944].

CD: Right. It's a Greek-Latin term: The Greek *genos* for group/tribe + *cide*, the Latin term for "killing."

TG: Exactly. So once I was offered it, I thought this was an opportunity given the fact that it's maybe the most suppressed of the catastrophic events of the 20th century.

CD: On that theme, Gail Miller and I just started up an educational program called *The Critical Thinking Project*. And so I go to places like Guatemala, and by Skype to Uganda, Ghana, and Rwanda, and I teach Critical Thinking skills to increase awareness in developing nations so that people can empower themselves. But that requires acknowledgement that there are problems to solve. So, unlike Rwanda, in terms of acknowledgement,



Christian Bale in Terry George's The Promise
(Promotional photo)

the Turks have claimed that their actions during WWI were not deliberately systematic?

TG: Yes, right. But clearly it was: there were orders involved. There's documentation. There's disputes about telegrams that Tala Pasha sent and a lot of it is cloaked in the fact that the Ottoman Government wanted to cover it up after the fact for practical reasons to protect the identity of the state and their reputation. And so a lot of documents were destroyed. But there's first hand accounts by various people (including some Germans) delineating the orders that were given. But the main strategy of the Turks was

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to drive the Armenian population into the desert rather than the gas chambers.

CD: And in that way, could they then say that the Armenians fled on their own?

TG: Yes, and what the Turks claimed is that they were moving them or "relocating" them from Anatolia in the north because there was some initial alliance of an Armenian resistance movement with Russia. So basically, the Turks thought if they were going to be traitors,

they had to move them. But (Raphael) Lemkin delineated other criteria such as dehumanizing the population you're aiming to exterminate.

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CD: That happened 100 years ago. Is the hatred that existed during the Armenian genocide a psychodynamic of tribalism?

TG: In stimulating a genocide or rabble-rousing the population to be involved, they certainly use that. But almost always it's a calculated move by a political force to take full control and wipe out the opposition. With Hitler, he firmly hated the Jews. Again, once you create that enemy within, you can consolidate your support and feed off the fervour of that to pick out all of your opposition. And that was the case in Rwanda for sure. The Hutu government used the genocide to fight against the Tutsi rebel army. And I think the same thing happened in Turkey. But in the Armenian genocide, I think a lot of it was about seizing

What do you think the effect of The Promise might have on the general public in seeing this as an historical event and calling it what it is—namely, systematic genocide?

TG: It's obviously an educational tool because there's so little perception of the Armenian genocide. Not just in the US, but all around Europe. The bulk of the people I spoke to recently at TIFF knew nothing about this.

property. Basically, they seized whole villages.

CD: So, resource-based aggression?

TG: Yes, land, security, protection. It's all of those factors brought together and coalesced into the idea that one group must get rid of the entire population of another.

CD: This is one of the reasons The Critical Thinking Project goes into war-torn countries like Guatemala, Uganda, and Rwanda to try to get people to think at least to the point of hesitating before you pull the trigger or swing the machete.

TG: Critical thinking doesn't work for soldiers.

CD: That's why if you can get it to the people – get it to the *polis* – maybe they will be more empowered to take a stand for peaceful resolutions. I'm not saying that what I'm doing is going to fix the problems of the world. It's a long term, generational initiative that's going to take years.

TG: It's about education and choice and learning and expressing yourself.

CD: And having the empowerment to use these skills and identify absurdity when you see it or hear it. And to call it out for what it is. Now, we've seen 26 cases of recorded genocide (that we know of) throughout modern history. Surely this could never happen in the US?

TG: It has happened [and I] think it could happen anywhere with the right conditions and the right rabble rousing and fear. Obviously I don't think Donald Trump is Adolph Hitler. But the devices and methods that he used during the election are the seeds of what we're talking about.

CD: They certainly seem fascistic don't they? Quiet the media, fear of foreigners, defend one's borders, fear, and more fear.

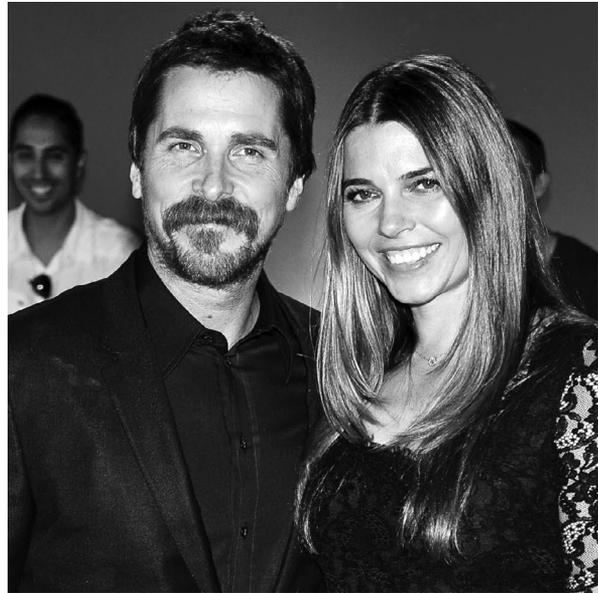
TG: Pick out a vulnerable section of a sub-population – whether it's Mexicans or Muslims and focus on them as the cause of our problems. And it's not a step away from that evolving into hatred. And you can see this particularly after 9/11 how the siege mentality which seems to have settled into the American population and they really are afraid. And their fear is stoked by Fox News.

CD: That brings me to my next point. Can Critical Thinking provide the type of media literacy that will allow the public to see through that kind of 'Fair and Balanced' reporting?

TG: You know, most of the media have the capacity for Critical Thinking. And I know people who work for Fox News and I know Conservatives and Republicans. They're as smart as anyone else. They're not dumb. But the ratings, popularity, financial gain, etc., start to take over and people like Rupert Murdoch have learned that tapping into people's baser instincts is a very good way towards financial success. So it's that manipulation of people using malignant Critical Thinking really. All Critical Thinking isn't benign obviously.

CD: What I'm trying to do is establish some universal rules so that people can have fairly equitable discussions so that when they commit errors in reasoning, we have names for them and can call them out on it. What do you think the effect of *The Promise* might have on the general public in seeing this as an historical event and calling it what it is – namely, systematic genocide?

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Christian Bale and his wife, Sibi Blazic, at the world premier of The Promise at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Photo: HP Staff Photographer

all around Europe. The bulk of the people I spoke to recently at TIFF knew nothing about this.

CD: Really?

TG: Yes, and the American population is notoriously insular about history and so we want to get the story told to have people investigate it. It was similar with *Hotel Rwanda* and the genocide that occurred there. The movie stimulated a lot of teaching in schools about the subject, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations brought attention to it. And so we're hoping for the same type of thing – that people will see the film and go away and read more about it.

CD: Will there be a truth and reconciliation commission?

TG: I doubt that. I think it has to be an admission by Turkey and some sort of attempt of reparations. I mean, we're a long way from there. There is a small movement. But there is a very scary, right-wing nationalistic group in Turkey who have assassinated a Turkish reporter (Ankar Akon) who was raising awareness of the Armenian genocide. But now, particularly the way (Recep Tayyip) Erdoğan's behaving, he's suppressing the whole nation.

They won't countenance any acknowledgement of this. And also, there's been a generational teaching from the history books that this thing never happened.

CD: Ah yes, history is written by the victors.

TG: And there's also an article in last week's *New York Times* about the paranoia of the overall Turkish population that the Americans were behind the coup and the campaigning for recognition of the Armenian genocide. I've had very liberal Turks tell me that it [the genocide] really didn't happen like that [the way it's been depicted in *The Promise* and elsewhere]. And I tell them: "I'm sorry, but yes, it did."

CD: I found similar attitudes amongst some Spanish in Guatemala in denying the Mayan genocide.

TG: Some of the British will say the same about the Irish famine. They blame it on the potato blight. Sure, but you had warehouses of corn that were not made available to anyone and successively over five years, the population was decimated. It was a political decision. We don't need those peasants, you know?

CD: I don't know what it will take for humanity in general to see each other as equals. If we accept evolutionary theory on human origins, then it follows that we are historically, all

We've actually regressed to the point where people think their religion is better than those of others. And if you don't believe in mine, then you're an infidel. Some feel superior and must dominate others because of this. That's such a primitive aspect. As the west moves towards Humanism and even atheism, they [true believers] see that as a decadence that gets in the way and must be attacked.

African and must all be related because we all came from the same ancestors. Could a message like this resonate with those in different cultures?

TG: It won't be easy because religion predominates. You have denialists about climate change and evolution. And religion is based on this notion that a God created us. For me, the thing about religion is (and I've said it so many times), it's so intrinsically linked to death and the human ego that says: "This can't be all there is. We're destined for greater things." And the notion that we are simply dirt and will return to the same is a particularly hard notion – espe-

cially when you're sick – that you're heading for dirt.

CD: And I get all that, but my concern has always been about harm. That is, through a person's religious (or political, moral, philosophical) beliefs, are they generating actions which are harmful to others or other species?

TG: Well they do. We've actually regressed to the point where people think their religion is better than those of others. And if you don't believe in mine, then you're an infidel. Some feel superior and must dominate others because of this. That's such a primitive aspect. As the west moves towards

Humanism and even atheism, they [true believers] see that as a decadence that gets in the way and must be attacked. People say there's violence in Islam; go and read the Bible. It's interesting; with the troubles in Belfast, I'd meet these priests and I wasn't a pacifist by any stretch of the imagination, but their justification [for violence] was that Jesus drove the money lenders out of the temple. The one example of when Jesus used violence. So we have to do it. I think religion is the single biggest scourge that has inhabited the Earth. Where would we be if religion didn't exist? Most of the wars up until the 19th Century – I mean, all wars are economical – but religion is often tied into it.

CD: It would be a different world, wouldn't it if we had to work things out for ourselves?

TG: I would say you need to do away with religion; and economic inequality.

CD: It's pretty clear that the fastest growing movement in the west is the abandonment of religious dogmatic belief. People are either re-defining what it means to be 'spiritual' and abandon dogmatic religious practices; or they are simply abandoning the religious belief and practice altogether.

TG: Well, the Catholic Church is such a corrupt and morally debased organization – particularly in Ireland where they have to

import priests from Nigeria. In Ireland, if you came out of poverty, you came to religion because you thought it would help. Religion is the opiate of the masses. When you're hungry, you can at least ask a god for food.

CD: People have been emotional beings long before we became rational. Religion speaks directly to the limbic system, not the prefrontal cortex. So it's a very difficult balancing act of diplomacy to engage religious believers in conversation so that people will at least examine their beliefs. And this is not an easy thing to do.

TG: And given that their core belief is unchallengeable...

CD: Yes, it's non-falsifiable.

TG: Exactly. Non-falsifiable. I like that.

CD: Yes, it's from Karl Popper.

TG: Unless someone comes back from the dead and proves us wrong or angels start appearing everywhere... which we know ain't going to happen. For me it's about understanding that this is it, do the best you can on this Earth because you ain't going anywhere else.

CD: You said earlier that you believe religion revolves a lot around the idea of death. I refer to this point in the evolution of human consciousness as 'caveman angst' – the capac-

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ity to recognize that one is going to die.

TG: There is a life after death and there is a heaven and hell. The life after death is the legacy you leave behind. For me, leaving that moral good behind in my body of work, and how I relate to other people in life, and how they'll remember me, is a life after death. And hopefully, that puts me in the Heaven category.

CD: Whereas Hitler's in the Hell?

TG: Yeah, exactly. We need to develop a system of morality. That's important. Religions will claim that they're

the font of that morality. Whereas for me, there's a human instinct for good but it's always a battle. In the Rwandan genocide, it was personal slaughter with neighbours killing neighbours. It wasn't a gas chamber. Eight hundred thousand to a million people died. How do you motivate half a million people to become murderers? Fear and ignorance. The fear of losing because the Hutu government said the Tutsi's were going to steal their property and enslave them. Finding a moral compass is an important step.

CD: It is. That's why were trying to combat those levels of fear and ignorance with Critical Thinking skills with the hopes that it resonates through the villages, towns, and cities. It's a start. I call it secular missionary work. It's sometimes dangerous.

TG: You're going against authority that's suppressive and needs to control. And they don't want that.

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CD: Yes, I know. But I'm just going to try to educate to the best of my abilities and not be dragged down or allow others to be dragged down into lazy or irresponsible thinking. It's audacious for me to believe I'm an educator, but somebody has to do it and you need a well thought-out reasoned plan.

TG: You have a purpose and a plan.

CD: Yes.

TG: But at the same time, you have to pay the rent. And the dichotomy of those two things becomes harder and harder.

CD: You don't have to tell me that. My wife wishes I were a Doctor of Neurology rather than a Doctor of Philosophy.

TG: Basically, any time I've done anything just for the money, I've regretted it.

CD: Well, I'm not there yet. So I guess I'm unsullied.

TG: Yes, well, good luck to you.

CD: Thanks, and the same to you.

Christopher DiCarlo is a Philosopher of Science and Ethics whose interests in cognitive evolution have taken him into the natural and social sciences. He is an outspoken activist for freethought, humanism and secularism, a fellow of the Society of Ontario Freethinkers, a board advisor to Freethought TV, and an advisory fellow for Center for Inquiry Canada. Chris is currently working on his latest book tentatively entitled Flying Without a Pilot: A Determined Look at the Future of Ethics, Law, and the Value of Human Behavior.