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Are Religion and Satire Mutual Taboos?

A Comment on the Life of Brian

The week before Christmas, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre withdrew a play, Gurpreet Kaur BHATTI's Behzti (Dishonour), as some protesters from the Sikh community, offended by one of its scenes representing a rape in a Gundwara (a Sikh temple), violently attacked the theatre.

A few months prior in the Netherlands, film-maker Theo VAN GOGH was killed by a young man Muslim for the director's offended by his continuous media attacks on Islam. Since 9/11, it seems that religions have become a dangerous taboo, as the mass media show an escalation of violence due to religious intolerance and hatred.

RELIGIOUS SATIRE AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Nevertheless, even if media show VAN GOGH's murder and the *Behzti* case as something new, or as a sign of the times, religiously justified violence is part of European history, both distant and recent.

For example, there are many similarities between the circumstances of the withdrawal of *Behzti* and the 1988 bomb attack in a Paris cinema showing Martin SCORSESE's *Last Temptation of Christ*.

In both cases, in fact, the authors and the attackers share belonged to the same religious affiliation (Sikh for *Behzti* and Roman Catholic for *Last Temptation of Christ*), and the attackers did not have a real knowledge of the play or film but rather believed the rumours about it.

Anyway, since the public opinion senses an escalation in religious violence, politicians are searching for ways to overcome this delicate matter. The British government, for example, proposed a bill to limit freedom of expression if it might cause religious hatred.

There are two categories of people who oppose this bill, who are usually reciprocal enemies: religious fundamentalists, as they who see it as a limit to their "evangelistic" style of preaching; and comedians. Comedians, who instead, say it is a liberal principle to be able to say anything and that there is no such thing as the right to feel offended. Let us then analyse the implications of religious satire in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry JONES, 1979), as many people consider it the most offensive movie for religious people ever made.

Life of Brian is a spoof of the Jesus movie sub-genre: it is the story of a Jewish man, Brian COHEN, born the same day as Jesus in a neighbouring stable. Most of the scenes and dialogues of this movie satirise Christian tradition and "Jesus film" patterns.

Curiously, most cinema and theology scholars debating Jesus movies consider *Life of Brian* one of them, even if we see Christ only once, when He delivers the Sermon on the Mount.

IS SATIRE ABOUT LAUGHING?

Before going further, let us focus on what satire is. Most people mistakenly consider satire as an entertaining performance that makes fun of something else, often in a silly way. So, some subjects should not be fodder for satire: for example, religion, and in some countries, politicians.

On the contrary, to write or perform a satire is one of the most difficult and serious actions an intellectual may do. A true satire consists of the re-presentation of reality in a way people may understand it better.

The reaction of laughter provoked by this representation is the psychological defence of the viewer's mind against the hardness of reality. One example may help: *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley KUBRICK, 1964) satirically presented the possibility of an atomic war.

Those were hard years: the Cuban Missile Crisis had been just resolved by establishing a direct telephone line (the red phone) between the White House and the Kremlin. In this famous movie, a mad U.S. Army officer organises the launch of atomic missiles at the USSR.

The US president calls the Kremlin through the red phone in order to explain the accident. The phone call is hilarious: "Hello Dimitri, it is me ... something happened? No, nothing worrying ..." and so on.

The viewer laughs right from the beginning, but is left with a bitter smile at the end as World War III destroys the Earth. *Dr. Strangelove* does not tell a funny story, but rather makes a satire of the relief after the missile crisis.

It is like saying, "There are thousands of atomic war heads around — is that a stupid red phone a *serious* solution?" A good satire does not present people and stories in a paradoxical and funny way, but instead unveils an already-existing paradox.

THREE EXAMPLES OF RELIGIOUS SATIRE FROM LIFE OF BRIAN

A. The Three Wise Men Go in the Wrong Stable

The first scene of the movie shows the three wise men mistakenly bringing gifts to Brian. *Brian's mother*: Who are you? *The wise men*: We are three wise men. *Brian's mother*: Is this some kind of joke? *The wise men*: We are astrologers ... we were led by a star! *Brian's mother*: Or led by a bottle, more likely.

Brian's mother is very sceptical about the three men, especially of their wisdom. It is quite understandable that this scene may seem blasphemous to some people, as it seems to mock the Gospels.

But, if we wear the glasses of satire, we see that it unveils a dualistic attitude of many western Christians, who do not reflect deeply on the meaning of the visit of the Magi to Jesus. The Gospels tell us that they were led by a star — does that mean Christians believe in astrology?

Was the birth of Jesus something magical? Or is the message of this story another one? Brian's mother's attitude is very common nowadays in Western Europe towards people of other beliefs, traditions or behaviour.



Do we really reflect on the implications of Mary and Joseph not sending the wise men away because they did not comply with Jewish traditions? The clever satire of this initial scene makes us reflect better on the story of the Magi and its implications on inter-religious dialogue today.

B. Women Dress as Men to Stone a Blasphemous Man

Brian and his mother leave the crowd that listens to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as they prefer going to a stoning (a satire on the rejection of a non-violent message). The man who is to die is guilty of saying that his supper "was good enough for Jehovah."

Apparently, most of the people ready to stone the man are actually women who are disguised by fake beards. In the end, they stone the priest when he accidentally says "Jehovah"; all the women then clap their hands.

This scene may seem anti-Semitic, as it mocks Jewish regulations that condemn a man to be stoned to death, disproportionately to the offence. But, if we wear the glasses of satire, we clearly see that it is not anti-Semitic.

Instead, it is one of the best examples of Jewish-style humour. In fact, as Jews have been persecuted and risked extermination for two thousand years, they developed the only weapon they could use against more powerful enemies: humour.

For example, the story told in *La vita è bella* (*Life is beautiful*, Roberto BENIGNI, 1997) recalls true stories of survival in concentration camps. As laughter and intellect distinguish human beings from animals, it is clearly and unmistakably stated who is human between the victim and the slaughterer.

Mass media often tell us stories of women in Muslim contexts who are condemned to be stoned for reasons we cannot understand (but did not Christians burn "witches" for centuries?) This scene from *Life of Brian* presents a paradoxical situation where public stoning is a show for women.

The ridiculousness of this scene tells us one clear thing: violent actions like a public stoning, especially if religiously justified, are silly and banal. This does not diminish the atrocity of such actions, as Jewish philosopher Hanna ARENDT taught us by describing the Shoah as a result of the "banality of evil."

C. Brian Is Mistakenly Considered the Messiah by a Group of People

This is perhaps the most controversial scene for Christian viewers. Brian disguises himself as a preacher to escape from Roman soldiers, but soon a crowd that believes he is the messiah Messiah chases him.

Many religious patterns can be apprehended in this



scene: the hunger for a miracle, the collection of relics and the suppression of a heretic. This may also seem a mocking scene as where the people follow Brian as they might well follow Christ, Mohammed, Buddha or others.

So, the claim for truth and exclusiveness seems to be challenged by this scene, but let us wear the glasses of satire once more and

we will see that if faith is lived only like Brian's followers do, other people may think that religions are pretty much the same, that there is not much sense in choosing one religion instead of another one.

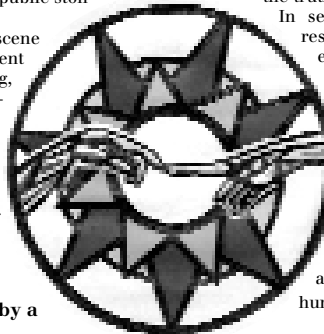
This satire sounds prophetic to me more rather than offensive: it reminds me of the ancient prophets of Israel who were telling the people that God preferred their pure hearts to sacrifices and rites. Naturally, it does not mean that rites are not important; it means that faith cannot be limited to them.

DOES GOD NEED TO BE DEFENDED?

In his youth, Monty Python member Terry GILLIAM was very involved in his local Presbyterian church in the United States. Then something happened: his fellow Christians did not like his vocation for humour and satire. As a result he left the church, as thinking, "What kind of church is this that my feeble little jokes are going to threaten its belief?" This brings us to a final consideration: does God need to be defended from religious satire? Many people who have claimed to defend God and God's truth have been doing it in violent ways. The violent attitude not only brings destruction but is theologically disputable: as followers of a religious faith (in my case, of the God of Abraham), we should instead seek and serve the truth.

In seeking, we encounter others; in serving, we respect them as God created them, just like us. The encounter with others is not always pleasant and comfortable: the person may even be a comedian who finds our religion ridiculous.

It is not through suppressing the other's freedom of expression that we demonstrate our seriousness. And could it be that God is laughs laughing at us, at our human divisions, at the separation between Christian denominations, at the hatred between religions, at human worries of about God under threatened by a few jokes? Could it be that God is laughing at us, in order not to cry as because His we humans God's creatures do not love one another?



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