

Should we grant moral veto to the hypersensitive?

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THE 2009 issue of Sax Appeal is but the latest of many instances of humour that have elicited public indignation. According to reports, at least two Christian groups have lodged formal complaints. UCT's response has been to offer multiple unreserved apologies, while Pick n Pay distanced itself from the offending content and pulled remaining copies of Sax Appeal from its shelves.

Is the outrage warranted? Are apologies due? To answer these questions, we need to establish the facts and evaluate the objections. The contribution that caused the most offence was a two-page spread containing 10 black-and-white photographs. Captions and speech bubbles containing religious slogans and proposed retorts were added.

Although the contribution was headed "Top Ten Atheist Retorts to Fundamentalist Christians", only two referred specifically to Christianity.

These were also the two that aroused most indignation. In one, somebody says: "Jesus died to save us from our sins," to which somebody else replies: "I bet he feels like a tool now." The second is a photograph of a lone suitcase on a baggage-retrieval conveyor belt. One of the people standing adjacent to it says: "Praise the Lord, it's a miracle ..." to which somebody else responds: "No you stupid C.U.N.T. (Christian who Understands No Theorems), statistically they happen every 35 days."

There was also a complaint about Zapiro's full-page cartoon, in which he recycles a famous satire of the argument that homosexuality is immoral because there is a biblical injunction against it. Here a questioner asks a religious authority for guidance on how best to follow other biblical laws, including ones that impose the death penalty for violating the Sabbath, and others that permit slavery.

One objection that has been levelled against the above contributions is that they discriminate against Christians because no other religion is ridiculed. Although it is true that Christians were singled out for special mention, the objection is, nonetheless, inadequate.

First, the Zapiro contribution, although ostensibly directed at Kenneth Meshoe, a Christian leader, applies equally to anybody invoking a biblical verse to argue that homosexuality is immoral. In earlier incarnations the satire was addressed to Laura Schlessinger, who then self-identified as an orthodox Jew. Thus, it is not true that Christianity alone has been subject to ridicule.

Second, to the extent that some of the other humour is specifically about Christianity there may be an entirely innocuous explanation. If one wanted to lampoon religious beliefs, the obvious target would be those that are most widespread in society, quite simply because they would be best known and the satire would have greater reach. Just as



HARD COPY: UCT students sell Sax Appeal in Long Street. The writer questions whether the offence taken by some Christians over material in this year's edition requires an apology.

there are certain advantages that come with being part of the majority - one's main holidays can become public holidays, for example - so there are also certain disadvantages. We do not hear those who have objected to Sax Appeal objecting to the discrimination in favour of South Africa's majority religion.

Third, there are two ways of rectifying the purported discrimination. The one is to desist from ridiculing any religion, but the other is to extend the range of religions that are satirised.

However, if Sax Appeal promised to mock other religions in future issues, we can be assured that the offended Christians would not be appeased. This suggests that the discrimination objection is but a peripheral objection.

The central objection is that the humour is immoral because it is blasphemous. However, this objection, too, is inadequate.

First, while it is clear that many religions prohibit blasphemy, there is disagreement about what constitutes blasphemy. Even where there is agreement, showing that there is a biblical prohibition against it does not suffice to show that it is immoral.

Many biblical prohibitions are non-moral in nature. They concern ritual matters, rather than how we should treat one another. The biblical prohibition on consuming leavened food at Passover is presumably of this kind.

In response, it might be argued that it is always immoral to disobey God, even if the commandments in question are non-moral ones. Let's assume, for a moment, that this is true. It would follow that not only blasphemous humour, but also every other religiously prohibited action is immoral. Thus, Muslims could claim that consuming alcohol is immoral. Non-Muslims would then

need to desist and to apologise to Muslims if they imbibed.

The obvious retort to this is that Christians do not believe that God has prohibited alcohol. But that very retort is open to atheists, who do not believe that God exists and thus do not believe that he could have prohibited blasphemy. This leaves those offering the blasphemy objection in a bind. However much they may believe they are right, they have to realise that others hold different beliefs with equal conviction.

In the absence of a publicly accessible manner of rationally settling these disputes, others have no greater reason to curtail their words to accord with Christian beliefs than Christians have reason to restrict their own words to accord with the convictions of others.

The point, then, is not that Christians are wrong, but rather that they have no publicly accessible way of proving they are right. If some

Christians, nonetheless, think that Christian beliefs should determine the social standards of behaviour for non-Christians, then they are advocating discrimination in favour of Christianity. We have already seen, however, that those leading the complaints against Sax Appeal are opposed to religious discrimination.

The foregoing also shows why we may not now fall back on a common argument against much humour - namely, that it offends. It simply cannot be the case that people's sensitivities are morally decisive, for this would grant a moral veto to the most hypersensitive.

Given the great range of sensitivities, there is almost no view that does not offend somebody. And those with opposing views would effectively have a moral veto over one another. Atheism offends some religious people, but religion offends some atheists. The offence objection is, thus, too expansive. Nor can reli-

because they are part of the open exchange of ideas that is necessary for the pursuit of truth. The offence is often greater when the same points are made light-heartedly. However, it does not follow that the offence thereby becomes gratuitous.

The humorous medium for conveying the ideas has certain advantages. While it often lacks the sophistication of an extended philosophical argument, it can reach a wider audience and do so in a pithy way.

Another objection is that the humour disrespects Christians. But is this really so? It is quite clear that the beliefs of some Christians are being lampooned. I say "some" because, contrary to what some critics of Sax Appeal have alleged, it is not the case that all Christians were referred to as C.U.N.T.s. Instead, it seems that this crass and ridiculous acronym refers to those Christians who do not understand "theorems" - read "probability". It is only if one thinks that there are no Christians with a more sophisticated view of miracles that one would infer that the acronym refers to all Christians.

Although the beliefs of (some) Christians are being ridiculed, there is an important distinction between thinking that somebody's beliefs are ludicrous and disrespecting that person. Some Christians draw a parallel distinction when they say that they "hate the sin but love the sinner".

But is it not insulting - disrespectful of a person, rather than his beliefs - to call him a "stupid C.U.N.T."? Well, it certainly would be if one said it, in all earnestness, to a real person. But it does not follow that it is insulting in a humorous context. Sometimes the humour lies in the incongruity of somebody saying something a decorous person would never say in real life.

The failure to see this is a failure to understand that there are differences between humour and reality. This is not to deny that humour can sometimes do real harm and should then be taken seriously. It is to say only that those wishing to take jocular insults seriously need to demonstrate, rather than merely assert, that the rest of us should interpret the humour that way. This will be more difficult than demonstrating the insult in serious statements that, for example, homosexuals are an "abomination".

In the light of the above, it is far from clear that the offending Sax Appeal humour is immoral. While it is regrettable that some people have been offended, to pander to these sensitivities only encourages more indignation and gradually shuts down the range of matters about which we can joke. This is deeply troubling, not least because we need to be able to laugh at ourselves more, rather than less. This applies not only to religious people of various kinds, but also to non-religious ones, many of whom mistakenly think that religious people have a monopoly on stupidity.

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