

# Editorial Matters

The start of 2005 has seen Christian protests hitting the headlines in two seemingly paradoxical ways. On the hand, the decision by the BBC to broadcast *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, brought the largest ever number of protests about a single programme, with Christians at the forefront, complaining about its swearing and blasphemy. Two Christian groups are even threatening prosecution for blasphemy. On the other hand, Christians have joined with a range of organisations and individuals – including the National Secular Society and the comedian Rowan Atkinson – to protest against clauses in the government’s Serious and Organised Crime Bill that seek to outlaw incitement to religious hatred. With evangelicals prominent in both of these campaigns it can look horribly like double standards – protest and threaten legal action if anything offends us but defend our right to offend others. How then should we think about religious offence in our society – both being offended as Christians and speaking as Christians in a way that offends others, particularly those of other faiths?

If we begin with scripture we could cite biblical support for seeking to punish those who ridicule and mock God and his works. Some of those who protested against the BBC doubtless would have liked to emulate Elisha in 2 Kings 2 who, when jeered at by youths who called him a ‘baldhead’, called down a curse on them and as a result forty-two Israelite yobs were mauled by two bears ! The problem is that we know that this is not the way of Christ. When a Samaritan village does not welcome him and his messengers, James and John ask Jesus whether he wants them to call fire down from heaven to destroy them, ‘but Jesus turned and rebuked them’ (Luke 9:55). Christians today generally lack the faith to call down fire or to look for bears to come out of the woods but we are sometimes likely to mirror the sons of thunder and offer to Jesus that we call down the force of the law to punish those who ridicule our faith and our Lord. If that doesn’t work, we might bemoan the fact that we are now in a post-Christian society and people can get away unpunished with broadcasting shows like *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

But should we expect the state, or even public bodies like the BBC, to prevent such free expression? At the heart of living in a liberal democracy is the claim that public authority does not use its coercive and law-making powers to defend, protect and uphold a particular religious tradition and set of beliefs in a privileged manner. More seriously, the fact that Jesus rebuked James and John should warn us when our zeal is similarly directed against those who ridicule, mock and reject Christ in a punitive manner.

In seeking to defend our God and Saviour we can easily forget that at the heart of our gospel is the scandal and offence of the cross – the cruel humiliation and mocking of God not on the stage or screen or in print but in human flesh and blood. Perhaps as, through Lent, we move towards Good Friday, we need to think more about how – in our post-Christian and in some ways increasingly anti-Christian society - we as followers of the crucified Christ should respond to public

insult and ridicule of him and of our faith. Peter reminds us 'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly' (1 Pet. 2:23). One of the most telling critiques of the BBC was that they would most likely not have broadcast a programme so antagonistic to the prophet Mohammed. Sadly, some Christians seemed to draw from this the conclusion that they needed to seek to emulate more extreme Muslim forms of protest (or the action taken by Sikhs in response to the play *Behtzi* in Birmingham) and not appear comparatively 'wimpish' and 'weak' in their response. This seemed to abandon totally any attempt at distinctive public witness shaped by Christ and to risk reverting to the worst form of pressure group and power politics. Why not instead clearly articulate any pain and offence caused and see in such an experience a sharing in Christ's sufferings at the hands of a fallen, rebellious world? A world which, despite its claims to be tolerant and caring and even Christian, remains at heart opposed to God: 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:18, 20).

But if we perhaps need to think through a Christ-like response when we are offended by free expression of anti-Christian views, what about our freedom to offend others? Are Christians right to be concerned at proposals to criminalise incitement to religious hatred? The proposed legislation first surfaced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 though it was then dropped. It has since been considered by various bodies, including a House of Lords Select Committee, and is now proceeding through Parliament. Its stated rationale is to respond to a loophole in the law. Because (unlike, for example, Jews), Muslims are classed as a religion but not a race, they (and other religious minorities) within Britain are increasingly threatened by hate-speech that cannot be prosecuted under existing race relations legislation. The legislation's intention, in the words of the Home Office briefing, is 'to prevent hatred being stirred up against people targeted because of their religious beliefs or lack of religious beliefs' by making it an offence 'to knowingly use words, behaviour or material that is threatening, abusive or insulting with the intention or likely effect that hatred will be stirred up against a group of people targeted because of their religious beliefs or lack of religious beliefs'.

On the surface there perhaps appears to be little of concern here. As the Church of England said in a June 2002 submission to the House of Lords committee supporting such legislation, 'we cannot imagine that any Christian would wish to assert their freedom to engage in activities intended to stir up religious hatred...even if they wished to express their religious views themselves in the strongest terms'. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales also supported the principle of such legislation even when asked in December 2002 whether 'in the light of the views expressed by some other Christian groups' they would wish to alter their evidence. Why then might we be right to be concerned?

Firstly, unlike matters of race, matters of religion relate to issues of truth. In the quest for truth there is inevitably conflict and confrontation and the need to combat what is seen as error. Any attempt to transfer legislative principles from race to religion therefore needs much greater care and thought. Least we be in any doubt at the strength of religious conflict, scripture provides plenty of examples

of how polemical and even offensive this can be. Think of Isaiah mocking idols (Isa. 44:6ff) or Paul calling down curses and eternal condemnation on anyone preaching another gospel (Gal. 1:6-9) or expressing a desire his opponents would castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12). How safe would he be from prosecution in writing of the Jews that they 'killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets...They displease God and are hostile to all men...They always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last' (1 Thess 2:15-16)? And lest we think all this in scripture must – like resorting to coercive or violent responses when we are offended - somehow be judged and found wanting by appeal to Jesus, his own example according to the gospels was not as 'meek and mild' as we sometimes think: 'You snakes! You brood of vipers!...Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth' (Matt. 23:33ff) or 'You belong to your father, the devil' (John 8:44).

Secondly, the modern secular, liberal state generally refuses to act as arbiter in matters of truth, especially when it concerns competing religious convictions. That is why, despite the fact we have an established church with the monarch as supreme governor, most people now find the blasphemy law so anachronistic in its attempt to defend one religion and its doctrines from offensive attack. The problem is that as the state will not judge between religious disputants on the basis of truth and error it needs to do so on some other criterion. Hence the category 'incitement to religious hatred' is introduced clearly paralleling that of incitement to racial hatred. Because of the difference between race and religion, assurances have been given that 'criticising the beliefs, teachings or practices of a religion or its followers; for example by claiming they are false or harmful' or 'proselytising one's own religion' or even 'expressing antipathy or dislike of particular religions or their adherents' would not, of themselves, be caught by the offence. However, it is also clear that 'if a person were to use threatening, abusive or insulting words, actions or material with the intent or likely effect that hatred would be stirred up' whilst being involved in any of these activities then 'they could rightly fall into the scope of the offence'. In short, the crime is ultimately defined not in terms of the object of the attack or particular defined actions but rather whether an action might have the 'likely effect' of inciting religious hatred. It does not even need to be shown that the intention was to incite religious hatred. One is left wondering whether Amos, for example, might have had to think twice before declaring that God himself says, 'I hate I despise your religious feasts' (Amos 5:21) lest some of God's people as a result be incited to what might be classed 'religious hatred'.

Thirdly, in our society there is the real risk that the legislation may be misused because of lack of clarity about 'religious hatred'. We have sought to evacuate strong religious convictions from the public realm and to preach a secular gospel of tolerance and respect. There is therefore the danger that many will fail to understand properly the conflictual character of much inter-religious (and indeed intra-religious) interaction. Any strong, polemical challenge during religious disagreement or interpretation and critique in religious imagery (e.g. 'they are controlled by evil forces') may be misunderstood to be incitement to religious hatred. Furthermore, some may use the threat of prosecution to attempt to silence religious opponents. There are, clearly, real cases of harassment and persecution of Muslims because of their faith

and how to protect people from these needs to be addressed. However, there are also concerns that strong public critique of aspects of Islam – perhaps religious or perhaps to do with the actions of Islamic regimes or to do with the impact of the growth of Islam on British society - may in future not only lead to protests but to threats of legal action. The response of some Christians to the BBC shows that Christians, too, may seek to use this law in future in ways that might lead to forms of self-censorship and severely limit freedom of expression. We must not forget the ease with which religious outrage at others' actions can be stirred up in a disproportionate manner. We may cite some of the response to Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses'. Closer to home, Christian failings become evident if one compares the current attitude of most evangelicals to Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' with the response of many at the time who campaigned vociferously against its release on the grounds that it was blasphemous. Faced with both the high level of secular ignorance of religion and the risk of appeal to the law by adherents of one faith against their religious opponents, the lack of precision in the current proposed legislation must be grounds for real concern.

### **Anvil web site**

We are currently developing our website and hope readers of the journal will visit it at [www.anviljournal.co.uk](http://www.anviljournal.co.uk). You are also encouraged to make use of the new forums which can be found at [www.anviljournal.co.uk/forum](http://www.anviljournal.co.uk/forum). We hope that this will allow interaction and discussion of the contents of the journal and other matters of interest to the readership and so help to build an *Anvil* community online. There will be some moderation (to avoid any incitement to religious hatred!). Please do feel free to suggest further ideas for development of the site by using the contact emails to write to me as editor or others on the Management Team.

### **In this issue**

Our opening article in this issue is the thought-provoking 2004 Michael Vasey Memorial Lecture by Christopher Cocksworth. Here, while retaining cross-centred gospel worship, we are given a vision of how this evangelical emphasis might be held together with catholic and charismatic emphases to shape 'catholic evangelical worship in the Spirit'. There follows the fourth and final of our series on loving our enemies which has been kindly commissioned and co-ordinated by Craig Smith. In this issue the focus turns to preaching love of enemies with powerful and challenging lessons from the persecuted church. At the heart of our worship and preaching must be the cross of Christ and in the third article, Justyn Terry expounds Christ's saving work through the model of God's judgement, arguing for this as the primary metaphor in our understanding of atonement. Finally, Trystan Owain Hughes examines different Christian attitudes to popular music, outlining three different approaches which also shape wider attitudes to mission. He commends a conversational attitude, illustrating its value in both worship and mission.

**Andrew Goddard**