

JE SUIS JÉSUS: SATIRE AND BLASPHEMY IN THE TEACHINGS OF A GALILEAN SAGE

By John Bennison

*You have heard his **blasphemy!** What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as deserving death.” Mark 14.64*



“Christ before the High Priest,”
Gerrit van Honthorst (1617)

PREFATORY CONTEXT

Radical religious extremists with a distorted view of Islam commit horrific acts of terror, executing the staff of a small satirical French publication. The satirists had dared to depict the Prophet Mohammed in cartoon caricature; all the while lampooning those misbegotten adherents who in turn regard such irreverent acts as blasphemous.

The Western world reacts with outrage and defiance to such an affront. World leaders join a million person protest and unity march through the streets of Paris, chanting “*Je Suis Charlie*,” in defense of freedom of speech, and on behalf of the publication’s name. When the modest magazine runs its next issue a week later, the printing presses can’t keep pace with consumer demand.

Anti-blasphemy laws are common in countries where there are a majority of Muslims. At the same time, it is notable that nearly ninety countries in the world, including France, have laws against the defamation of religion and public expression of hate against religious groups. In the U.S. there are laws that prohibit “hate speech,” where it pertains to words that “offend, threaten, or insult groups, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits.”

While a clear distinction might be drawn between the use of words and the vehement reactions they may incite, more profound underlying questions remain. Once the dust settles and more thoughtful discussion ensues, what constitutes the differences between hate speech and freedom of expression? After all, what one considers merely irreverent, others might regard as not only offensive, but blasphemous and in violation of established law, whether religious or secular. When should freedom of expression be curtailed if, and when, it leads to deliberate or even unnecessary provocation? What meaningful purpose might *blasphemous satire* serve, justifying its use as being of greater importance than the negative consequences that may result?

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In the Qu’ran there is the passage, “Those who annoy Allah and His Messenger - Allah has cursed them in this World and in the Hereafter, and has prepared for them a humiliating Punishment. ... They shall have a curse on them: whenever they are found, they shall be seized and slain (without mercy).” (Qu’ran 33:57-61)

In the Jewish faith, the religiously observant is forbidden from even pronouncing the name of their god, let alone seeing the face of the divine; hence the *tetragrammaton* YHWH (translated into four Latin letters that are commonly pronounced ‘Yahweh’ in English). So holy is even the utterance of the name, that *Adonai* (“Lord”) is often substituted. To do otherwise could be considered blasphemous. In the Torah, it states that he that blasphemes the name of the LORD “shall surely be put to death.” (Lev. 24:16)

In the canonical gospels of the Christian scriptures, Jesus' antagonists are continually portrayed condemning the Galilean peasant preacher's words and actions as blasphemy. The gospel author's construct their stories to include the gradual, but cumulative, effect of tension and controversy surrounding Jesus. Moreover, he continuously breaks the rules, healing on the Sabbath, usurping God's exclusive right to pronounce absolution, and making use of political satire in his depictions of the reign of god; until the mounting evidence is sufficient to condemn the offender as deserving death.

Whether it is the religious institution that passes judgment -- or some zealous religious extremists with their own aberrant interpretation and expedient claims to their religious tradition who hijack their own religious tradition and assume the authority to be judge, jury and hangman -- both the question and consequences may be the same. What useful and greater purpose might "blasphemous" satire serve, to make it worth the risk?

PURPOSEFUL SATIRE

At Harvard University each autumn, the *Ig Nobel Prizes* are awarded for the most esoteric, trivial or simply off-the-wall kinds of scientific research imaginable. As a parody of the prestigious Nobel Prizes, winners of the *ignoble* (hence the name of the awards) achievements last year included researchers who studied how reindeer react to seeing humans who are disguised as polar bears; while others investigated whether it is mentally hazardous for a human being to own a cat; and still others seeking to understand what happens in the brains of people who see the face of Jesus in a piece of toast. Seriously.

The award ceremony is organized by a science publication that goes by the name of *Annals of Improbable Research*. It considers itself a humorous, even satirical, magazine. It's all meant to be good-hearted fun by those who take scientific inquiry very seriously.

Since the Enlightenment and Age of Reason it has long been suggested that scientific theory and empirical evidence is the religion of choice for those moderns, or now post-moderns, who have left primitive cosmologies and mythic theologies behind.

As one example, the consequences of a significant rise in CO₂ into the earth's atmosphere by human causes has been first theorized, then verifiably documented, since the late 1800's. To the faithful adherents of science, heretical thinking is merely a matter of ignoring the obvious facts of global warming.

Why then do naysayers so vehemently oppose such claims by a different set of their own convictions and conclusions? Why do some so vigorously try to match, say, evolutionary theory with something called intelligent design? Why do creationists still hold out more vehemently still, regarding such scientific endeavors as tantamount to blasphemy?

Better, how can those who treat science with such reverence simultaneously make fun of certain scientific endeavors without dismissing the entire field of human endeavor as something that is no laughing matter?

This brief commentary does not presume to answer the questions raised, but offers an observation about the purposeful use of satire, regardless of its possible consequences. It is unlikely that any group of mad scientists will conduct a murderous attack on the offices of the *Annals of Improbable Research*.

At the same time, *religiously* motivated types – call them fundamentalists, or radical extremists, fanatical adherents of a warped interpretation of their religious convictions for their own purposes, etc. – consider satire, lampooning, or mocking their deepest held beliefs to be intolerable blasphemy. And, since every (Western) religious tradition has this component to it, where does one draw the line, or cross it?

JESUS AS SATIRIST AND BLASPHEMER

The stated purpose of the *Ig Nobel* prizes has always been to "honor achievements that first make people laugh, and then make them think." While the awards are sometimes thinly veiled criticism and gentle satire, they are also used to point out that even the most seemingly absurd can result in new and useful ways of seeing things.

So too, there may be no better way to describe Jesus' use of satire in what are considered some of the most authentic sayings attributed to him in what we know as the parables. The idea of a *good Samaritan*, or a foolhardy shepherd who'd forsake an entire flock for one, dumb sheep, or a woman who'd turn her house upside down in search of a single coin are all examples of the kinds of absurd little stories with a bite sufficient to make one first laugh, then think more deeply. Another example is the parable of the mustard seed.

All three synoptic gospels include their own variation on a somewhat briefer and probably earlier version found in the "sayings" of the Thomas gospel:

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like." He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky." (Thomas 20:2)

Now, in the Jewish literary tradition that would have been well known to any faithful Jew in 1st century, CE, Palestine, the image of the "cedars of Lebanon," would have been a familiar symbol of lofty power and might. "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars," says the psalmist. "Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon" (Psalm 29:5)

But the same Mount Lebanon that was once forested with ancient cedars, was subsequently plundered for the prized timber they provided by one invading nation after another. "Open thy doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour thy cedars. Howl, fir tree; for the cedar is fallen; because the mighty are spoiled: howl, O ye oaks of Bashan; for the forest of the vintage is come down." (Zechariah 11:1, 2)

Evidently, "Save the Trees" is not a chant exclusive to modern-day environmental activists. So too, from Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord God: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out; I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bring forth bough and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest." (Ezekiel 17:22-23)

So when Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed -- how from the tiniest planted seed such tremendous and specular growth is possible -- any motivational speaker or campaigning politician could adapt such a hopeful message out of context to suit their own agenda.

Jesus' original listeners, however, would have thought it was a joke; as in, "Did you hear the one about the mustard seed that thought it was a mighty tree? ..." In fact, the mustard bush was a fast-growing weed that -- once it took hold -- could become so large it was almost impossible to eradicate. With echoes of the Ezekiel text from the Jewish prophetic tradition about the mighty cedar tree providing shelter and shade, Jesus' image of the reign of God being compared to a mustard bush that could be equated with -- or replace -- the mighty cedar might well have made his listeners both laugh and cringe.

Perhaps when the evangelists chose to include and adapt this parable for their own purposes in what later became the New Testament canon, they wanted to encourage their fledgling congregations to put their shoulder to the gospel plow, and assure them that everything was possible with God. Just plant the seeds and watch the good news spread.

But those who first heard the parable may have first gasped, then chuckled uncomfortably and nervously shifted in their seats when they were invited to imagine the divine as an irascible weed. With a little biting humor, Jesus was poking fun of their traditional image of the reign of God; while prompting them to think differently about it.

As already mentioned, the parable of the mustard seed is only one of a number of such absurd little stories. Folksy, set in ordinary, every day secular settings, typically irreligious, they also often portrayed the religious authorities in a less than favorable light. Surely Jesus knew he was deliberately poking them in the eye with a sharp stick. And surely he paid the price when his satirical critiques hit too close to home for the institutional hierarchy.

When the gospel story depicts him “setting his face to Jerusalem,” along with everything that would await him there (Matt. 19:1; Mark 9:30-32; Luke9:51-56), Jesus may well have known his satirical jabs would not only be considered irreverent, but judged to be blasphemous.

To his credit, however, it seems clear his use of satire was always used to serve a deeper purpose than a quick laugh. Namely, to think more deeply about the nature about what he called the reign of God. With the stakes so high, he did not seem interested in simply exercising his right to mock, ridicule or castigate those whom he regarded as having lost their way.

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But if there had been such a thing as an *Ignoble Prize for Religion* in Jesus' day, he might well have been its first infamous recipient.

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