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Religious Offence: Artistic Expression, Unforeseen Reactions, and Identity Politics

By Paul Hedges and Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

Recent offence taken at the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics, which some interpreted as mocking the Last Supper, raises questions of how and where offence is taken by religious communities.

COMMENTARY

While the hullabaloo around the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games is the most recent example, people taking offence at real or perceived insults to or slurs against their religion seems increasingly common. This apparent trend of rising religious offences raises questions for religious leaders, media, politicians and legislators, grassroots activists, police and law enforcement officers, the wider civil society, and ordinary rank-and-file members of religions.

Is Religious Offence New?

It is difficult to assess whether people more readily take offence now than in the past. While religious offence is nothing new, now, with the ubiquity of social media, one person's taking offence can spread and lead to others feeling that they, too, must be offended with images, claims, and counterclaims going viral in unprecedented ways. What might once have been limited to an individual getting hot under the collar while reading their morning newspaper and perhaps venting to a few colleagues over lunch can now become mass movements that fuel others to further heights of extreme reactions.

Seeing your religious community as under siege increasingly seems a common response to taking offence. Certainly, in building an online following, strong reactions and clickbait content will get you further than nuanced and fact-based responses

reflecting on many angles. Religious offence, as we see it today, seems to be taking on a new life in our internet-saturated age.

The Paris Bacchanalia as Case Study

The reaction of some Christians, and indeed some non-Christians, to one segment of the Olympics opening ceremony seems an excellent case study. In the segment, the French singer and actor Philippe Katerine sits on a long table, nearly naked, covered in blue body paint and adorned with flowers and grapes, and sings his song “Nu” (Naked) while behind the table dance a long line of people (17 at first before more join).

While a plurality of interpretations of any performance or artwork is normal, even desirable, the particular interpretation of this scene as a mockery of Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous painting of the *Last Supper* (1494-1498) is contrary to the stated [intentions](#) of the artistic designer, Thomas Jolly. A [tweet](#) published by the official Olympics account, before any online discussion took place, indicated that the blue figure in the scene portrayed Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.

After the controversy erupted, Jolly sought to [clarify](#) that the scene depicted “a grand pagan festival connected to the gods of Olympus, Olympism” and that the *Last Supper* was not an inspiration whatsoever. Of course, dissimulation can never be ruled out, but the best one can do is to ask the creators and pay attention to what they say, especially as the explanation before the controversy is consistent with what was said later.

[Many interpretations](#) of the scene link it to a [painting](#), Jan Van Bijlert’s *The Feast of the Gods*, held in a French gallery. This painting depicts a bacchanalia, or feast of Bacchus (the Roman equivalent to Dionysus), with drinking and debauchery. This, moreover, fits into the broader framing of the Olympics [opening ceremony, which represented aspects of French culture](#), referencing both wine drinking and Paris’ reputation as a city of love (licit or otherwise).

“Gaslighting”?

Some have suggested that the scene does not closely match Van Bijlert’s painting, even claiming that descriptions of it as a bacchanalia are a type of [gaslighting](#). From a first glance at part of the image (just the figures behind the table), as was often circulated online, it may have seemed that the *Last Supper* was being parodied.

As such, we can understand strong reactions of shock and offence among some Christians. Certainly, the scene may have been subconsciously influenced by the *Last Supper*, or Da Vinci’s famous painting may have given a context that designers thought would make sense of this display.

Indeed it has been suggested in some, more considered, analysis that Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* [was an inspiration](#), though not directly copied. Whatever the inspiration, many “Last Supper” paintings [do not follow Da Vinci’s one-side-of-the-table model, while much Christian imagery is modelled on older Pagan art.](#)

Fundamentally, questions are raised as to the extent to which it is reasonable to project what is significant to you onto everybody else. This can be connected to the important issue of limits on free speech to protect the rights of others, and how any perceived religious offence factors into this balance. Certainly, in the interests of civil discourse, when passions are inflamed, those who have not been offended should refrain from mocking those who have been.

Reactions and Identity

Controversy about the Olympics opening ceremony also seemed to centre on the featuring of members of the LGBTQI+ community to promote inclusivity. In recent decades, attitudes towards LGBTQI+ rights have emerged as a [key identity issue for some Christians](#) globally, separating supposedly “real”, i.e. socially conservative Christians, from “progressive” Christians who support a socially liberal agenda. Both sides can point to scriptural texts and theological arguments to support their stance, and both have millions of followers in mainstream churches.

Indeed, it has been [observed](#) that other potentially blasphemous depictions of the *Last Supper* have not been met with significant outrage among conservative Christians. For example, John McNaughton’s *Last Supper of a Blessed Nation* (2022), which depicts 12 United States presidents with Jesus Christ, with Barack Obama as Judas, presents an image many Christians could find offensive, and its implications would seem blasphemous to many. This suggests that remodelling the *Last Supper* in contemporary contexts may not itself be the issue. Rather, the performative religious offence may be an attempt to resist the portrayal of an LGBTQI+ inclusive public space by one strand of Christianity. For some, this is missing the point of the Gospel message.

Religious Offence as a Category

The Olympics opening ceremony may not be a typical case of religious offence, given the disagreement over whether the *Last Supper* was even referenced. Nevertheless, YouTube videos, blogs, and other media continue to circulate, suggesting that Christians are under attack and that they were deliberately mocked.

We can, therefore, highlight some key features noted above. The taking of religious offence is often about mobilising a defensive position. Your religion is under attack, and if the claim is that you are an oppressed minority, so much the better (as some conservative Christians, [despite all evidence](#), increasingly assert in various Western countries).

Religious offence is often about pre-built identity lines, in this case, around LGBTQI+ claims. It, therefore, builds into a strong “us versus them” set of identity markers, being polarising and seemingly requiring strong borders with absolute distinctions between each side. Questions, research, and contrary evidence are unwelcome. Your claim of offence is paramount.

In some countries, it is sometimes a legal issue, such as with blasphemy laws, or increasingly weaponised beyond simply building an us-vs-them identitarian response. But we must also remember that what may seem offensive to some people in some

contexts may not be seen this way by others. Beyond the legal questions, social coexistence often requires seeing how others understand things and to dialogue in a respectful manner rather than mock or trivialise others' perceptions.

Responding to Religious Offence: Lessons and Directions

As noted, many stakeholders and communities are invested in debates about religious offence. In each case of alleged religious offence, it is important to ascertain whether any offence was actually intended, so as to resist overly quick reactions without measured consideration. Realising that multiple interpretations are natural is important.

Perhaps most important, though, is encouraging other "religious" responses rather than offence-taking. Jesus taught his followers to turn the other cheek and extending love for fallen humans would be one way to respond, even if the offence was intentional. For the supposed "offender" and those on the sidelines, this act of grace is also worthy of emulation when confronted with disagreement, rather than being derisive.

Fundamentally, it bears noting to all that even though offence givers and offence takers do not represent entire communities, modelling interreligious friendships and difficult conversations across barriers is important in both religious and non-religious communities.

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