

Christian right forces attack “blasphemous” British television comedy

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British right-wing Christian groups have mobilised against the BBC's recent screening of the musical comedy *Jerry Springer—the Opera*. Members of BBC staff have been threatened, and their home addresses published on evangelical websites. One organisation has said it will mount a private prosecution of the BBC for blasphemy.

The show, written by comic Stewart Lee and composer and comic Richard Thomas, was one of the surprise theatrical hits of recent years. Originally developed at the Battersea Arts Centre, it was taken on by the National Theatre. Its West End run will finish next month after 609 performances, before it tours nationally.

The first half of the show is a musical version of the talk show, culminating in the assassination of host Springer. Along the way there are such songs as *Pregnant by a Transsexual* and *Here Come the Hookers*, while the characters include a nappy-fetishist and a troupe of dancing Ku Klux Klan members.

The second half sees Springer meeting god, the devil, and Jesus. Jesus is described as “a bit gay,” and told to “put some fucking clothes on and grow up.” There is a swearing match between Jesus and the devil, and Eve discusses sexual acts. There is, throughout, much swearing, much as in the *Jerry Springer* show itself.

Indeed, most of the pre-broadcast hysteria that was stoked up in the press centred on the number of swearwords contained within the show. One organisation calling for the programme to be withdrawn, Mediawatch, claimed there were 8,000 swearwords in the show. Stewart Lee, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, said that he had counted them and come up with a total of 451. Accusing the group of orchestrating a campaign against the show, he said, “Perhaps Mediawatch multiplied the number of swear words by the number of people singing on stage.”

The show is a continuation of work that both Lee and Thomas have been pursuing for some years now. Thomas has long been probing the application of serious operatic treatments to comedy. Lee, a thoughtful and intelligent stand-up comic and writer, has been involved in several comedic treatments of characters from Christian mythology. His television show *Fist of Fun*, written and performed with Richard Herring, featured regular playground arguments between Jesus and petulant

disciples.

The BBC issued warnings about the content both before the broadcast began and again before Act II. They also ran an hour-long programme before the screening, setting the show in context. This followed earlier discussions with mainstream Christian groups like the Christian Media Council. The CMC did not oppose the broadcast, although it subsequently expressed reservations about the show.

However, even before broadcast, the BBC was deluged with complaints in a campaign orchestrated by the Christian right. They received 48,391 complaints before the broadcast, a far higher number than usual even after a controversial programme. (After Robert Kilroy-Silk's anti-Arab comments last year, for example, the BBC received roughly 7,000 complaints.)

Of these complaints, only 14 arrived by post, suggesting an organised email and telephone campaign. The complaints are still being analysed geographically, but anecdotal evidence from BBC switchboard operators points towards systematic multiple calls. One operator talked of receiving several consecutive calls from the same number but giving a different identity.

The anti-abortion organisation UK Lifeleague—which also participated in the protests—employs an IT worker whose task is to gather email addresses of people it wants to target. The head of the organisation, the Reverend James Dowson, said, “I think it's legal.” The BBC admits that although it uses spam-filtering technology to prevent multiple votes on interactive game shows, for example, it does not use it on its complaint line. There is a belief that many of the email complaints were software-generated.

After the broadcast the BBC received another 1,393 communications about the programme. Over 500 of these expressed support for the screening.

The protest campaign was orchestrated by the evangelical organisation Christian Voice. Run by Stephen Green, a former builder from south Wales, the organisation pursues an openly right-wing agenda. Christian Voice is anti-abortion, and opposed to rights for gay couples. Their web site promotes the notion of “curing” homosexuality.

Their main line of argument is the defence of the reactionary

blasphemy law. Prior to the broadcast, whilst freely admitting to BBC Director General Mark Thompson that he had not seen the play, Green called on Christian Voice supporters to video the programme to provide evidence for prosecution under the blasphemy law. He invoked the last successful prosecution under the law in 1977, when the owners of Gay News were convicted for publishing a poem about Jesus. Two years ago Christian Voice disrupted attempts by the National Secular Society to stage a public reading of the poem in London. The National Secular Society has called on the BBC to stand up to “religious bullies.”

Interestingly, Christian Voice do not support the extension of the blasphemy laws to other religions—their web site is vitriolic in its opposition to the marketing of other religious festivals like Diwali—but they do look approvingly to recent anti-democratic operations by other religious groups. Among evangelical groups the success of Sikh demonstrators in forcing the closure of the play *Behzti* last month has been widely welcomed as something to emulate.

In the last month Christian Voice have led street protests against a staging in St. Andrews of the play *Corpus Christi*, which also portrays Jesus as gay. They were quick to organise protests outside Television Centre, and recruited other organisations to join them. UK Lifeleague demonstrated in Belfast, while Operation Christian Vote, an evangelical political party, protested in Glasgow. They were joined in these demonstrations by groups from other religions.

It is clear that this is not simply about a perceived insult to a religious group. This is a highly political attempt to coordinate forces with a view to justifying censorship on religious grounds, and pushing an increasingly right-wing agenda. The Reverend George Hargreaves, for example, head of Operation Christian Vote in Scotland, has recently returned from the United States. He was there to meet “Christian political strategists in advance of the next year’s British general election,” according to their web site.

Christian Voice’s sponsor is the Tory Lord Ashbourne, a former hereditary peer who was elected to retain his seat in the House of Lords. Ashbourne is on the board of a number of evangelical pressure groups aimed at the media, such as the Christian Broadcasting Council. He sent his support to a rally calling on the cleaning up of the media in his capacity as past chairman of the All-Party Child and Family Protection Group. On the Christian Voice web site, he points to the “unrighteous laws” passed since the Second World War as contributing to “Britain’s current moral decline.”

In England the evangelical political party, the Christian People’s Alliance, called on Christians to protest in the streets after being “ignored” by the BBC. Prior to the broadcast of *Springer* Stephen Green had warned that Christian Voice was “well up for this.”

What this meant could be seen by the scale of hostility levelled at BBC staff even before the broadcast. Christian

Voice published home contact details of 15 senior BBC staff on their web site, including those of BBC2 Controller Roly Keating and Director of TV Jana Bennett. A private security firm was employed after threatening telephone calls were made, and the police were notified of the threats.

One member of BBC staff told the *Guardian* newspaper: “People are being harassed. Their families have been subjected to a torrent of threats and abuse.” Describing the “disgraceful” campaign, the source told of a family who were victims of an abusive phone call while trying to observe the three-minute silence in honour of the tsunami disaster victims.

“We are witnessing something quite unprecedented,” the source said, “something we have never seen before in this country in terms of the methods of protest. We’ve had to put in place the sort of security arrangements that are normally only necessary when we broadcast programmes about far-right extremists.”

Although some liberal Christian congregations have been critical of the tenor of the campaign, more mainstream Anglican leaders have joined the mob. The Bishop of Manchester said that some scenes had crossed “the boundary between satire and ridicule.”

The campaign has also been welcomed by the Tories. Deputy party leader Michael Ancram criticised the BBC before the broadcast, saying that public service television had a responsibility “to exercise a degree of caution.” He suggested that the theatre is the place for people to go to see such things. This ignores the fact that these groups are also attempting to close down shows in theatres.

In the face of this orchestrated right-wing movement, however, the BBC has been unable to defend itself. When the scale of the complaints became apparent, Michael Grade, the chairman, sought reassurances from Mark Thompson that the programme complied with broadcasting regulations on blasphemy. Although Grade insisted that the board of governors should not view programmes before broadcast, he was ensuring that he has a fall-guy if the movement gathers momentum. Thompson’s meek defence of the programme consisted of declaring, “I am a practising Christian but there is nothing in this which I believe to be blasphemous.”



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