

London's Tate gallery censors work citing fear of offending Muslims

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The Tate gallery in London has withdrawn the work *God Is Great* from an exhibition dedicated to the conceptual artist John Latham. Referring to the London bombings carried out by Islamic fundamentalists, the Tate explained that in the “sensitive climate, post-July 7” the work might offend some Muslims.

Neither Latham nor his curator, Paul Moorhouse, was consulted about the removal of the work. The Tate's director Stephen Deuchar said the “difficult decision” had been made “in the light of opinions that we value regarding religious sensitivities.”

The Tate's actions underline the developing climate of intimidation and censorship of artists that is being fostered in Britain. The piece was to be shown alongside 11 other works by the 84-year-old artist in a retrospective at Tate Britain. It is a part of the Tate's permanent collection, and can be seen on the Tate's web site at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=99999961&workid=83953&searchid=845>.

The artist has accused the Tate of “cowardice,” saying they had “misunderstood” the work. He has demanded its return to him from the permanent collection. He also accused the gallery of having played into the hands of Islamic militants.

Many critics have condemned the decision. Richard Cork noted that religion has become the flashpoint for censorship and warned that this could develop further: “When you start thinking about that, then the sky is the limit.”

The civil liberties group Liberty has also defended Latham. Liberty's Shami Chakrabarti criticized “legislators and ... lobby groups who've allowed free speech to be put in such peril.”

Latham created the first work of this name in 1990.

The Tate piece was created a year later. It consists of a large vertical sheet of thick glass in which are embedded the Bible, the Koran and the Talmud, the central texts of the monotheistic religions Christianity, Islam and Judaism. In the latest version of the piece, made earlier this year and displayed at the Venice Biennale, the three books are contained within a field of broken glass.

There have been no complaints about the pieces, which have also been shown at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art and the Lisson Gallery in London. According to Latham, one school in Oxford had disapproved of the piece but had decided not to take their pupils to see it.

Latham denies that the piece is anti-Muslim, and the Muslim Council of Britain told the BBC that they had received no complaints. However, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, secretary of the Muslim Council, said that they would “respect” the Tate's decision to withdraw the piece. The Muslim Council's main concern was that they would have preferred to be consulted “before the decision was taken to remove” the piece.

In fact, what is striking about *God is Great* is its evident sympathy with religious modes of thought—a philosophy Latham has been elaborating since the 1950s. In 1990 Latham explained that, in his cosmology, the three monotheistic religions formed a single belief system from which “all cultures have sprung.” Further, he said, this provided a point of reference for discussing any unresolved questions, if not actually resolving them.

He aims at the unification of the world based on a shared religiosity, asking, “Is it so impossible that the world should add up to one?” His emphasis on the three monotheistic religions (“the people of the book”) is a distant echo of the viewpoint that reached its height

during the period of the Crusades. It should also be noted that Prime Minister Tony Blair has made use of such rhetoric on occasion—specifically in order to deny accusations against him of anti-Islamic intent in the war against Iraq and on anti-terror legislation.

The fact that Latham’s work is far removed from a critical approach to Islam or any religion gives the Tate’s removal of *God is Great* added significance. Such actions clearly set a dangerous precedent for many other artists.

Increasingly artistic freedom is under attack due to demands that artists conform to politically motivated and antidemocratic legislation, such as that proposed by the Labour government criminalizing anti-religious expression, and even more overt right-wing prejudice. And if direct censorship were not enough, an intellectual and political climate is being created that encourages self-censorship by artists.

The Tate, for example, has announced their intention to hold a public debate on “art’s claim to cultural independence” and promise a panel of “leading figures on art, ethics and religion.” After Sikh protestors forced the closure of the play *Behzti* earlier this year, a similar debate on the future of theatre was used to encourage “restraint” and self-censorship among critical artists.

The success of the Sikh protestors encouraged a similar but less successful protest by fundamentalist Christians against the BBC screening *Jerry Springer—The Opera*, which was denounced as blasphemous.

The direction of this latest debate has been indicated by a Tate spokesman, who explained, “In a time of increasingly political and social anxiety, Latham’s work, with direct reference to canonical texts, brings to the fore the fraught relationship between the artist’s practice and contemporary society.”

Under conditions where the Tate has already withdrawn Latham’s artwork, it has made clear that its own approach to this “fraught relationship” is to adapt to the regressive atmosphere created by the government. The Tate’s comment also reveals broader anxieties about any art that engages with any form of social and political reality and not merely religion.

A spokeswoman for the Tate told the September 29 edition of the *Washington Times* that this was the first time the gallery had withdrawn an exhibit over religious concerns. But in future the gallery “would

judge things on a case-by-case basis.”



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