

EQUAL PLAYING FIELD PROVES ELUSIVE

The Catholic League is often criticized for commenting on exhibitions, movies or plays before they have opened. We are also condemned for protesting bigoted portrayals of Catholics on the screen and for trying to punish the offenders. But none of this seems to apply to others.

We protested the Museum of Sex before it opened, and rightly so: we took a tour online and what we discovered was raunchy with a scholarly veneer. This, of course, didn't satisfy our critics—they said we should have at least waited until the museum opened to comment.

These same people, however, were nowhere to be heard from a few months back when New York Jews (and the Catholic League) pounced on the Jewish Museum for scheduling an exhibition that trivialized the Holocaust. Those who objected to this exhibition did so on the basis of reading a publication that offered a graphic description of what was to be displayed. That was enough to make a judgment call. Similarly, the online tour of the Museum of Sex offered sufficient grounds to make a call. But the outcry against the protesters—in both situations—was quite different.

"Barbershop" is a film that went over big in the African American community, this despite the fact that Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton registered strong objections. They sought to have a segment that made fun of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. deleted from the yet-to-be-released DVD version. The reaction among blacks to Jackson and Sharpton was split, though it is fair to say most were not supportive of their efforts. It needs to be emphasized, however, that few

blacks slammed the two leaders for their protest. More revealing, fewer whites slammed them. Yet when the Catholic League objects to a film, it is not uncommon for Catholics, and especially non-Catholics, to accuse us of disrespecting the free speech rights of the offending party.

It's even worse than this. In the scene that Jackson and Sharpton took exception to, the black man who made fun of Parks and King was subjected to immediate rebuke by everyone else in the barbershop. Yet if a Catholic is portrayed in a parish dumping on Catholicism, he or she is never jumped on for doing so. If anything, everyone else chimes in. The ABC show that we got booted, "Nothing Sacred," was replete with such examples, beginning with that insufferable hippie priest Father Ray.

When the Catholic League complains about a TV program or a film, we are constantly told to lighten up—it's just a show or a flick. Why, then, do both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) have Hollywood bureaus that do nothing but monitor the entertainment industry?

Both organizations provide all sorts of resources to see to it that their group is fairly portrayed on the screen. Now if it's just make-believe, why do they spend the bucks? And if it's more than that—if what is depicted may have real-life consequences—then why are we being ridiculed for objecting to unfair characterizations? They can't have it both ways.

In reality, what we see and experience affects our perceptions. That is why civil rights groups object to patently unfair portrayals. It explains why the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) supported Governor James McGreevey of New Jersey for calling on New Jersey poet laureate Amiri Baraka to resign

after reading an anti-Semitic poem. But if the Catholic League had called upon the African-American writer to step aside for reading an anti-Catholic poem, we'd have been accused of trying to censor Baraka. No such charges were levied against the ADL.

We could repeat examples like this all day. The bottom line is that an equal playing field for Catholics is still proving to be elusive. A better example of why we exist would be hard to find.