

# NBC'S "JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR" IS FINE

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the NBC Easter Sunday broadcast of "Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert":

One of the big myths about Christians is that they get exercised whenever some producers or artists take some liberties about the Gospel story. No, they generally don't take offense unless it is insulting, exploitative, or malicious. That is why almost no Christians protested "Jesus Christ Superstar" when it opened on Broadway in 1971. Even fewer are likely to be upset with the NBC telecast on Easter Sunday.

It was mostly Jews who protested the musical, not Christians, when it first debuted. The American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League were afraid that there were elements in the show that might invite viewers to think that Jews conspired to kill Jesus, thus fanning the flames of anti-Semitism. The good news is that their fears were unfounded.

The Catholic community was mostly dismissive of the show, at least at first. That changed in 1999 when the Vatican officially endorsed it. Three years later, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said it was "a sincere effort to tell the story of Jesus in contemporary musical and ethical terms."

As I pointed out in my book, *Twilight of Liberty: The Legacy of the ACLU*, the only organization in the United States to go off the rails about "Jesus Christ Superstar" was the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization with a history of censorship (it sued a magazine for libel in the 1920s—five years after it was founded—simply because of a critical

article about it; see my book, *The Politics of the ACLU*). In the 1980s, it threatened a lawsuit against Bethel High School in the state of Washington over a performance of the play.

So incensed was ACLU activist, and professed atheist, Nat Hentoff at the time that he wrote the state's affiliate inquiring whether the ACLU was prepared to file suit against a public school concert featuring Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" or Duke Ellington's "Sacred Concert." He got no reply.

The NBC show should be just fine. Just don't bring it to your local school or the ACLU censors will come down your throat.