

PROBLEM PERSONALITIES

Taylor Swift is a teenager who received an MTV Video Music Award in September. But rapper Kanye West thought singer Beyoncé should have won. This wouldn't have been newsworthy except for what he did: he walked on stage, grabbed the microphone from Swift and told the world that his favorite singer should have won.

When the line judge made a call that tennis star Serena Williams didn't like, she erupted in a string of expletives, threatening to kill the referee.

Congressman Joe Wilson is no fan of President Obama. Fine. But when he heard the president tell his colleagues something he believed was untrue, Wilson yelled, "You lie."

All of these people later apologized, though in each case it was clear that the apology was rather forced. They did what they did because they felt like it. In another time and day, they would have put the brakes on and never have exploded the way they did. But they live in a society where certain forms of incivility are tolerated. So they rant.

Worse than these examples is what Penn & Teller did. Unlike Williams and Wilson, who both acted impulsively (West's misbehavior was contrived), Penn & Teller planned their hit well in advance. Indeed, they bragged about it for weeks before their show aired. Not only that, their hit job was unrelenting, vicious and obscene. Beyond even that, they are serial offenders, having engaged in vile anti-Catholic performances for years. That's why they earned a place in *Secular Sabotage*.

The hatred that Penn & Teller have for the Catholic Church is pathological. Indeed, they are very sick men. Jillette can say what he wants about me—he frequently attacks me without provocation—but his comments about Mother Teresa, Pope

Benedict XVI, bishops, priests and nuns are so over the top as to warrant unqualified condemnation.

The incivility that Penn & Teller, and the aforementioned singer, athlete and politician engaged in would not exist if there were stiff penalties for their outrageous behavior. But such is not the case. Worse, no matter what they do, their fan base seems to stay intact. To top things off, when the only thing that forces such persons to apologize for their barbaric behavior is a loss of sponsors, then we know we're in trouble. Cash is no substitute for conscience as a moral anchor.

When it comes to problem personalities, it would be hard to beat Michael Jackson. Yet despite what everyone knows about him, almost 13,000 youths turned up in Mexico City recently to imitate his dancing feats: it was the largest assembly of its kind for Jackson, breaking the previous world record. Yes, it's understandable that we distinguish between professional contributions and personal wrongdoings, but at some point the latter should veto the former.

The celebrity culture that we live in brooks no limits. When an estimated 40 percent of professional basketball players have been arrested—the most common offense being an assault on a woman—then we are nourishing incivility. When the head of major league baseball knows full well that players are routinely cheating by taking drugs that enhance their performance, and he does little about it, the message sent to young athletes is pernicious. When actresses partake in behavior that gives sluts a bad name, and are still adored by legions of fans, then it is clear that cultural corruption runs deep.

We don't expect public personalities to be angelic, but is it too much to ask that they respect their position as role models? To the refrain that they never opted to be a role model, we need to remind them that the choice was never theirs to begin with: their fans, whom of course they cherish, make

that decision for them. Thus, they are morally obligated to understand what it means to be a public personality.

Some of the problem personalities have fathers and mothers who have been training them, and exploiting them, from a very young age. All for fame and fortune. This is a form of child abuse that is rarely recognized, but that is exactly what the parents of people like Michael Jackson and Lindsay Lohan have done.

Bad as many of these celebrities have become, even worse are their backers. CBS is not some small fry organization: it represents the establishment. And when the establishment sponsors religious hatred and bigotry, it is even worse than the indefensible antics of the likes of Penn & Teller.

It does not appear that CBS will allow its relationship with Penn & Teller to snap. That's too bad. Just think how much goodwill it could generate if it did. By making a principled decision—drawing a line in the sand for everyone to see—CBS could really be a force for change. Not until those who underwrite religious bigotry decide to pivot will the coarseness in our culture turn around.

In the meantime, the Catholic League will do what it always does—put the media spotlight on the guilty. Public pressure works, even if it does not yield instantaneous results. The alternative is to give up, and since crying uncle is for wimps, we will be just as brazen as ever. Bet on it.