

SILENCE 'CORPUS CHRISTI'?

<p>Yes, play is blasphemous <i>by Rick Hinshaw</i></p>	<p>No, free speech is at stake <i>by Craig Lucas</i></p>
<p>"Freedom of speech," goes the mantra from the arts crowd, as the Manhattan Theater Club – after reports in recent weeks that it was canceling a production – now declares its intention to offend Christians by staging a play that portrays Jesus as having sex with his apostles.</p> <p>But our cultural elite is quite selective in its application of the First Amendment.</p> <p>"Freedom of speech" becomes "censorship" when the Catholic League exercises it to oppose this blasphemy. And religious freedom goes out the window when the Manhattan Theater Club insists that Christians be forced to participate in defaming our own religion by funding the theater's work with our tax dollars.</p> <p>Such are the double standards by which anti-Catholic bigotry is justified by the politically correct. Was it censorship for the Anti-Defamation League to try to prevent publication of "A Nation on Trial," a book written by a foe of Zionism that challenged our conventional understanding of the Holocaust?</p> <p>Or for Puerto Rican leaders to call for a boycott of "Seinfeld" after a Puerto Rican flag was burned on one episode? Was the National Organization for Women threatening the First Amendment when it succeeded in having several stores pull an album containing the violent, sexist song "Smack My Bitch Up"?</p> <p>In 1991, WOR-TV banned a show, "The Passover," after Jewish groups protested. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee said the show was "not in the public interest" because it contained historical and theological errors and "misrepresented the Jewish tradition, and therefore misled the public."</p> <p>Well, based on how the press has described Terrence McNally's "Corpus Christi," the play contains historical and theological errors, and clearly misrepresents Christian tradition, by portraying Jesus Christ as a promiscuous homosexual. "From the beginning to the end," according to a report in the <i>New York Times</i>, this play presents "a Jesus-like figure...in a manner with the potential to offend many people." Crucified as "king of the queers," this Jesus figure "has a long-running affair with Judas and sexual relations with the other apostles."</p> <p>Imagine a play that offered a similar portrayal of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., or one that glorified Adolf Hitler or sought to deny the Holocaust. Surely, no one would challenge the right of offended groups to use moral suasion to try to have such scripts changed or taken out of production. Indeed, it's hard to imagine such a script ever making it into production. The arts community would never dream of offending Jews or African-Americans in this way.</p> <p>Catholics, however, are fair game. From Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," featuring a crucifix submerged in urine, to McNally's depiction of Jesus as a sexual hedonist, anti-Catholicism remains the last respectable bias, in the arts community and among America's cultural elite. And when the Catholic League expresses its moral outrage, we are maligned as "censors."</p> <p>Even more offensive have been efforts to link us to threats of violence against the Manhattan Theater Club and McNally. The Catholic League has a long history of forceful but peaceful advocacy against anti-Catholic defamation. Blaming us for the threats of a lunatic fringe is akin to blaming King for the violence of the Black Panthers. Such guilt by association is a not-so-subtle attempt to hamper our free speech.</p> <p>But the First Amendment wasn't written just for the cultural elite. Its guarantees of freedom of speech and of religion belong to all of us.</p> <p>The Catholic League will continue to exercise those rights in defense of our faith, and in defense of the right of all Catholic Americans to equal participation in our democratic process.</p> <p><i>Hinshaw is editor of Catalyst, the monthly journal of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.</i></p>	<p>The Catholic League presumes to be speaking for Christians in general and Catholics in particular when it calls for the suppression of "Corpus Christi" on the ground that the play, not yet produced, is offensive to Christians.</p> <p>Which Christians?</p> <p>Are all Christians of precisely the same mind on all subjects? I was raised Christian, and I read my Bible. At no point in the Scriptures does Christ speak on the subject of homosexuality; he embraced prostitutes and the downtrodden and was friend to all the oppressed.</p> <p>His sexual practices and orientation are never mentioned in the Bible. There are plenty of things that appear onstage, on TV, in movies and in the papers that are offensive to me and millions of other Americans; that doesn't mean we get to silence them.</p> <p>"Majority rules" doesn't mean that the minorities must all shut up and toe the line. Our democracy includes a separation of church and state, and all free citizens are permitted to speak their minds, even if their ideas are offensive to some. Anyone who wants to picket or object is also free to do so.</p> <p>When large numbers of people objected to the depiction of African-Americans in "Show Boat," "Huckleberry Finn" or "The Birth of a Nation," they picketed and published Op-Ed pieces, making their voices heard. But these works were not suppressed, and are all still available to any citizen who wishes to make up his or her mind.</p> <p>Many people object to the character Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice," others to the Hispanic character in Terrence McNally's "Love! Valour! Compassion!"</p> <p>And that's certainly anyone's right. But to call for the silencing of any voice in a democracy is itself anti-democratic.</p> <p>Not having seen or read "Corpus Christi," I won't presume to judge it. But even if it were the most sacrilegious and hateful depiction of Christ imaginable, I would still defend McNally's right, and the Manhattan Theater Club's right, to produce the play without threats of violence or censorship.</p> <p>In addition, I would like to say to the Catholic League and any other Christian calling for the suppression of "Corpus Christi," as well as to any Christian who is content with the current societal discrimination leveled at homosexuals in housing, employment, health benefits, tax law, marriage and the armed services, where is your righteous indignation about all those who break the other laws of Leviticus?</p> <p>Why aren't you loudly condemning those who wear cloths of two weaves, women who appear in public during menstruation, those who eat "unclean" meat? If McNally had depicted Christ wearing a blended-weave cloth, would you be equally outraged? Why not? The Bible is clear on this: It is an abomination equal to homosexuality, never to be tolerated.</p> <p>Is the cardinal demanding that the city withhold equal rights from women who go to work during menstruation? No, but he wants the city to deny equal rights to gays and lesbians.</p> <p>According to the Catholic League and others, the worst thing anyone could say about Jesus is that he was gay. One must wonder why some passages from the Bible are so important to obey and so deeply offensive, while others are to be ignored. Gay people, of course, are extremely unpopular, so it's easy to beat up on them and get the approval of a larger public.</p> <p>To the Catholic League, the cardinal, the Pope and anyone who call themselves Christian, I have but one message, and it is Christ's: Love thy neighbor as thyself.</p> <p>Instead of pretending that Christians are somehow a terribly maligned and oppressed minority (in a country where their numbers vastly outweigh all others), and instead of fighting to silence and oppress those with whom you happen to disagree, why don't you invest your financial resources and energy in making people's lives better?</p> <p>Christianity is an act of love. It is not a set of beliefs to be hurled at sinners like stones.</p> <p><i>Lucas is a playwright whose works include "Prelude to a Kiss," "The Dying Gaul" and "God's Heart."</i></p>

Clyde Haberman's piece appeared in the *New York Times* on Tuesday, June 2, 1998.

A SOLDIER OF CHRIST ON THE MARCH

When visited yesterday in his corner office at the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, William A. Donohue was

no burning books. He was not chopping up reels of film into celluloid guitar picks. He was not tossing video cassettes into the trash can.

That is because he is not a censor, no matter what some may say, Mr. Donohue said. All he does as president of the Catholic League, he said, is raise warning flags whenever he believes someone has gone over the top in ridiculing Christian dogma or the Roman Catholic Church.

He just happens to be a particularly vigorous flag waver.

"I believe in moral suasion," Mr. Donohue said at his normal decibel level, which is high. "I believe in whipping up public sentiment to isolate the offender. I believe in putting on a lot of pressure."

He certainly has tried to do that in his latest crusade: to get the Manhattan Theater Club to cancel Terrence McNally's new play, "Corpus Christi," planned for the fall. A recent draft shows that it is about a Jesus-like figure who has sex with his apostles and is crucified as "king of the queers."

And you wonder if the Catholic League was offended? Of course, it protested.

Somebody went much further and threatened to bomb the theater club, which caved in and dropped the play, until it came to its senses on how to deal with would-be terrorists. It canceled its cancellation.

On that score, it got no argument from Mr. Donohue. If the police find "the lunatic" behind the bomb threat, "they should put him in prison for a very long time," he said at the league's offices at First Avenue and East 56th Street.

But that did not shake his conviction that "Corpus Christi" is an "immoral" play unworthy of being performed and that the Manhattan Theater Club is not entitled to its Federal, state,

and local government subsidies. It is one thing for a fully private group to produce such a work, he said, but “nobody has a right to the public purse.”

“If it’s wrong to take public monies to promote my religion, then it’s wrong to take public monies to bash my religion,” he said.

-That goes to the heart of what Mr. Donohue has been about in the five years he has led the Catholic League, whose symbol is a sword and shield. He is convinced that “anti-Catholicism is the last respectable bias” among those who view themselves as models of enlightenment. Utter a word remotely offensive to Jews, blacks, women or gays? Heaven forbid. Yet some of those same people do not blink before mocking the Church or Jesus or Catholic sacraments.

Imagine, Mr. Donohue said, “a play called ‘Shylock and Sambo,’ about gay Jewish slave masters who sodomize their obsequious black slaves.” You would not even have to protest a work like that, he said. Its offensiveness to certain groups would be obvious. No theater troupe would produce it in the first place, not in this city anyway.

Don’t Catholics, he asked, deserve the same consideration? Instead, his league has tracked one example after another of artists and writers depicting priests as pedophiles, nuns as sex-crazed witches and the Pope as a man having sex with prostitutes. Let’s not even get into images of Jesus on a cross of penises or Mary in a G-string.

For protesting such outrages, and aggressively, Mr. Donohue has received death threats of his own. At a minimum, he is branded in some circles as an enemy of free expression. Even among largely sympathetic Catholics, there are those who wish he would soften his style.

Mr. Donohue replies that Catholics are the aggrieved ones, especially “Catholics like myself who openly proclaim the

virtues of the church.”

Returning to the McNally play, he said: “A lot of people in the gay and the artistic community hate with a passion the Catholic Church, and they don’t want to admit to bigotry. Bigotry is something in their mind which the Archie Bunkers of this world exercise.”

If this play turns out not to be offensive, “I’ll be the first guy to say I was wrong,” Mr. Donohue said. He paused before adding: “But I would be very, very surprised if in fact I’m going to have to make such a statement. No, I think this is an in-your-face, stick-it-to-Catholics play. And they wouldn’t do it to any other segment of society.”