

TALK-SHOW HOSTS AND RELIGION

Writers for late night talk-show hosts are obsessed with Catholicism, especially those who worked for David Letterman. Generally speaking, Conan O'Brien has been fair; Seth Meyers less so. Both of them offered jokes about Catholicism and women in their recent outing.

"New pope doing everything he can to modernize the church," said O'Brien. "That's what I like about this pope. He's trying to take the church into the 25th century. Pope Francis has reportedly advised new priests not to give boring sermons. And! He's also telling nuns to start wearing tank tops."

Meyers said, "Pope Francis spoke out today in favor of wage equality for women—continuing the Catholic Church's long history of being fair to women. Lady priests get the same as man priests."

Neither joke was Maher-like obscene, and indeed they did not cross the line. Here's the problem: they help foster invidious stereotypes. These guys need to get up to date.

For example, Orthodox Jewish rabbis refuse to sit next to women (save for their wives) on an airplane, causing all kinds of problems. When these rabbis meet in places such as Citi Field, over 50,000 show up, but there are no women: they are banned from attending. As for Muslim women, well, where should Bill Donohue begin?

This doesn't go on once in a while—it goes on all the time. It's time the writers for these shows practiced equality and decided whether to treat Catholics like Jews and Muslims, or Jews and Muslims like Catholics. The former is our choice.

MAHER ASSAULTS POPE AND JESUS

During a recent episode of “Real Time with Bill Maher” on HBO, Maher lashed out at Pope Francis and Jesus in a particularly vulgar way.

While discussing the Armenian genocide, Maher said, “You know who said it’s a genocide? The pope. The pope was like f*** yeah it’s a genocide. The pope has huge balls. You would too if you were 78 and never had sex.”

Maher’s assault on the Eucharist was vile. He spoke about a toaster that can customize a burnt image of your face on it. When an image of Jesus was shown on the screen, Maher asked, “What kind of needy loner says, ‘hey look at that bread you’re eating, it’s really me.’”

Maher does what he does because a) he is an unrelenting bigot b) HBO officials allow him to trash Catholicism with impunity and, c) Catholics will not threaten to kill him. Since neither the first nor the third reason is going to change, that leaves it to HBO to finally act responsibly.

THE MIND OF JOY BEHAR

On a recent episode of the CBS show, “The Insider,” there was a discussion involving Joy Behar about the man/woman Bruce Jenner.

Here is what Behar said: “I’m not going to do a stand-up about transgenders. It’s too sensitive a topic.”

The next day on the ABC show known as “The View,” a guest host mentioned that she was raised in a conservative Catholic

household and that later in life she went on a drinking binge.

Here is what Behar said: "It could have been worse—you could have turned out a nun."

This is the mind of Joy Behar.

LETTERMAN'S GREATEST HITS

Last month, the final episode of "Late Night with David Letterman" aired on CBS. Below is a sampling of host David Letterman's history of Catholic bashing excerpted from Catholic League press releases.

"WHAT COUNTS AS OFFENSIVE?" 4/22/2015

David Letterman warmed up his audience by making a joke about women. He said, "Treat a lady like a whore, and a whore like a lady." The audience didn't think this was funny, so he dropped it.

Letterman tells obscene jokes about priests on a regular basis, and even though the audience does not always approve, he never stops.

"CHRISTIAN BASHING MARKS EASTER SEASON" 4/7/2015

On Good Friday, David Letterman joked about the pope's physical, saying his weight gain may be a function of "a little too many Communion wafers."

On Holy Thursday, Letterman made ten jokes about the pope's physical; all the comments were attributed to the attending physician. The joke listed as #1 was: "I know you don't use it, but I still have to take a look at it."

"LETTERMAN'S ABNORMAL OBSESSION" 1/6/2015

A clip was shown of Michael Sam, the failed homosexual

football player, crying when he was selected in the draft to play in the NFL. Sam is then shown kissing his boyfriend. When the screen goes blank and "Please Stand By" is posted, an image of the pope and some crosses appear.

We have been tracking Letterman since 2008. Since that time we have recorded 28 monologues where he ridicules Catholicism, 16 of which involve homosexuality. This isn't normal.

"RELIGIOUS JOKES DURING RAMADAN" 7/28/2014

Not unexpectedly, Ramadan was not an occasion for jokes about Islam. Over the last month, four jokes were told about Islam: Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, Jimmy Fallon, and "Saturday Night Live" each made one, but only one of them—Maher's—was offensive.

By contrast, even though there were no Christian holidays during this period, there were 33 jokes made about Catholicism, 13 of which were offensive. Those who made the most offensive jokes were Bill Maher, David Letterman, and Tosh.

LETTERMAN SHOULD AVOID SEXUAL JOKES 7/17/2014

Letterman began by saying Pope Francis is thinking about lifting the celibacy requirement. "That's right, the pope is saying that priests can be in a marriage with a woman and have sex." [Women are shown cheering.]

The pope is also shown speaking to bishops and cardinals, his words dubbed over. "When two people love each other very much, they become more than just good friends. Eventually they might even get married and have a baby. The mommy and daddy make the baby together, but it grows inside the mommy."

Letterman: "So if a priest sees someone out there in the crowd that he likes, he might send over some Communion wine." [Letterman is shown pointing and winking at someone.] Off camera, band leader Paul Shaffer replies, "That little lady over there." To which Letterman replies, "Priests having sex,

can you believe that?"

"LETTERMAN LIBELS POPE AND PRIESTS" 7/24/2013

Letterman mentioned Pope Francis' appearance at World Youth Day in Brazil by saying, "And I'm telling you if there's anything the kids can't get enough of, it's a 76-year-old virgin. Come on! World Youth Day. Or as the Vatican calls it, salute to altar boys."

"LETTERMAN, THE POPE, AND HIS SHRINK" 2/14/2013

After twice saying the pope has "a chronic neck problem," Letterman let loose with, "He's got a chronic neck problem and apparently the chronic neck problem is for looking the other way so many times." He then said the Vatican "is already holding auditions to see who might be the next pope and we have one of those auditions that's going on." Footage was then shown of acrobats taking off their shirts and then performing for the pope; he looks on while rock music is played.

Letterman said that besides looking for someone who is a biblical scholar and at least 60 years old, the Vatican is looking for "a guy who is good at transferring creepy priests."

"SEXUAL DEVIANT DAVID LETTERMAN INDICTS PRIESTS" 6/15/2011

Letterman said he was "stunned" and "fascinated" by Anthony Weiner's predicament. He then said the following: "Honest to God, is this the kind of behavior you'd expect from a congressman! No. In simple terms, no. It is not the kind of behavior you'd expect from a congressman. It is the kind of behavior you'd expect from a priest."

"LETTERMAN'S SEXPLOITS MAKE HIM A HERO" 10/2/2009

It certainly didn't hurt Letterman's career when he laughed at the Catholic Church for what happened in 2002. That summer a man and a woman had sex in St. Patrick's Cathedral around 4:00 p.m. on a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics. They did so in plain view of men, women and children and had their

performance described on the radio as part of some sick contest. Most people were aghast, the radio hosts who rigged the caper were fired, and apologies were issued by the radio station. Letterman, however, found it so hysterical that he used the story to tell jokes about it for three nights.

“The Unthinkable in the Twenty-First Century”

Rick Hinshaw

George J. Marlin, *Christian Persecutions in the Middle East: A 21st Century Tragedy* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2015)

Bombarded as we are by daily news reports, we probably feel we know all we need to know about the unspeakable crimes being perpetrated virtually every day against innocent people – primarily Christians – in the Middle East. But how much do we really know, about the history, the causes, and, perhaps most importantly, possible responses to this persecution?

As chairman of Aid to the Church in Need-USA, which works to support the suffering and persecuted Church around the world, George Marlin is uniquely situated to give us a much clearer picture of this tragic situation. And he does so in this book, which helps us better understand the long and often painful history of Christian-Islamic relations in the Middle East; the current day situation of Christians in the different nations of that region; the proximate causes of their suffering and persecution; and, through the eyes of various Church leaders who bear the burden of ministering to the suffering faithful throughout the Middle East, some of the challenges that must

be addressed, needs that must be met, and solutions that must be explored if the world – and the universal Church – are to help bring about a just and lasting end to the persecution.

And that, as Marlin makes clear, is his intent.

“Far more than supplying readers with information and perspective, or even alerting Christians and others in the West to the threat posed by today’s ultra-violent expression of Islam,” he writes in the Introduction, “the purpose of *Christian Persecutions in the Middle East* is to enable us to walk the Via Crucis, the ‘Way of the Cross,’ with these fellow Christians in the Middle East, to truly stand with them, and to inspire us to provide them with the means to help them continue to bear witness to Christ in the land that gave Him birth.”

In “The Unthinkable in the Twenty-First Century,” the book’s second main section, Marlin gives us a heart-wrenching overview of what that “Way of the Cross” looks like for Christians in today’s Middle East. He starts by recounting the carnage that the Ottoman Turks committed against Armenian Christians before, during and after the first World War, beginning in the 1890s when the Ottoman Sultan, “[t]o dissuade Christians from seeking more rights and freedoms ... turned to loyal Muslim tribesmen, particularly the Kurds, to attack and massacre” Christian Armenians.

“As many as 200,000 Christians perished” in what became, Marlin quotes historian Philip Jenkins, “a dress rehearsal for the later genocide” that would occur in Armenia during and after World War I – when, as Marlin quotes British statesman and historian Lord James Bryce, “the Turks hatched ‘a plan for exterminating Christianity root and branch.’

“It is estimated that between 1914 and 1923, when a new state in Turkey was established, 1.5 million Armenian Christians, out of a total population of 2.5 million, were murdered by

Turkish Muslims.”

From here, Marlin, citing scholars and Church leaders of the region, details – nation by nation – the persecution of Christians today throughout the Middle East, in:

- Turkey, “Now a prosperous democracy under the rule of an Islamist party,” where Christian communities “find themselves at risk of being extinguished altogether.”
- Egypt, where “discrimination” against Christians is “continuous,” and “violent persecution,” which “tends to surface sporadically” has “increased significantly over the last five years, in parallel with the Islamization of the police.”
- Lebanon, where a 15-year-long civil war between 1975-1990 left 125,000 dead, 80 percent of them Catholic; another 213,000 Christians fled the country; and “approximately 440 Christian churches and facilities were destroyed.”
- Syria, the “cradle of Christianity,” where Christians today are caught in the middle of the civil war between the brutal Assad regime and rebels, and now the ISIS terrorists. Open Doors International reports that “Syria headed ‘the list of the countries in which the most Christians were killed for their faith’”; and, according to a study released in January 2014, “as many as 600,000 Syrian Christians, a third of the nation’s total, have fled their homes and are displaced within Syrian borders or have been living as refugees in neighboring countries.”
- Iraq, where a mass exodus of Christians began during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, and has accelerated in the years since, as a series of events – culminating now in the onslaught of ISIS – has so terrorized Christians and put them to flight that the Archbishop of Mosul declared, “My diocese no longer exists. ISIS has taken it away from me.”

- Iran, where there is systematic discrimination and repression against Christians and other religious minorities, who are prohibited – under penalties including even death – from propagating their faith.
- Sudan, where “In the final decades of the twentieth century,” it is estimated that 2 million people may have been killed by fighting and famine, and 5 million displaced, as “Sudan’s single party authoritarian sharia-based government waged war on the country’s 6.6 million Christians and 18 million racial minorities.”
- Saudi Arabia, where “public practice of non-Muslim religions” has for most of its history “been strictly forbidden”; and where, in recent decades – even as the government actively sought to attract foreign workers for its rapidly expanding oil industry – it has repressively enforced these anti-religion restrictions against some six million foreign workers, including about 600,000 Christians. They face floggings, jailings and deportation for daring to practice their Christian faith.

Before exploring possible solutions to this ongoing scourge of anti-Christian persecution, it is necessary to examine its causes; and this Marlin does, again through his own insights, those of academic experts, and – in the book’s Part Three section entitled, “Christian Perspectives on the Middle East” – through the observations of bishops, priests and religious who have been “on the ground” ministering to the Church and her people throughout the Middle East.

Some lay some blame at the feet of outside influences; and indeed, Marlin describes the machinations of western nations, particularly after the two World Wars, creating artificial divisions and boundaries throughout the region. Whether done to enhance their own economies or spheres of influence, or even for altruistic reasons, trying to construct a more durable peace, such manipulations have surely fueled

resentments and power struggles in the region, leading to the scapegoating and persecution of Christians and other minorities seen as tied to the West.

Some place blame more specifically on the support of the West – particularly the United States – for Israel, at the expense, they contend, of the Palestinian people. Sister Marie Melham, after recounting her years growing up peacefully with Muslims and Christians together in Lebanon, points to “exterior forces that use poverty to their ends and that want to sell arms.” Others, too, cite conditions of poverty as a breeding ground for violence and terrorism, as well as for scapegoating of minority populations.

Yet it becomes clear, reading this book, that the root causes of anti-Christian persecution in the Middle East cannot be separated from the tenets of Islamic teaching and the history of Islamic rule.

“Unlike Christ’s apostles, who preached to all nations but did not coerce or threaten non-believers,” Marlin writes, “Muhammad told his followers that they had a duty to wage holy wars and to destroy pagan non-believers, referred to as infidels. ‘Kill all pagans,’ he declared.”

Muhammad taught that Christianity and Judaism were “earlier, incomplete divine revelations given by God,” Marlin explains; and thus Muslims, during their “centuries of conquest,” held that Christians and Jews were “corrupted by error and obstinacy and no longer worthy of carrying out the commands or teaching of the almighty.”

Also unlike Christianity, Marlin explains – again, citing scholarly experts – religious control of the state is held to be integral to the religious mission of Islam. And thus, Christians and Jews living under Muslim rule in conquered lands were treated as “dhimmis,” second class citizens – with certain freedoms but also many restrictions, and at times –

certainly today – harsh repression.

Surely, as most of the commentators cited in this book concur, this extreme face does not represent the whole, or probably even the majority, of Islam in today's world. At the same time, as Father Wafik Nasry, an Egyptian born Catholic Copt and expert on Islam and inter-religious dialogue, maintains, it cannot be pretended that "members of al-Qaeda and ISIS and many other Muslim militant political groups have nothing to do with true Islam. ...Both Muslims and Christians," he writes, "need to calmly face the reality of violence in Islam."

And speak out against it. As this book also makes clear, far too many moderate Muslims – whether out of intimidation, apathy, or other reasons –are loath to raise their voices against this anti-Christian persecution. And they are not alone. Too many in the West have also fallen virtually silent, including Christians. While some of those cited in this book see a military role in protecting Christians, virtually all see the need for a strong, universal moral voice – Muslim and Christian, secular and religious, political, social and cultural – rallying, as Marlin writes, to "truly stand with" the persecuted Christians of the Middle East as they courageously continue "to bear witness to Christ."

The question naturally arises: in the face of their terrible, terrible suffering, *why* should Christians in the Middle East be encouraged to stay, rather than being helped to flee to a potentially better life? Besides the logistical enormity of such a mass evacuation – the current number of refugees is already overwhelming nations and aid organizations – it is first a matter of simple justice. These nations are their homelands, and they should not be forced to uproot their families, abandon their livelihoods, and move to strange lands. Beyond that, their presence as Christians is vital, not just to preserve the heritage of our religion's birthplace. As so many of the commentators to whom Marlin gives voice in this book – particularly those bishops, priests and religious "on

the ground” in the Middle East—make clear, their Christian witness is essential *now* if peace and justice are ever to come for *all* the people of this beleaguered region. Their courage and sacrifice, their love of family and neighbor, their willingness to suffer so greatly out of love for Christ, can be the most powerful weapon of all in calling forth the universal cooperation – including in the Muslim world – that can ultimately destroy the forces of cruelty and oppression.

As George Marlin intended, we cannot help, after reading this book, but be inspired to support that courageous witness in whatever way we can – offering our prayers, our material support, and our voices, calling on forces of influence in our part of the world – media outlets, government leaders, churches – to do all in their power to bring this terrible situation to light, to aid the suffering, and ultimately to stop the anti-Christian persecutions in the Middle East.

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