

Mocking religion in the service of freedom and civility

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Mocking religion has been good sport among artists, intellectuals, and comedians for thousands of years. That means that the sport as currently practiced has the weight of custom or tradition behind it.

Now relativists about value think that an action that has the weight of custom or tradition behind it cannot be criticised as ethically unsound and, so, should be protected from those who disapprove of it. Relativists, then, should be happy to insist that mockers of religion be allowed to have their fun. Those of us who are not relativists but who value freedom of expression should be equally happy to insist on this.

There’s much to be said against making fun of religion and religious believers, and certainly some instances of mockery are puerile, intemperate, or obnoxious. But what can’t be said against it is that it is cruel. It’s not, at least not in the way making fun of the lame or the dim is cruel. Neither the lame nor the dim chose their condition, and they cannot choose to escape it. That’s not true of the religious.

Making fun of religion is like making fun of bad taste. It’s making fun of something that’s up to individuals themselves, something for which individuals are willing to take responsibility. It’s open to the religious believer, just as it is to the connoisseur of felt paintings, to disabuse her critics of their false evaluation of her attitudes.

Mockery of religion can have a serious point, though good mockery needn’t and often doesn’t. It can be an attempt to rid people of religion, or of the need they feel to have a religion. It can be a rallying call to defend secularity or to oppose the deference authorities often show to religious sensibilities. More than a few teenagers, I suspect, owe a debt of gratitude to the likes of Sarah Silverman or Sam Harris, for enabling them to acknowledge their doubts about their religious heritage and to reject that heritage.

For a long time, mocking religion was a fairly safe pastime. One who publicly ridiculed religion wasn’t risking much. That hasn’t always been so. Consider Diagoras of Melos, the late fifth-century BCE philosopher also known as Diagoras the Atheist.

On a ship during a rough crossing, Diagoras heard the conjecture that it was God’s displeasure with him that had caused the storm. Diagoras wondered aloud whether Diagoras was also on each of the other ships out that night.

Diagoras wasn't always content to wait for a straight man. Throwing a small wooden statue of Heracles on the fire, he commanded "Perform your thirteenth miracle! Cook my turnips!"

Diagoras lived in Athens as a resident alien, as many artists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs from throughout the Greek world did. But he fled Athens, with the price of a silver coin on his head. Diagoras had told the Athenians that the fact that a particular act of injustice went unpunished showed that the gods do not exist. The unjust act he had in mind was the murder by the Athenians of the people of Melos.

We are again living in a time when making fun of religion or the religious is dangerous. Perhaps this time began on 14 February 1989, the day a price was put on Salman Rushdie's head. In fact, we should set the date a little later, when the weak response by Western governments to this call for murder gave the violent impetus and unnerved the fun loving.

Things have not let up, as the recent attack on a *Jyllands-Posten* cartoonist shows us. The violent got their way when governments, newspapers, and even universities, including my own, sided with those who demanded solace for their hurt feelings, or else. (Sadly, my university caved without even requiring the "or else.") Nowadays, political leaders in Ireland and other European countries are busy rehabilitating laws against blasphemy. We're kidding ourselves if we expect better from our own leaders.

Probably the best way to decrease the danger would be to meet it head on. That would be to take up mocking religion and the religious in earnest. As part of this effort, I'll make a small snow Mohammed and set him next to some waist-high drift that's been causing pedestrians grief. "C'mon, Mohammed," I'll say, "you were able to multiply the waters. Surely you can divide the snow."

No, I won't. Too dangerous. Diagoras would have, though.