

Following the broadcast of ‘Jerry Springer – the Opera’ on Saturday night on BBC 2 I have decided that I can no longer be a member of the BBC staff. I made my position clear to the Director-General of the BBC, Mark Thompson on Friday morning. Mark kindly took the time to telephone me on Friday evening and over the course of nearly 40 minutes we discussed the nature of the broadcast – which I had understood from news sources such as BBC Radio 4, bbc.co.uk, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph to contain elements that were clearly blasphemous in any ordinary understanding of the word. Mark, however, persuaded me (if I could bear it) to watch the broadcast before making any further decision. Having now watched the show in its entirety and the hour-long introductory broadcast, my conclusion was that the blasphemy was far, far worse than even the most detailed news reports had led me to believe.

Here are a few specific examples out of many – although words even now do not convey the offensiveness of these elements in their context:

- *The introduction of and dialogue with the Jesus figure containing all kinds of abuse, insults, profanity and deliberate mockery of the Lord’s Name.
- *The ridiculing of the figure of Jesus on the Cross, dressed to imply sexual perversion.
- *The repeated mockery of the wounds (stigmata) of Jesus, linked to acts of crudeness.
- *The singing of “Jerry eleison” as a contemptuous travesty of an act of worship.

As I understand it, the current legal definition of blasphemy is as follows:

“Every publication is said to be blasphemous which contains any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible, or the formularies of the Church of England as by law established. It is not blasphemous to speak or publish opinions hostile to the Christian religion, or to deny the existence of God, if the publication is couched in decent and temperate language. The test to be applied is as to the manner in which the doctrines are advocated and not as to the substance of the doctrines themselves. Everyone who publishes any blasphemous document is guilty of the [offence] of publishing a blasphemous libel. Everyone who speaks blasphemous words is guilty of the [offence] of blasphemy.” (article 214 of Stephen’s Digest of the Criminal Law, 9th ed., 1950 – confirmed by Lord Scarman, 1979, and the European Court of Human Rights, 1996)

Mark Thompson himself gave me an impromptu definition of blasphemy which tallies well with the above.

One of the arguments used before the broadcast was that the stage show had not been attacked for blasphemy. My answer before watching the show was that by the time the blasphemous elements were introduced, any member of the audience would have been so desensitised by the continuous swearing and gross sexual references that nothing would shock any longer. My answer after watching the show is that anyone likely to pursue a case for blasphemy would not have remained in the theatre long enough to witness it.

I am very proud to have been part of the BBC, one of the UK’s most important institutions, and particularly to have worked for BBC Radio 3 (90-93FM) since 1992. I would like again to be part of the BBC, but a corner has been turned. I feel a corporate responsibility for what has happened – aggravated by the fact that we the BBC did not give sufficient attention to the overwhelming level of listener protest in advance. The BBC was intended to be a beacon of inspiration to the country. The Latin inscription on Broadcasting House reads:

“This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director-General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness.”

My prayer is *Kyrie eleison*.

Antony Pitts
Senior Producer, BBC Radio 3
9 January 2005