



Press comment NR Greer in News Letter

Dramatic spat over Bible play shows why unionists don't receive respect

The most interesting thing about the recent talks chaired by American diplomat Richard Haass was the carefully contrived propaganda backcloth that was erected behind them - NR Greer writes

At the beginning the media line was all about whether unionists would “show leadership”, and would they be capable of doing a [deal](#), of “making history”, and so forth.

When the UUP and DUP wisely passed on the daft, expensive, crass and irrelevant proposals that seemed to have been scribbled up by an intern working from a nationalist wish list, the headlines screamed of unionist “intransigence” and the of the malign influence of “hardliners” and “extremists”. If you braved the on-line comment threads following the talks you would have been exposed to the sort of vile abuse that would be classified as a hate crime had it of been directed at any group other than Northern Ireland's unionist community.

Nowhere in the whole manipulated media morass was there a thread of comment as to whether nationalists might perhaps wish to occasionally take a day off from getting up



early and travelling far to find something to be insulted about.

It was not suggested that naming kiddies' play parks after terrorists was perhaps provocative. That one or other version of the IRA was ratcheting up the violence to coincide with the talks was politely ignored and there was little tut-tutting about Republican extremists declining to toe the line.

Why is it that people who have been responsible for decades of murder, mutilation and destruction, and who continue to agitate to the detriment of all get a better press than a community that just wants to be left alone?

The answer is simple. Step forward the DUP's Newtownabbey Borough Council representatives, who tried to pull the plug on The Reduced Shakespeare Company's performances of the play, *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)*, at the Theatre at the Mill, on the grounds that it may be blasphemous.

I have followed the Reduced Shakespeare [Company](#) from small fringe performances to the stages of grand theatres. They are brilliant, witty, erudite and just incredible fun. Their creative genius Adam Long is the nicest, smartest guy you could ever wish to meet. The company has tackled a number of subjects in their own inimitable manner including the works of Shakespeare, American history, Dickens and The Bible. Their style is a mix of fast-paced irreverence combined with a genuine respect for the source material. I just could not imagine the [company](#) deliberately setting out to offend anyone.

The play could be seen as analogous to the sort of illustrated simplified children's versions of The Bible to be found in evangelical book shops. The general view from Christians who have seen the show is that it is juvenile but not blasphemous. Clearly DUP councillors in Newtownabbey disagree, as is their right, that did not give them the right to impose their minority viewpoint on others.

In attempting to ban this play, the politicians were behaving like the medieval priests who refused the common people access to any religious interpretations other than those prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church.

Under the concept of freedom of civil and religious expression, as described by either the tenets of Protestantism or modern human rights advocacy, people should be allowed to choose whether they want to see the show or not.

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access to any religious interpretations other than those prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church.

This stupid, ignorant and selfish act by a few petty parochial politicians was quickly seized upon and blown out of all proportion. The nationalist PR machine was cranked up to amplify the story and to keep it alive for as long as possible. By the end of the week, the attempted banning of a play in a small regional theatre will have had a greater national and international media impact than the Christmas bombs left in Belfast by IRA terrorists.

A Newtownabbey Sinn Fein councillor described the move as the “worst type of censorship”. A comment that got widespread attention without anyone asking if perhaps murdering people you do not agree with would be an even worse type of censorship.

Apparently unaware in the role played by her party in suppressing unionist cultural traditions, Sinn Fein Culture and Arts Minister Carál Ni Chuilín got on the bandwagon, with a media friendly quote about the sanctity of freedom of expression and how “saddened” she was.

Amnesty International jumped in too and levered in the human rights rhetoric, calling freedom of expression “a fundamental right” and stating that, “... the cancelling of the play is utterly unjustified on human rights grounds”. A fair point, if a bit over-egged. Perhaps Amnesty might now reflect as to why they are not equally forthright whenever Republican thugs decide to leave bombs about the place.

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