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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	292
Reflections on the Fourth Lausanne Congress.....	293
<i>Joseph W. Handley, Jr.</i>	
Creating Life in Glass: A Biblical and Ethical Examination of IVF.....	302
<i>Ruth Houser</i>	
Lessons from the Olympic Ceremony Controversy .....	315
<i>Thomas Paul Schirmacher</i>	
Reclaiming the <i>Imago Dei</i> and Epistemology of Love.....	318
<i>Richard Howell</i>	
Six Sigma Soteriology: Applying Business Methodology to Christian Apologetics .....	328
<i>Jonathan Corrado</i>	
The Real Presence of Christ in the Church: A Central Theme in Casiodoro de Reina’s Confession of Faith.....	338
<i>Andrew Messmer</i>	
Barnabas and Paul: What Galatians and Acts Tell Us.....	351
<i>Jim Reiher</i>	
Perspectives on the Problem of Evil.....	362
<i>Joshua Jo Wah Yen</i>	
On the Unlikely Trajectory of US Evangelical Politics.....	376
<i>Bruce Barron</i>	
Book Reviews .....	381
The Priesthood of All Students: Historical, Theological, and Missiological Foundations of a Global University Ministry .....	381
<i>Timothée Joset</i>	
The Memory of Ignatius of Antioch .....	382
<i>Frazier MacDiarmid</i>	

# Lessons from the Olympic Ceremony Controversy

Thomas Paul Schirmmacher

*The 2024 Paris Olympics created considerable controversy at its opening ceremony with a scene that observers interpreted as mocking Christianity. The World Evangelical Alliance responded promptly with a measured, respectful statement, commenting that ‘Disrespect, even if unintended, has been felt.’<sup>1</sup> Now, with three months of distance, one of global Christianity’s most prominent voices on human rights offers this analysis to help us respond persuasively to similar situations in the future and to demolish arguments that artistic licence justifies such performances.*

The opening ceremony at the Paris Olympics on 26 July 2024 featured a drama that portrayed drag queens appearing to mimic Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper. The portrayal led to widespread criticism from the Christian and Muslim communities, as well as much debate in the media. After the emotional debate died down, I took a close look at the defences presented by the head of the organization that planned the opening and closing ceremonies, Tony Estanguet, and the choreographer, Thomas Jolly.<sup>2</sup>

In making these comments, I am not claiming that Christians deserve special protection or that I care only about the rights and sensibilities of Christians. I would be writing similar words if the scene had mocked an image or event dear to Muslims or another religious group. I firmly defend the freedom of religion or belief, which includes the right of non-religious people to criticize my Christian faith. But we are not talking here about the freedom of opinion or speech of private individuals; we are talking about a global event that was viewed by a billion people around the world and that is intended to promote harmony.

Choreographer Thomas Jolly said that the ceremony was meant to be ‘inclusive’. But his version of inclusiveness did not include Christians—that is, 2.3 billion people and one-third of the athletes and spectators. No other group was mocked during the

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1 World Evangelical Alliance, ‘Jesus Our True Friend: WEA’s Response to the Opening Ceremony at Olympics 2024’, 30 July 2024, <https://worlddea.org/news/26475/jesus/our/true/friend/weas/response/to/the/opening/ceremony/at/olympics/2024/>.

2 See Jack Rathborn, ‘Paris 2024 Apologises over “Last Supper” Parody at Olympics Opening Ceremony’, *The Independent*, 28 July 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/olympics-opening-ceremony-last-supper-paris-2024-b2587192.html>; Melanie Goodfellow, ‘Olympics Opening Ceremony Artistic Director Says Controversial Tableau Was Not Inspired by “The Last Supper”’, *Deadline*, 28 July 2024, <https://deadline.com/2024/07/olympics-opening-ceremony-artistic-director-intention-mock-or-shock-1236024601/>.

opening ceremony; why were Christians singled out? And as Jolly added that he wanted to convey that in France ‘we have a right to not be worshippers’, it is obvious that this message—which is already accepted by all who support freedom of religion or belief—is equivalent to a justification of the public mockery of Christianity.

Imagine if things had been the other way around—if Christians had made fun of a scene very dear to queer people and then said, ‘Oh, we didn’t know, we didn’t mean to hurt anyone, we just wanted to be inclusive.’ Who would have believed them?

Tony Estanguet insisted that the show was meant to be thought-provoking and that its basic lines had been agreed upon with the IOC. If so, that makes the undiplomatic nature of this offence even worse! And what fruitful thoughts about Christianity did they want to provoke?

Jolly, the choreographer, also denied having been inspired by the Last Supper: ‘The idea was to have a big pagan party associated with the gods of Olympus.’ Then why did virtually everyone recognize the parallel to Leonardo da Vinci’s painting? Why is the person in the middle so obviously playing the role of Jesus in da Vinci’s painting? Why does the screenplay use the heading ‘La Cène sur la scène sur la Seine’ (The Last Supper on the Seine stage)? And again, the queer community would not have accepted any excuse based on ‘we did not know’, if it had been the other way around.

Jolly also claimed that instead he followed a painting by Jan van Bijlert, ‘The Feast of the Gods’, from which the blue God Bacchus at the end of the scene was taken. One has to smile at this explanation, as van Bijlert’s work itself was inspired by da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper!

Da Vinci’s image has been misused so many times in the past decades that no one can claim not to know how Christians feel about it. Whoever planned this did so deliberately to ensure maximum global interest by shaming the largest possible group, that is, one-third of the world’s population. Since most countries in the world would not have allowed this presentation at an Olympics in their country, it was possible only in the country with the reputation of having the highest percentage of art that shames Christianity.

Incidentally, Barbara Butch, the lead actress in the performance, called herself ‘Olympic Jesus’ in a post and posted pictures on Instagram afterwards, calling the scene ‘Oh yes, the new Gay Testament’.

If the ceremony had used a dance around the Kaaba instead, and if Muslims from around the world had protested, would the organizers have said that they wanted to be inclusive and did not know that Muslims would be offended? Moreover, if the ceremony had used a dance around the Kaaba, churches around the world would have protested on the Muslims’ behalf as much as they protested Jolly’s work.

Jolly also stated, ‘You will never find in my work a desire to mock or denigrate anyone. I wanted a ceremony that brought people together, that reconciled, but also a ceremony that affirmed our republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity.’ One thing is important: queer people and other discriminated groups are serious about the fact that it is the discriminated people who decide whether they feel discriminated against or not. By that logic, whether Christians feel shamed by a caricature of the Last Supper must be determined by the Christians’ own feelings, not the theoretical intentions of those who shame others. Should there not be equal rights

for all, including Christians? Should the rules that apply to anyone who is discriminated against and shamed not also apply to Christians?

The organizers also used artistic freedom as a defence. Artistic freedom? What nonsense! No one is talking about banning such art by law. There are thousands of places where this kind of performance can be shown. But this was the Olympics, where art should serve the goals of peace and harmony. Or are they saying that they could have called for any kind of discrimination as long as they used art to express it?

Artistic freedom and freedom of expression include the right to dislike or criticize any art, to find it ugly or immoral or uninteresting or too expensive, or to criticize it for any reason. But apparently the offenders are now offended by the objections and demand not to be criticized.

Artistic freedom does not automatically make anything moral. In Russia, art is used to glorify war. Art is loved by all kinds of dictators and autocrats. None of their failures become more moral just because they are presented as art. Neo-Nazi art in Germany is, for the most part, not illegal. Does that make it any better?

Whenever art is used to shame a particular group of people, even if it is legally permissible, it is still morally wrong. Publicly stating that all baldheaded men are stupid is legal in most countries, based on the right of freedom of expression, and equally so if the message is expressed through art. But that does not change its immoral and discriminatory nature. Would it have been a valid message for the opening of the Olympic Games to say that bald people are stupid and then claim that their statement is protected by artistic freedom and freedom of expression?

The negative reaction by many leaders of other religious groups proves that they all felt the intention was to mock a particular world faith, which happens to be the largest one. If the organizers had wanted to humiliate a group larger than the 2.3 billion Christians (31.3 percent of the world's population), the only option would have been to select all women or all men, since even the number of children and youth in the world is slightly smaller than the number of Christians.

Finally, if the organizers had wanted to address a real problem in a controversial manner, they could have done so. They did not dare to express a criticism that might have unleashed powerful resistance, such as protesting China's treatment of the Uighurs, or the abuse of minors by religious leaders, or religious extremism in any form. Instead, they chose the cheap and easy way, knowing that Christians would not respond with violence.