[IE] Decisions on offensive comments concerning religion during television programme

IRIS 2017-8:1/29

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On 3 August 2017, the Compliance Committee of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) issued a notable number of decisions (11 in total) on offensive expression and religion arising from comments made on a programme broadcast by the public broadcaster RTÉ. The BAI had received a number of complaints over the programme, including those from priests and a Christian association, generating coverage in the media. The decisions are noteworthy because they show how the BAI assesses the distinction between offence and harm; they outline which duties are applicable to broadcasters and presenters to minimise harm; and they follow a number of other recent decisions on satire and religion (see IRIS 2017-1/9 and IRIS 2015-9/17).

The complaints were made following a January 2017 edition of RTÉ's longest-running chat show, The Late Late Show. The show featured a broad discussion on faith, the Christmas period and Catholic belief and practice. During the discussion, one guest, who was a comedian, made reference to the Eucharist as "haunted bread". Later, another guest spoke about how, as a child, The Eucharist being described as the body and blood of Christ had conjured up images of "cannibalism" in her young mind, leaving her conflicted about eating the literal "Body of Christ". The complainants claimed that there had been a violation of section 48(1)(b) of the Broadcasting Act, whereby broadcasters must ensure that anything which may reasonably be regarded as causing harm or offence is not broadcast, and Principle 5 of the BAI Code of Programme Standards on respect for persons and groups in society, which includes a reference to the fact that broadcasters shall show due respect for religious views, images, practices and beliefs.

However, the BAI's Compliance Committee held, by a majority, that the programme had not violated the Broadcasting Act nor the Code of Programme Standards. All 11 decisions contained similar reasoning, and the Committee first began by noting that since a broadcaster must cater for a diverse audience, there would inevitably be programming that "causes offence to some members of the audience", though the Code also recognised that offence can become harmful in certain circumstances. It then examined the comments concerning the Eucharist being "haunted bread", and noted that it was legitimate for a panellist to articulate their own personal views, dealing with a religious tenet which may be

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difficult to reconcile for those who hold other or no religious beliefs. The Committee held that the comments were an expression of his own views rather than a comment on the views of others, and that they were not intended to mock the faith of others. With regard to the mentioning of cannibalism, the Committee considered that the contributor was not equating the Eucharist with cannibalism, but rather describing her thoughts as a child. Moreover, the Committee had regard to the fact that the discussion had been broadcast after 23.00, which was a time at which content with a higher likelihood to offend may be broadcast. Furthermore, the audience would have been familiar with the comedian's artistic style.

Finally, the Committee found that the presenter had misjudged the offence likely to have been caused by use of the term "haunted bread", and while the comments did not cross a line such that undue offence was caused, the degree of offence may have been minimised if the presenter had demonstrated greater sensitivity to the potential for offence; "RTÉ is advised to have regard to the Committee's view in this regard".

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Broadcasting Complaint Decisions, August 2017

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