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# Heresy in the Church of High Art

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Opera seldom makes the news these days. Once a major force in the culture, opera is now the concern and fascination of a narrowing elite. The reasons for this trend are many, but among these is the fact that opera has followed the trend that now characterizes the world of high art — it is often transgressive, vulgar, and highly political.

Such is the case with Berlin's Deutsche Oper [German Opera] and its scheduled performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo* under the direction of Hans Neuenfels. Neuenfels is one of those pushing the artistic envelope. Mozart would no doubt be surprised to see his opera end with this dramatic flourish added by Neuenfels: Idomeneo the Cretan king enters the last

scene with the severed heads of Poseidon, Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed.

The controversy erupted when Berlin police warned the Deutsche Opera's director that the scene might be the cause of Muslim violence. The Berlin authorities — quite aware of what followed the publication of newspaper cartoons earlier this year — wanted to warn the opera that the performance of the Neuenfels production could be incendiary. In response, the Deutsche Oper canceled the performances, scheduled for November.

Artistic forces rallied in outrage to this form of "censorship." As of this week, it appears that the Neuenfels production will be back on the schedule.

There is a great deal to this story, of course. There is the very real danger of Muslim outrage and violence — just witness the response to the Pope's speech in Germany last month. The authorities were not concerned about violence from the followers of Jesus, Buddha, or Poseidon.

But the more telling story here is the worldview of the modern artistic elite. As critic Martha Bayles rightly commented, the world of high art has transformed itself into a religion.

From her essay published in *The Boston Globe*:

*In Berlin last week, a great offense was committed against one of the world's major religions: the high church of art.*

*When the director of the city's leading opera company, the Deutsche Oper, responded to a possible terrorist threat by canceling the scheduled performances of Mozart's "Idomeneo," howls of outrage were heard among the priesthood — a highly visible group in most cities, but especially Berlin, marked by their black clothing, shaved heads, and bizarre designer glasses, through which they gaze contemptuously at the rest of humanity.*

*First question: Why would terrorists care about an 18th-century opera about a bunch of Greeks on their way home from the Trojan War, traditionally performed in powdered wigs and silk waistcoats? Well, because when the Deutsche Oper stages this opera, they add a few flourishes, such as a final scene in which Idomeneo, the king of Crete, opens a bloodstained sack and pulls out the gory, severed heads of Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Poseidon (Neptune to you Romans). For three years this has not bothered anyone, because as the Berliner Zeitung pointed out:*

*“Nowhere else on earth does so much stage blood flow as in our theaters. Liters of the stuff are poured over people’s heads, actors defecate, [and engage in sexual acts] naked onstage. And when people run out of ideas for how to get a few people to leave the theater in anger, they stick a cross right next to the orgy so that at least the local bishop will be obliged by his congregation to write a letter of protest. Then, the amassed intellectual forces of the Republic rally in defense of artistic freedom and give the poor bishop a proper scare.”*

Bayles argues that the Church of High Art was established in the 19th century, and its creed is simple — aim for maximum offense.

More:

*In the high church of art, Mozart is a semi failure who secretly yearned to play football with the severed heads of prophets, but due to the repressive attitudes of various princes and archbishops, was forced to write gorgeous, immortal music instead.*

*Today, of course, it is hard to get a rise out of German bishops. Like the rest of us, they are tired of being pilloried by artists. That’s why Islam is starting to look like the new target of opportunity for transgressive artists — and their amassed intellectual defenders — in Europe. For example, the publication of the celebrated Danish cartoons was a clear case of a newspaper taking 100 yards when 50 would have sufficed.*

This is what inevitably happens when the aesthetic is severed from the moral. Truth, beauty, and goodness are, in truth, inseparable. Any effort to separate truth from beauty leads to ugliness — but ugliness is the reigning style within the magisterium of this “church.” The unification of the good, the beautiful, and the true is its main heresy. And its version of original sin? Censorship, of course. And the artist who avoids the transgressive offensiveness of the Church of High Art is guilty of the most damning sin — self-censorship. No wonder so few attend the modern opera.



NOTE: Happily, Mozart’s operas are available in several outstanding recorded performances. Never before have individuals been able to secure such outstanding recordings at such reasonable prices — a fact that would no doubt fascinate Mozart. I am a big fan of opera [favorites are the operas of Puccini, Verdi, and Mozart] but I stay away from live performances by most major opera houses. Who wants to see a German director play with body parts?

FOR FURTHER READING: See my lecture, “A Christian View of Beauty,” Parts [One](#), [Two](#), and [Three](#).

