



Demonstrators outside of the Loveland Museum/Gallery in Colorado, protesting an artwork by Enrique Chagoya. Oct. 1, 2010. Photo: John Prieto/Denver Post.

THE GLOBAL CULTURE WAR

Around the world, art is being censored and vandalized in the name of religion. But is there really something covertly secular at stake?

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

FROM THE VENICE AND SHARJAH biennials to museums in the U.S., France, Italy and Russia, accusations of artistic blasphemy and sacrilege are in the news. Not so long ago, the Culture Wars seemed a strictly American phenomenon. Today, the conflict has gone global, and in an increasingly sectarian world, it is clear that artists take on religious subjects at their peril.

In mid-March, the Singapore Biennale removed homoerotic elements from an installation by Japanese-British artist Simon Fujiwara for fear of offending the city-state's many devout Christians. On Aug. 2, a female Pakistani curator was reportedly roughed up by police at a private gallery in Lahore for violating fundamentalist Islamic strictures. Her crime? Wearing a sleeveless garment and chatting openly with men. A week later, the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila shut down a group exhibition after former first lady Imelda Marcos joined Roman Catholic leaders in denouncing Filipino artist Mideo Cruz for displaying works that combine phallic objects with Christian symbols.

In a phrase that captures the peculiar role of religion in the post-9/11 age, Jürgen Habermas has dubbed this a "post-secular" world.¹ With this deliberately awkward phrase, the German philosopher suggests that the Enlightenment model is finished, and secularism is no longer a necessary condition of modern society. Now we must add that alarmingly, across the world, the ascendant forms of religion are often militantly politicized. This is evident in such developments as riots in the Muslim world over Danish cartoons allegedly mocking the Prophet Mohammed, the religious rhetoric surrounding anti-immigrant nationalism throughout Europe and the U.S., and terrorism and wars characterized as a "clash of civilizations." In societies with already simmering tensions, the ethical and moral teachings of the world's major faiths are often



Andres Serrano:
Piss Christ, 1987.
Cibachrome,
60 by 40 inches.



Enrique Chagoya: *The Misadventures of the Romantic Cannibals*, 2003, color lithograph/woodcut, 7 1/2 by 90 inches. Courtesy Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colo.

distorted and even negated in battles over identity, authority or political power. This pattern emerges from a closer look at some recent controversies over art and religion that have prompted loud debate—and even, more rarely, serious thought.

UNITED STATES

Last fall, a protester destroyed *The Misadventures of the Romantic Cannibals* (2003), a print by Mexican-born painter Enrique Chagoya. The work was on display at the Loveland Museum/Gallery in Loveland, Colo., and had been the target of a campaign initiated by the pastor of the local Catholic parish. Regional media took up the priest's characterization of the work as a portrayal of Jesus receiving oral sex, and the controversy was quickly fanned by William Donohue, president of the Catholic League. This watchdog organization, though technically not affiliated with the Catholic Church, has played a role in many art/religion controversies past and present, including those involving David Wojnarowicz and Chris Ofili. When reported by Fox News, the story, which also inflamed many Protestant evangelicals, reached Kathleen Folden, a 56-year-old trucker, 690 miles away in Kalispell, Mont. She drove to Loveland, where she reportedly cried out "how can you desecrate my Lord?" before smashing the display case with a crowbar and irreparably damaging the work.

In an echo of the sexual politics that pervaded the 1990s Culture Wars, Folden and other protesters read this work as an attack on

Jesus Christ and a violation of scriptural injunctions against homosexuality. The reality is more complicated. The work, which had been exhibited without problem at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver the previous year, consists of 12 panels laid out in an accordion-style strip, each panel containing scenarios that advance the artist's message about the corruption of the spiritual in our materialistic society. The mix of visual elements includes comic book characters, Mexican porno scenes, Mayan symbols and ethnic stereotypes. The offending image juxtaposes a male head with its tongue sticking out not far from the crotch of a female body whose head has been replaced by that of Jesus. Chagoya, who told AOL News that "although I am not religious, I am not an atheist, either,"² has said that his target was neither Christ nor Catholicism but rather the Catholic Church's sex scandals and its hypocrisy regarding homosexuality.

FRANCE

In early April 2011, a print of American artist Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* (1987) was destroyed while on exhibit in Avignon, France. The work's troubled reception in the U.S. two decades ago had little bearing on this new event, as the act of vandalism emerged from contemporary French politics. *Piss Christ*, which depicts a crucifix submerged in urine, had been uneventfully on display since December 2010 at the Collection Lambert, a museum founded by Yvon Lambert, Serrano's dealer. Then, this spring, local Catholic archbishop Jean-Pierre Cattenoz denounced



View of Avdei Ter-Oganyan's performance *Young Atheists*, 1998. Courtesy Guelman Gallery, Moscow.



Aidan Salakhova: *Black Stone*, from the series "Destination," 2010-11, marble, 49 1/4 by 29 1/2 by 15 1/4 inches. Courtesy XL Gallery, Moscow.

Federico Solmi: *The Evil Empire*, 2009, mixed mediums on paper mounted on wood panel, 25 1/2 by 12 1/4 inches. Courtesy Jerome Zodo Contemporary, Milan.



View of Mustapha Benfodil's *It has no importance!*, *Wild Writings*, 2011, before the installation was removed from the Sharjah Biennial.

the work. His call for its removal was seconded by the General Alliance Against Racism and for the Respect of French and Christian Identity, a group of far-right Christian activists. The day after 1,000 protesters marched through the city to the gallery, four men, who may or may not have been aligned with the group, entered the gallery armed with a hammer and a screwdriver (or, in some accounts, an ice pick). They slashed both *Piss Christ* and a nearby Serrano photograph of a meditating nun, the latter apparently collateral damage.

In statements to the press, gallery director Eric Mézil connected the attack to a climate of intolerance stoked by French president Nicolas Sarkozy's recent affirmations of France's essential Catholic nature. Such declarations, along with Sarkozy's support of a controversial ban on the wearing of the Islamic veil, have been read by the French press as a response to the tough political challenge being mounted from the right by National Front president Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the movement. In this context, *Piss Christ* served as a useful rallying point for France's right-wing nationalists, for whom attacks on Christianity become attacks on France itself.

ITALY

The recent travails of Italian animation artist Federico Solmi are embroiled in the politics of art and religion of his native country. Last year Solmi, who has lived in the U.S. since 1999, was put

on trial for violating Italy's blasphemy laws. At issue was his video *The Evil Empire* (2008), which chronicles a futuristic dystopia presided over by a porn-obsessed Pope who engages in bestiality and sodomy and is accompanied at times by such personifications of evil as Hitler and Stalin. Replete with historical references (holy wars, the Inquisition) and produced in a cartoon style drenched with blotches of red that signify both blood and fire, the work resembles nothing so much as a frenzied anime version of Dante's *Inferno* with the powerful undone by their own vices.

The animation, which has appeared in the U.S. without incident, became the focus of controversy when shown at the Bologna art fair in January 2009, with accompanying objects, including a sculptural crucifix of a pope with a cherry-topped erection, based on imagery from the video. With sensitivities aroused by the concurrent visit by Pope Benedict XVI to the region, local authorities confiscated the work and charged the artist with "contempt for an article of worship" and "the display of obscene objects." The 2009 trial ended without a conviction, due in part to the legal counsel Solmi was able to retain thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship he received just after the furor broke.

There things rested until this spring, when the Mole Vanvitelliana in Ancona, Italy, abruptly canceled a survey of Solmi's work scheduled for exhibition this past summer. It appears that the cultural center panicked when it discovered that a Eucharistic Congress, to be attended by Pope Benedict, was scheduled to take place in the same building a few months later. Solmi offered

to withdraw *The Evil Empire* so the show could go on, but was rebuffed, at which point he decided to sue the museum for breach of contract. When the court ruled in his favor, the museum countered by slating the show for a much smaller space. Feeling there was no point in persisting where he was so unwelcome, Solmi then pulled out.

The reaction against *The Evil Empire* is in part due to its odd tendency to pop up, apparently coincidentally, in places where the Pope is about to appear. However, Solmi also sees a larger pressure at work. In an interview, he points out that many of the articles, blogs and e-mails critical of this work asked why he chose to attack Catholicism and the Pope rather than Islam and Osama bin Laden. From this he surmises that the reaction against his work is entangled with fears of an Islamic immigrant invasion and the rise of right-wing nationalism in Italy, where Muslim asylum-seekers have been flooding in, most recently from Tunisia.³ As in France, this has produced a conservative backlash, with denunciations of immigrants and affirmations of Catholic identity serving as rhetorical staples of the hard-right Northern League, a political party that has long been a key ally of embattled Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

RUSSIA

Such cases pale beside the situation of artists who run afoul of blasphemy laws in the former Soviet Union. The turmoil of the post-Soviet era has left many looking backward for a lost golden age. The Russian Orthodox Church has used this nostalgia to consolidate its power, going so far, in 2000, as to bestow sainthood on the last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family, who were shot by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

By cozying up to the ostensibly secular civil government, the Church has acquired a powerful voice in cases where charges have been brought against artists and organizers of art exhibitions for "inciting religious hatred." This crime, prohibited under Article 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Constitution, is selectively prosecuted. When artists choose to critique the newly empowered Orthodox Church, they become particular targets.

Yet as religion has gained more political clout in Russia, artists and curators have pushed back, thus exposing themselves to physical assault, arrest, fines and exile. Those on the lam include Avdei Ter-Oganyan, the first artist to test the muscle of the post-Soviet blasphemy laws. He has been living in the Czech Republic since 2002, following his indictment under Article 282 for a performance lampooning Russian artists' slavish imitation of Western radicalism. His piece involved the desecration and destruction of cheap paper reproductions of icons purchased from church shops. In 2004, painter Oleg Yanushevski found refuge in the UK after receiving death threats from members of an ultra Orthodox nationalist group protesting an exhibition in Saint Petersburg of his "contemporary icons," which depict consumer items in the traditional format of sacred images.

Oleg Mavromatti is currently living in Bulgaria, where he fled following a blasphemy accusation in 2000. Mavromatti's crime was to stage a performance scene in an aborted film, *Oil on Canvas*, in which he played the lead character, an artist who kills a fellow artist out of jealousy and then attempts to repent by crucifying himself. When footage of the performance in progress was presented on national television as part of a cultural program, the chairman of the Orthodox community in Moscow filed a complaint. Orthodox protesters



Above, video documentation of Oleg Mavromatti's performance *Do Not Believe Your Eyes?*, 2000, at the Institute of Culturology, Moscow, intended for his aborted film *Oil on Canvas*.

Opposite, Chagoya: *Resurrection*, 2011, oil on canvas, 80 by 60 inches. Courtesy the artist.

took to the city's streets, whereupon Mavromatti's apartment was searched by the police, who confiscated and destroyed the artist's equipment and offending video, and took him in for questioning. Several months later, while at a video conference in Bulgaria, Mavromatti learned he had been charged with fostering religious animosity and elected not to return home. His situation is particularly precarious as the Russian government has refused to reissue his passport, and Bulgaria has been slow to grant him refugee status, without which he risks extradition and three to five years in prison.

Curators have also run afoul of Article 282. In 2005, museum director Yuri Samodurov and curator Ludmila Vasilovskaya, organizers of an exhibition titled "Caution: Religion" (2003) at the Andrei Sakharov Museum and Center in Moscow, were accused of promoting religious hatred and fined \$3,500 each. Undaunted, in 2007, Samodurov joined with art expert Andrei Yerofeyev to mount "Forbidden Art—2006" at the Sakharov Center. The exhibition presented work previously excluded from or thrown out of other exhibitions, including "Caution: Religion." Due to complaints from religious activists and right-wing nationalist groups, the two curators were again

prosecuted for blasphemy. After a 14-month trial, they were convicted and given fines totaling \$11,300.

Russia's blasphemy laws cast a wide net. The Russian Orthodox Church recently refused to lift the excommunication of Leo Tolstoy, who was banished from the faith in 1901 for his criticisms. As a result, the centennial of the death of Russia's greatest writer went largely unobserved last year. It is worth noting here one of the great ironies of this chronicle. In Russia today, the Orthodox Church seems to be aping its nemesis, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which during the Soviet era promoted an atheist ideology as vehemently as the Russian Orthodox Church now promotes a nationalistic Christianity. As Mavromatti's wife, artist and curator Boryana Rossa, remarks, "In Russia today, religion is more dangerous than politics."⁴

SHARJAH AND AZERBAIJAN

The examples above all involve conflicts over Christian imagery. Charges of sacrilege have even greater consequences in the Islamic world, where blasphemy is sometimes punishable by death. Even in supposedly liberal Islamic states, religious sensitivity often runs high. The 2011 Sharjah Biennial, a respected stop on the international circuit, was rocked this April when Sharjah's ruler, Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi, fired the Sharjah Art Foundation's director, Jack Persekian, over a work in the Biennial. The offending installation, *Maportaliche/Ecritures sauvages* (It has no importance/Wild Writings), 2011, by Algerian artist, journalist and activist Mustapha Benfodil, comprises 23 headless mannequins arranged in a mock soccer match. Their T-shirts are inscribed with texts, including phrases from a post-rape soliloquy (based on real-life accounts) delivered by a fictional female character victimized when a radical Islamic sect overran Algeria in the 1990s. Because the attackers were envisioned invoking the name of God, this work was deemed blasphemous and pornographic by Sharjah officials. In a statement to the press, the artist maintained that his target was not Islam generally but rather "the devastating destructive divinities claimed by Algerian millenarian movements."

Two months later, references to Islam proved equally problematic at the Venice Biennale, when two works were removed from the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the request of Azerbaijan president Ilham Aliyev. They were the creation of Azerbaijan-born, Moscow-based artist and gallerist Aidan Salakhova, who is known for provoca-

THE ETHICAL AND MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE WORLD'S MAJOR FAITHS ARE OFTEN DISTORTED AND EVEN NEGATED IN BATTLES OVER IDENTITY, AUTHORITY OR POLITICAL POWER.

tive explorations of gender and religion. The two sculptures consist of a completely veiled woman with the title *Waiting Bride* (2011) and a representation of the holy black stone of Mecca surrounded by a vaginal-like frame (*Black Stone*, 2011). Azerbaijan is an overwhelmingly Muslim country with a secular government, a mix that requires a delicate balancing act. It appears that Salakhova touched two nerves at once—the first work was seen as a challenge to the officially secular position on women's rights, while the second was seen as a profanation of Islamic beliefs.

AS THESE INSTANCES SUGGEST, conflicts over religious images are often ignited by broader social and political issues. Sometimes artists are drawn into quagmires they might have preferred to avoid. At other times, they intend to provoke, employing religious symbols in order to challenge demagoguery, institutional hypocrisy or the exploitation of religious teachings for political ends. Rarely do their works consist of a direct attack on religion itself, as opposed to the social and political uses to which religion is put. In fact, in surprisingly many cases, artists acknowledge their powerful attraction to religious symbols and core beliefs. But these niceties are often lost on believers, particularly those for whom religion is inseparable from national or ethnic identity or for whom it represents an unchangeable orthodoxy. Meanwhile, politicians and power brokers across the globe have discovered that religion is a potent tool for rallying their constituencies against the encroachment of "heretical" outsiders, be they homosexuals, immigrants or adherents of other religions.

The battle lines between art and religion are not inviolable, however. The Chagoya incident was followed by an unusual but encouraging coda that demonstrates the potential for common ground.⁵ Alerted to the incident by his congregation, Jonathan Wiggins, pastor of Loveland's Resurrection Fellowship Church, e-mailed the artist, suggesting that they open a dialogue. Chagoya, who was genuinely distressed by the controversy, accepted the invitation as well as Wiggins's request that he create an image of an "uncorrupted Jesus." That work, which depicts the Resurrected Christ and draws on sacred images from Renaissance and Mexican Baroque art, is now installed in the Fellowship Church. Chagoya says, "I want to make a statement in favor of open-minded actions and civil dialogue. . . . Responding to hate with hate will not take us anywhere."⁶ ○



1 Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on a post-secular society," *signandsight.com*, June 18, 2008. 2 Karen Schwartz, "Artwork Inspires Hate and Understanding," *aolnews.com*, Oct. 31, 2010. 3 Interview with the author, Apr. 15, 2011. 4 Interview with the author, Apr. 11, 2011. 5 For a fully detailed account, see Faye Hirsch, "The Print and the Pastor," *artinamericamagazine.com*, Mar. 1, 2011. 6 E-mail to the author, Apr. 12, 2011.

ELEANOR HEARTNEY is a New York-based art critic.