

Anti-Christian Blasphemy Isn't Edgy or Brave

In late December, an obscure Brazilian far-right group firebombed the Rio de Janeiro office of the production company behind a comedic Netflix "Christmas special" that portrayed Jesus as gay. A security guard quickly extinguished the blaze, and no one was hurt.

Porta dos Fundos, the comedy group behind the film, immediately began casting themselves as brave defenders of free speech. In an official [statement](#), the group announced that "our country will survive this storm of hatred and love will prevail along with freedom of speech," while one member took to Twitter to proclaim, "They won't shut us up! Never!"

I'll admit, at first there was a small part of me that wanted to thank the would-be arsonists. The film, entitled *The First Temptation of Christ*, is blasphemy of the most juvenile sort, on par with a child who farts at Christmas dinner just to watch Grandma clutch her pearls. Porta dos Fundos set out with the sole intention of offending, and it worked. Play stupid games; win stupid prizes.

Then I realized something. The film not only achieved its desired effect; it went beyond anything Porta dos Fundos could have expected. It is precisely because the Molotov cocktail attack was so unexpected that *The First Temptation of Christ* was ever made in the first place. Blasphemy may have been a capital crime in bygone centuries, but today no one slanders Christ and expects to suffer for it. Quite the opposite in fact. In the "profits" column, Porta dos Fundos has a lucrative Netflix contract and 16 million YouTube subscribers. Their "loss" column consists of some minor smoke damage and the cost of a new fire extinguisher.

I'm not the first to make this observation. At the 2016 Chicago Humanities Festival, feminist scholar Camille Paglia [railed against](#) the “completely hollow” type of “transgressive gesture” that defines contemporary art:

Once, if you made an avant-garde gesture, there was a price to be paid for it... Since the 80s, what is the price paid?... You take something from Catholic iconography—always Catholic, right? Never Jewish, never Muslim... and do something scandalous to it and you will be written up... in the New York Times... You will get a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts... You will be hired by the University of Chicago... or Berkeley, or UCLA.

The blasphemy of *The First Temptation of Christ* is not only safe and boring. It's hypocritical. There's a reason Porta dos Fundos made a gay Jesus movie instead of a gay Mohammad movie. Most Christians are fully onboard with the values of free speech and freedom of religion, which are arguably themselves products of a Christian worldview. Even [a band T-shirt with the slogan](#) “Jesus is a C***,” the most blasphemous statement its designers could think of, resulted in nothing more than a few brief arrests and perfunctory fines.

Depictions of Mohammad, on the other hand, have led to death threats, riots, and terrorist attacks, including [the 2015 massacre](#) of 12 people at the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Many artists and organizations that portray themselves as heroes of free expression often cower when certain Muslims threaten to make them put some skin in the game. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, temporarily removed paintings depicting Islam's Prophet back in 2010, but it had no problem [offending Christians with its 2018 Gala theme](#).

Christianity is the perfect target for pseudo-provocateurs, who get to seem edgy without suffering any of the consequences

that often accompany truly counter-cultural art. For Porta dos Fundos and their ilk, Christianity is simultaneously so tyrannical that mocking it is an act of heroic bravery and so powerless that it can be mocked with impunity. It cannot be both.

Likewise, it is impossible for Porta dos Fundos to be mainstream and subversive at the same time. As early as 1932, British journalist G.K. Chesterton [foresaw the absurdity](#) of this secular balancing act:

[W]hen... God is abolished, the abolition is abolished. There can never be any future for the literature of blasphemy; for if it fails, it fails; and if it succeeds, it becomes a literature of respectability. In short, all that sort of effect can only be an instantaneous effect; like smashing a valuable vase that cannot be smashed again. The heaven-defying gesture can only be impressive as a last gesture. Blasphemy is by definition the end of everything, including the blasphemer. The wife of Job saw the commonsense of this when, when she instinctively said, 'Curse God and die'. The modern poet, by some thoughtless oversight, so often neglects to die.

Porta dos Fundos has the right to free speech, and the radical right-wingers who attacked their offices should be caught and punished. But any attempts by the members of this comedy troop to portray themselves as revolutionary martyrs speaking truth to power deserve nothing but scorn.

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[Image Credit: Youtube-Porta dos Fundos, "[TRAILER – A PRIMEIRA TENTAÇÃO DE CRISTO \(ESPECIAL DE NATAL – NETFLIX\)](#)"]