



## Thought For The Day

### Transcript

Stewart Lee 13<sup>th</sup> February

Last year, as I crossed a picket-line of religious protesters trying to ban a theatre piece I'd co-written, a phrase popped unbidden into my head. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Few would disagree that the stories and sayings of religions and myths are an unavoidable part of the imaginative fabric of our daily lives, whether one accepts them as literal truth or not. From Jesus' wise words to his tormentors on the cross, to Odysseus' cunning use of the Trojan Horse, everyday language is consistently and quietly informed by religion and myth. But should this source material be available as imaginative resources for everyone, or should its usage be restricted?

Last month, at The Bush theatre in London, I performed a one-man show about the last week of Jesus' life, as seen through the eyes of his disciple Judas. On some nights, I was aware of the predictable and menacing presence of believers looking to object, but I also had lots of positive feedback from thoughtful priests and enthusiastic secularists alike. Two years ago, right-wing Christian fundamentalists closed down the theatre piece I co-wrote, Jerry Springer The Opera, due to its religious content. Ongoing attempts to take us to court for blasphemy, and a general doubt over religious freedom of expression introduced by the government's failed Incitement To Religious Hatred bill led to the collapse of the Opera as a financially or artistically viable entity.

So given this, why return to religious themes for a new work? Well, it's thirty years now since half of the population, as one, watched The Morecambe and Wise Christmas show together at the same time, and even longer since the majority of the nation claimed to believe in the same God, or indeed any God indeed. We live in a society where common ground is increasingly hard to find, where communal points of reference are increasingly rare. Multi-channel media narrowcasts to ever-more focused demographics rather than broadcasting to broad ones. But what better way is there to look at, as we did in the opera for example, the most essential notions of good and evil than through the Christian vision of heaven and hell in conflict, what better known tale of betrayal is there than the story of Judas and Jesus?

Believers say religious stories survive because they are literally true, but even rationalists accept that religious tales, myths and folk-stories, while not always actually true, can be true in terms of what they tell us about human experience. As rationalists, we should be careful, in trying to block religious education in its most pernicious forms, that we do not prevent young people from accessing a treasure trove of invaluable material.

As I travelled the country defending the opera, meatheads made the banal point that we would not have used the Koran in the same way as we appropriated the bible. They attributed this to fear, which is understandable, but ignored the fact that there would be little point in using Islamic stories as a short cut to bigger ideas, when they are not commonly understood by most people in the

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country. So, how do we maintain a shared frame of mytholo-poetic reference in a country both increasingly secular and multicultural? Religious education needs, if anything, to be increased, to teach the folk-tales and ancient stories of all religions and pantheos of Gods alongside each other, without ever addressing the argument of their literal truth. A child learning that his parents' faith is another person's myth, or another person's blasphemy even, must find in these great, ancient metaphors key common elements, rather than, in ignorance, defending the inescapable rightness of a position he has merely inherited culturally. Besides which, I quietly believe that the best way to get society en masse to abandon any dangerous, literal, fundamental belief in religions, is actually to expose young people to all of them.

