

Spain: Bomb threats and funding cuts follow theatre show

By Paul Bond
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Responses to a theatre show by comedian Leo Bassi indicate the escalation of right-wing clerical reaction in Spanish politics. The cutting of government subsidies to a theatre festival that staged the show is the latest in a sequence of attacks that has seen theatres picketed and attempts made to bomb auditoriums.

New York-born Bassi describes his show “The Revelation,” which has toured successfully elsewhere in Europe, as a “tribute to secular values” and a “defence of atheism.” He notes the contradiction of a society where technological development sits alongside the proliferation of fundamental religious sects.

The intention of his show, Bassi told *El Pais*, was to explain as an atheist his opposition to monotheistic thinking. In the two-hour satirical monologue, he plays a televangelist, a fundamentalist and the Pope (handing out condoms). At the end of the show, he directs people to a form on his web site where they can renounce their faith. He describes this as “reverse evangelism.”

He was driven to create the show because of the rising influence of religion in politics internationally. In the *El Pais* interview, he described the Evangelical church as “the biggest political force” in the United States. His previous work has also attacked other conservative elements of Spanish life. His ongoing “Bassi Bus” tours of “the worst of Madrid” sometimes take in the Valle de los Caídos, where General Franco’s remains are interred.

The show pays tribute to the Enlightenment and its philosophers, particularly Voltaire, and argues for the separation of church and state. Bassi explained to *El Pais*, “The reality of a democratic society based on the separation between state and religion is losing ground, and things are going backwards.... The only way to live is to separate what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar.” He described the intrusion of religion into

politics as “very, very, very dangerous to society.”

In defending Leo Bassi’s show, the implications of the attacks on it need to be fully understood.

This obvious and immediate attack on artistic freedom expresses the degree to which the Catholic Church, as the ideological vehicle for the extreme right, is taking an ever more active role in Spanish politics.

When the show opened at Madrid’s alternative Teatro Alfil, it met with demonstrations by conservative groups against what they described as an attack on Christian values. The lead was taken by the religious group Alternativa Española, which organised demonstrations denouncing the show’s lack of respect for religious beliefs.

Some 200 extreme right-wingers wrote to Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in February demanding he “apologise” for the “offence to Catholic principles.” Two groups filed suits against both the comedian and the theatre. Bassi said he had received threats from Alternativa Española, which describes the show as “blasphemous.”

The attacks have also taken a more directly physical form. After attempts were made to burn down the display window at the Teatro Alfil, Bassi was forced to hire bodyguards to protect himself.

Several days after the Alternativa Española demonstration outside the theatre, staff disturbed a man in the act of planting a bomb in the theatre. A 50-year-old man was seen fleeing the scene shortly before a performance was due to start. A homemade firebomb was discovered in a cleaning cupboard in the balcony, not far from Bassi’s dressing room. The bomb was made of a gasoline can and two tins of gunpowder. The wick was lit when staff discovered it. There were 200 people in the theatre at the time, and bomb-disposal experts advised that the device could

have caused untold damage.

The police said that they had no immediate idea who might have planned the attack. One ultra-Catholic newsgroup ran suggestions that Bassi himself had staged the event as a publicity stunt. Others on the Hazteoir forum, whilst opposing the bomb attempt, still denounced Bassi's "verbal violence."

After the Madrid run, the show was due to open at the independent T+T theatre festival in Toledo. Before it opened, Antonio Cañizares, archbishop of Toledo, denounced it as "blasphemous, anti-Christian" and "a real insult to the Church." Cañizares cited Christianity's tolerance of other religious beliefs, and said that the Church "demand[s] the same respect" for its convictions. Without that respect, he warned, "there is no peace."

Within days of Cañizares's attack, the local and regional government of Toledo threatened to withdraw its subsidies to the festival if the show was not cancelled. A spokesman justified this by saying that "It could offend Catholic sensibilities." The festival resisted this crude attempt at censorship, insisting that the show would proceed. The local government then cut €7,000 worth of subsidies. The festival producers were looking to make up the shortfall through donations.

Alongside the attacks on the show, there have also been vigorous protests mounted in defence of freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression. In Toledo, the police intervened when Catholic groups came to blows with a group defending Bassi.

Bassi himself has said that the reaction to the show indicates the intolerance of certain religious people. He has described it as "part of democracy," as people have the right to see such a defence of "lay values" and has said he is "fighting so as not to let a bunch of fools say they were able to stop a show."

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