

You have to make some allowances for the apparent clumsiness of Pope Francis's remarks about the Charley Hebdo murders in which he pointed out that if you insult someone's mother you can expect a punch. If he meant that there was no need to be gratuitously offensive and no call for gratuitously provoking those who are easily provoked, then his words were nothing more than plain old common sense, civility and even Christianity in practice.

But if he meant more than that, it raises some interesting and serious questions.

Going back to the Salman Rushdie fatwah, we should not lose sight of the fact that the constitutionally powerful Iranian ayatollahs who effectively dominate a modern state, Iran, were seen by the world to instruct such of the Muslim faithful as pay attention to them that it was their right and duty to kill Rushdie wherever in the world they could find him on the basis that they had adjudged that certain parts of his *Satanic Verses* were blasphemous.

Either that is tolerable or it is not. Either Islam, or some parts of Islam, claims the moral and legal right for its followers to kill blasphemers or it doesn't. Put another way, either Islam and all parts of it, accepts that it is a grievous crime to kill any person who exercises his right of free speech in his own democratic state by uttering a blasphemy against Islam or it doesn't. This is something on which there can be no ambiguity. Full stop. There is no wriggle room on this issue.

If there is doubt on these matters, a wholly un-necessary question mark thereby hangs over the relationship between Islam and our modern democratic states.

For my part, I would not avail of these pages to mock the religious beliefs of others. That said, I do feel it is my right to freely express my own views on the validity, credibility or falsity of any religion or religious belief without any expectation of a "punch" from anyone I may have offended.

Mormons have to put up with the West End musical "The Book of Mormon" which satirises their heartfelt faith. Christians had to put up with "The Life of Brian" even though it deeply offended the likes of Malcolm Muggeridge and Mary Whitehouse. Devout Irish Catholics may resent Father Ted. Muslims may not like, but may not stop, the depiction of the Prophet or the satirising of aspects of their faith.

Nobody forces any of us to see or watch any of these satires. And I think I have a right to see them and enjoy them.

It is an entirely different issue when those who are offended by what they consider blasphemy seek to prevent anyone else from seeing that which they consider blasphemous or to punish or harm the blasphemer.

We have all seen in recent years that Christians in Pakistan, Sudan and elsewhere live under the threat of denunciation and execution for blasphemy and apostasy. That is what Sharia law means today in some Islamic states. It was the same in Christian Europe up until the Enlightenment. The savagery of the Inquisition and the torture and burning of heretics was a characteristic of the Christian equivalent of Sharia. So also was the orthodoxy of anti-semitism.

We in the West have been spoon-fed a history of Christianity that sometimes bears little or no relation to reality. Far from being noble, the crusades were a shocking, evil episode in the history of the Roman church. It was not only in the Holy Land that violence, slavery, torture and burning was the means of bringing Christ's message to the heathen and the pagan. The natives of the newly "discovered" Americas were also savagely converted to the love of Christ.

One way or another, every single one of us is an "infidel" in the eyes of someone, somewhere. Since that is axiomatic, we should, I think, reflect on what it means for our own society now.

In Ireland, North and South, we seem at long last to have moved on from oppression, hatred and violence against our own infidels. We are well down the road to the creation of a tolerant, secular republican state and society where the religious and philosophical liberties of all citizens are respected and guaranteed. There is a way to be travelled yet – North and South – on the road to tolerance, respect and inclusion.

We should always remember our own recent and distant history in our dealings with others. Aggressive secularism today may in future be seen as equally oppressive as the aggressive sectarianism and confessionalism of the past. Respectful secularism threatens nobody.

On the gay marriage referendum, I think there is also need for tolerance and honesty.

I support the referendum as a means of bringing about a culture of respect and inclusivity.

I personally cannot see how in reality - as opposed to theory - gay marriage "weakens" marriage for everyone else or the individual marriage of anyone else. I do not see how civil partnership has done any harm at all to marriage and I am glad that I was able to push-start the process that led to civil partnership when I was in government.

I have, however, feared and felt that the opponents of gay marriage would ultimately fasten on a concern for the "interests of the child" as a ground for rejecting marriage equality for gays.

And so it is turning out.

As respectfully as I can, I want to express my sincere doubt that "concern for the child" is the real issue for many moral conservatives. I think it is more of a construct designed to win an argument rather than a real, heartfelt concern for any individual child.

The "ideal" of a child being raised by a father and a mother is that - an ideal. Many children are raised in circumstances which are far from ideal. But there are many, many children who are given a loving childhood in a family where both of their parents are not part of their family.

Many moral conservatives might also ask themselves whether they themselves were as "concerned for the interests of the child" when they opposed the legalisation of contraception or the ending of illegitimacy or the referendum to allow for the adoption of the children of married people.

It was, by the way, striking to hear Pope Francis expressing -again rather clumsily - his concern about people irresponsibly multiplying like rabbits but still defending the generally discredited doctrine on birth control found in *Humanae Vitae*. Something has to give –some day.

It seems to me that we need to be respectful and generous to each other in our social and political discourse. But that does not mean self-censorship. Honesty and tolerance are not enemies.