

16084 France, Iran, and the Affair of the Lunch Wine

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French President, François Hollande, cancelled a lunch Thursday in Paris with the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in town on an official visit, because the Iranians insisted that no wine be served at lunch.

The Iranian insistence that no wine be placed on the table came a few days after the point, on Rouhani's European tour, when the Italians agreed to cover up some potentially offending nude statues that he might otherwise have glimpsed at an event in the Capitoline Museums, by placing big white boxes over them. The French position seemed to be that there are limits: the Italians might box their statues, but the French were not prepared to surrender on Chablis. No *carte des vins*, no lunch at all.

Trivial as it might seem, the dispute touches on a real issue, worth pursuing: what *is* owed to guests who see the world differently? How extensive are the duties of hospitality, which incline us to think that we should do all in our power to make our guests feel comfortable and at home, providing them minimal embarrassment or awkwardness? And, against that, what is owed according to the duties of integrity—not pretending to our guests that we are in any way ashamed or unwilling to stand up for our own values, even while respecting theirs?

There is more than one reasonable answer to the question of what we owe such guests. One is: *everything we can give them, within the limits of basic decency and harm*. If our norms are offensive to them, then we owe them some shifting of our own—particularly if ours have been the imperial norms of the past. If wine on the table somehow reminded a visitor of colonialists in his capital, then it would not be unfair for him to ask the host to go without.

The other side of this, of course, is that the visitor ought to accept that cultural signals differ—it is part of being a good guest not to *take* offense. It seems perfectly fair to say that not intending to give offense does not mean that the offense does not exist. The wine is not on the lunch table to insult the Iranians but to please the French, but try telling that to the Iranians: we can't always tell other people what they ought to be offended about. But it also seems reasonable to say that one should not seek out occasions to be insulted.

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