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Introduction: Blasphemy

The subject of blasphemy has rapidly become of significant contemporary importance within the last thirty years. The Salman Rushdie and Danish cartoons affairs both demonstrated that it has become an essential factor in inter-religious relationships, as well as a phenomenon bringing modern states to re-examine their religious and legislative pasts. Blasphemy became a flashpoint where the religio-politics of the post-cold war era were discussed and defined. Episodes where blasphemy was a central accusation also invaded western societies and their conceptions of freedom around personal and artistic expression. Countries as diverse as Britain, Pakistan, the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands have been forced to confront the legal status of religion within their borders, as well as the historical legacy that blasphemy laws have left them. More than this they have also had to refine and debate the entire issue of tolerance and such societies have found themselves in the classic liberal dilemma of both ensuring rights and protecting individuals from harm.

Amidst this rapid resurgence in importance the academic study of blasphemy in historical contexts has only just begun to catch up. This is particularly striking when the history of blasphemy is compared alongside the history of heresy. This latter phenomenon has had significant factors influencing its development and these have continued to emphasis its importance within religious history. Heresy benefited from a very early interest in its historiography that arguably formed a central part of Christianity’s own formative development and indeed many such works formed an important part of the Reformation story. In such histories of heresy we can identify, chart, and follow the development of coherent groups and coherent religious doctrines, as indeed the numerous histories of Lollards, Cathars, and Waldensians demonstrate. These histories were able to sketch for us a clear geography of dissidence and individualised approaches to Christianity. They were also able to tell us that heresy and concern about the phenomenon existed within a clearly delineated historical period. Taken in a still wider context histories of heresy were linked to the European-wide process of
confessionalisation. All of these explain the prevalence and success of histories of heresy within religious history and indeed the absence of these factors around blasphemy partly explains the gaps in our knowledge. Blasphemy’s historiography is a comparatively young phenomenon with only early forays into the field appearing in the first years of the twentieth century, leaving the bulk of work to be done from the 1980s. Unlike heresy, the phenomenon could not be readily linked to coherent groups or indeed to coherent beliefs and doctrines. Indeed what cases were examined spoke of the individual, often marginalised by their own convictions and beliefs. In still more cases beliefs almost disappeared when faced with evidence of simpler profanity emerging when individuals were drunk, distracted, or railing against an unfair and malevolent universe. Such individuals appeared to deserve no real chance of collective analysis that geographical or longitudinal study could give them. The drunk and the mad were obviously not the distracted honest dissident and as such appeared less interesting. Moreover blasphemy’s periodic waxing and waning and its appearance within detection panics could all too readily persuade us that it belonged firmly within the history of crime rather than the history of religion. Lastly, and perhaps most intriguingly, blasphemy belongs to the history of de-confessionalisation where government laws and states are confronted by the consequences of promoting and sustaining a state religion, sometimes long after the raison d’être for doing so has become unclear.

As suggested, many of the older style, arguably, trailblazing histories of blasphemy concentrated almost exclusively upon its existence as a legal phenomenon, so it seemed to belong to the history of law and crime. This history looked at the development and changing history of the offence. Very often this history looked obviously whig, progressive, and teleological and tended to end its story with a sigh of relief at blasphemy’s recent repeal, or some statement about its obvious anachronism and moribund nature. Nonetheless it needs to be remembered that this legal history was quite often the first stage of meaningful research in this area and it is worth recording that more research is still needed in some geographical areas that we might still consider “undiscovered.” Another aspect of this early history of the subject

that deserves attention has been its tendency to concentrate upon what lawyers would regard as high profile cases. These are instances where the law has been changed or, as happened on some occasions, aspects of the law’s function (or indeed failure) is graphically demonstrated. This means that the wider and deeper appearance of blasphemy in lesser courts and lesser cases is still largely awaiting discovery. When researchers begin to uncover this fuller picture we will start to have a much deeper understanding of the individual’s relationship with their god, particularly where this was problematic or placed under extreme stress.

Our way into blasphemy as an area of study in religious history has not been especially helped by problems of definition. Quite often the first two chapters of those studies that do exist, embroil themselves in chasing definitions and theoretical paradigms that seem to inform how the modern world wants to treat blasphemy. This is because unlike heresy the idea of blasphemy has remained a linguistic category and method of describing conflicting beliefs. Within these definitions blasphemy becomes malleable and in danger of being represented simply as a transgressory act. Other approaches see it as a speech act, a criminal offence requiring action, an occasional error of judgement committed in fit of rage or in latter periods as an artistic evocation of higher authority and a willing (or unwilling) partner of providential belief in divine judgement. Although much of this work remains necessary, competing definitions are sometimes in danger of overshadowing the more rewarding work that is currently being undertaken in archives throughout the world.

It is with in mind that this themed issue was conceived. As well as showing the new directions in which the study of blasphemy is proceeding, it also demonstrates a significant appreciation of the work that has gone on before.

The article by David Manning seeks to focus upon how blasphemy was “a sin in the context of theological polemic.” This focuses upon the theatre as a specific locale for battles about blasphemy and theology. Manning notes that the theatre was a place where blasphemy and the workings of the universe could be represented to audiences. From the theatre material that could be considered blasphemous resonated throughout the land. Even the actual performance of plays themselves could be juxtaposed with misfortune in the popular mind, or considered unwise in the face of apparently divine judgement. In the fearful protestant mind the theatre was a vehicle for turning against God and the following it attracted was leading souls to damnation. The problem sketched here, however, also has an important relevance for the contemporary world. Manning notes playwrights seeking to establish authority for their words and images by reaching for transcendent phrases and transcendent authority. This invested their works with seriousness and gravity and demanded an audience response. Certainly this issue of artists using (and perhaps abusing) the sacred has been a fundamental part of blasphemy’s recent history where it has emerged amongst audiences in theatres, cinemas, and art galleries.

Francisca Loetz’s article adds considerably to our knowledge of Swiss Calvinism’s response to blasphemy. For several generations knowledge of this scarcely went beyond Calvin’s decision to burn Servetus. Thankfully our knowledge is being extended as Loetz’s article opens an important window onto the world of Swiss confessionalisation. Far from religious orthodoxy being intractable the attempts to bring charges of blasphemy against the high-ranking General Werdmuller ironically suggests to us a much more fluid and permissive religious culture. Religious debate emerges as a central part of social relations, even if the ultimate aim within it was to establish orthodoxy and confessionalisation. Werdmuller was not the tavern miscreant nor hot-headed gambler we find elsewhere. Instead he used serious debate, rhetoric and even heavy handed jokes to define his own intellectual and doctrinal position. Nonetheless this incident also highlights how the crime of blasphemy and the status of the blasphemer remained as a means of demonstrating the boundaries of the godly commonwealth. It also suggests how the blasphemy accusation could readily function as a political tool reached for by the scrupulous and the unscrupulous.

The article by David Nash uncovers the enduringly close link between blasphemy and providence. It traces this link from its origins in the late seventeenth century through to its stubborn persistence into the twentieth century and beyond. The reappearance of blasphemy accusations at regular intervals also uncovers a fear of the blaspheamous. Whereas the medieval world conceived of the blasphemer as a danger to local communities David Manning’s article suggests how influential pamphleteers noted its links to national disaster. This is further amplified in the Nash article since it demonstrates that the link between blasphemy and providence persisted into the era of the modern social democratic nation state. This close relationship between the two enabled them both to survive symbiotically into the modern world. This discovery means we should make it a research priority to investigate the fertile nature of these ideas and discourses well into the twentieth century. The survival of blasphemy as a means by which people may be offended looks slightly different if viewed alongside providential ideas, however opaque or half realised. The twentieth century, if viewed from a secularising perspective, saw the reach for a blasphemy accusation as an act of desperation. It looked to be a principled, if forlorn, stand to reaffirm the religious identity of the individual or group. If we consider that some semblance of providential belief remains amongst religious groups then their apparent motivation alters and their engagement with a secular world takes on a wholly new dimension. This survival of providentialism also further damages secularisation arguments about a self-sustaining and triumphant secular world.

Gerd Schwerhoff’s article, drawing upon his earlier work published in German, demonstrates the distinct discrepancy between the thinking of ecclesiastical and judicial authorities about blasphemy and how populations at large regarded this. For theologians it was a “horror crime” whilst for the rank and file of most European countries it was simply a disreputable habit that still, nonetheless, belonged in everyday speech. Schwerhoff notes that the
existence of blasphemy as an everyday speech act has been neglected thereby allowing the seriousness of written ecclesiastical condemnations to affect our judgement about this phenomenon. Nonetheless his article is partly a history of how ecclesiastical invention of blasphemy as a sin has effectively overwritten this wider and deeper history. It was, so he argues this authoritarian definition which became widely accepted and was inherited by modern secular governments seeking to reinforce their own claims to sovereign authority. Finally Schwerhoff explicitly denies the idea that blasphemy demonstrates the capacity for pre-modern atheism since only believers could blaspheme effectively.

Soilli-Maria Olli’s study of early modern Sweden for the first time opens the history of religious conflict and confessionalisation in this country up to wider scrutiny. It demonstrates the complex nature of blasphemy within a Lutheran country and notes how blasphemy and blasphemy prosecutions took a distinct turn within the history of Swedish Society, at considerable variance with the history of the phenomenon in other western countries. Blasphemy in early modern Sweden was considered a domestic matter and the state’s role in promoting this view was significant. Moreover the article depicts a reforming project in which the state worked successfully with the clergy. Although the link between a controlling project, new theories of kingship, and a centralising state fits firmly with what we know about France, England, Spain, and the Hapsburg lands the development of blasphemy in Sweden has one more interesting story to tell. The continued use of severe punishments, even capital punishment, persisted in Sweden far later than other western European countries. For this alone this article sheds light upon developments in the history of Scandinavian religious conflict.

These articles aim to showcase and engage interest in a neglected part of religious history. An area that, if opened out has much to offer other areas and paradigms of this subject.