DAVID NASH

“To Prostitute Morality, Libel Religion, and Undermine Government”: Blasphemy and the Strange Persistence of Providence in Britain since the Seventeenth Century

This article looks at the long term history of blasphemy in Britain and its relationship to the phenomenon of providence from the seventeenth century through to the twentieth. This, it is suggested, has substantially dominated the appearance of blasphemy accusation and public concern linked to the moral security of the realm. Using sermons and didactic writing from the seventeenth century, the article demonstrates how conceptions of providence and blasphemy were linked to produce a forceful culture which protected rulers against challenges to the community. Using demonstrations of public opinion the article shows how in the twentieth century the providential fear of misfortune as a result of blasphemy became linked with issues of national safety and prosperity. The article concludes by suggesting that the link between blasphemy and providence enabled both to remain credible into the twentieth century and beyond, undermining many of the linear models of both secularization and the growth of rationality.

Historians have known a great deal about how the Church in Medieval Europe spent considerable energy pursuing and processing heretical individuals and groups. For contemporary authorities this was primarily undertaken as a means of establishing religious orthodoxy within the wider Christian community. In comparison the medieval church was significantly less interested in blasphemy and blasphemers and it is even possible to suggest that serious legal and religious interest in the crime only originated in the laws enacted by municipalities throughout late medieval Europe. Blasphemy was primarily characterised by impulsive behaviour which took a mocking or contemptuous approach to the central truths of Christianity. This was assumed to be taking God’s name in vain, assuming power over him, taking his powers upon oneself or cursing and reviling his use of his own omnipotent power. This collective definition signals to us that blasphemy was linked to individuals whose judgement had become in some way unbalanced either through drink,
through their temporary loss of mind, or through their reaction to the unfortunate losses occasioned by gambling. As such the late medieval world considered blasphemy a challenge to all forms of authority and tended to act swiftly. It punished individual blasphemers through ignominious and marginalising shame punishments which introduced mockery and turned the community against the blasphemer and their crime.¹

This comparative equation arguably changed in the sixteenth century as individual behaviour became increasingly scrutinized and proscribed. An intensity of discipline has been noted throughout Europe with mechanisms of repentance regularly enacted from Scotland to Switzerland.² This was not a phenomenon confined entirely to the Protestant world since Jean Delumeau noted its appearance as early as the fifteenth century in pre-reformation culture which brought guilt more readily to the foreground.³ Whilst it is easiest to focus upon these issues from the study of court cases it is equally possible to see the phenomenon as one which significantly concerned wider forms of authority in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The last third of the seventeenth century in particular saw a dramatic increase in both the scope and scale of blasphemy legislation and statute provision. One explanation regularly offered for this is that such enhanced interest coincides with the process of full confessionalisation — the process by which orthodoxy became linked with ongoing regimes of discipline to acculturate whole populations to an altogether stricter regime of Christianity. In this the State and its relationship with established religion became fused in a partnership that guaranteed respect for religion and the monarch/prince.

There is much to commend this argument. Many European statutes against blasphemy in France, the Hapsburg lands, England, and America seem to follow this established pattern. Perhaps most influential of these was the English Statute (9 & 10 William III c 32) which fused religion and state together. What made this statute have, if only symbolic power, was its declaratory intention gleaned from the judgement of Sir Matthew Hale who claimed religion was “part and parcel” of the law of the land. To subvert this was to subvert morality and the promise of peace and tranquility offered by the state. This particular viewpoint became a central part of the philosophy behind

English Common Law in this matter.\textsuperscript{4} Thus in the two centuries that followed, this link between behaviour, and peaceability had resonance in other places influenced by Common Law such as America and Australia, as much as it had in England.

Blasphemy, however, was more readily linked to the control and policing of the individual’s thoughts and desires than many other species of offence. Although many disciplinary codes aimed to curb and control appetites for drink and licentiousness only blasphemy laws sought control over an individual’s inner self, defined by their own relationship with God. Yet, unlike many of the other crimes against morality, blasphemy persisted in its apparent assault upon the worldview of individuals. Moreover, the pursuit of blasphemy and blasphemers equally continued way beyond the demise and eclipse of other heavy-handed attempts to control and regulate morality in the West. Thus, whilst the genesis of modern blasphemy laws and statutes can be fitted into an orthodox and recognisable framework of western legal and penal history, the persistence of blasphemy as a crime within these jurisdictions becomes rather more difficult to explain.

This article suggests the primary reason behind this survival was the association of blasphemy with species of providence. The seventeenth-century world was awash with literature and cultural ideas which associated blasphemy and blasphemers with providential happenings and punishments. This was so widespread that it performed an important role as an explicit governing restraint upon behaviour. In this, providentialism was itself an effective mode of policing and control which empowered both organisations and individuals to detect, report and police the behaviour of others. So commonplace and internalised was this cultural reaction that it persisted in new forms way beyond the disciplinary imperative of the early modern state. As such it survived to be articulated in recognisably modern contexts with varying degrees of sophistication. It is the contention of this article that the link between providence and blasphemy particularly ensured the survival of both into the twentieth century, when issues of identity and nationhood evoked discourses which blended both into a potent mixture.

I. Understanding Early Modern Providence and Blasphemy

The pervasive nature of providence as a theory governing human actions and the operation of the universe in the early modern period has been significantly


© 2008 The Author

Journal compilation © 2008 Association for the Journal of Religious History
well established.\textsuperscript{5} Works which examine this have noted how it policed and governed the actions of rulers as much as the ruled and did much to shape and constrain individual conduct. It is equally possible to see the potential for providential judgement used to command the responses of both humble villagers and exalted monarchs, yet in each case such command operated in broadly similar ways. Both were persuaded into specific actions in fear of divine retribution for their poor or neglectful behaviour. One especially abhorrent and dangerous behaviour was blasphemy (specifically taking the name of God in vain, mocking his powers, or an individual taking such powers upon themselves). These three particular facets of the offence appear to be those that caused the greatest concern during the Early Modern period. The fear of being in the physical presence of such blasphemy was important (e.g., inside and outside the church or adjacent to the tavern, street, or gaming room), but equally merely acquiring knowledge that it had transpired in the vicinity was potentially as dangerous. This fearful knowledge of its mere existence was a central part of conceiving blasphemy as “passive.” In this the acquisition of such knowledge enabled individuals to consider such actions “a blasphemy” rather than a later active conception of simply “blasphemy.”\textsuperscript{6} This also conveys the fact that much medieval and early modern blasphemy in everyday life was a species of impromptu verbal cursing or temporary assault upon God and his works.

Blasphemy in the early modern period betrays its relationship to providence generally in three specific ways. Firstly many of the statutes passed during this period inevitably show their debt to conceptions of providence. Related very closely to this phenomenon is the observable behaviour of early modern monarchs in their quest to preserve both their own status and the cohesive nature of their rule and realm. For example Louis XII gave thanks for military victory by indulging in a purge of blasphemers. Similarly it is also evident that the actions of monarchs in France were influenced by the advisors who convinced them that action against blasphemers was imperative to protect the nation from the cataclysmic judgement of the almighty.\textsuperscript{7} Elsewhere this connection was more subtle, in England the statute of 1698 had been preceded by a campaign in both the English and Irish parliaments to demonstrate that the population was especially unruly and required a suitably measured piece of legislation. Led enthusiastically by the bench of Bishops, what had commenced as the low-level campaign aimed at eradicating vice in low places, became a systematic attempt to control dissident behaviour and beliefs in England. Yet it was also designed to deter such vices from entering


\textsuperscript{6} For further details on the passive active blasphemy model see my “Analysing the History of Religious Crime: Models of ‘Passive’ and ‘Active’ Blasphemy since the Medieval Period,” \textit{Journal of Social History} 41, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 5–29.

\textsuperscript{7} See Hildesheimer, “Repression of Blasphemy,” passim; Belmas, “Rise of Blasphemy,” passim.
the country from continental Europe. The legislation in this instance linked protecting the nation from vice with a conception of national security.

Whilst we might argue that providential views of the world conditioned individuals to believe in divine immanence, blasphemous incidents could also provide more obviously secular evidence that they were a threat to the peace of society. The retribution of God was a theme regularly dwelt upon by writers and polemicists. The Southwark preacher and prolific author Benjamin Keach, writing in 1694, for example, argued all should tremble “at the very thoughts of the incensed wrath and anger of an offended God. Who can stand before his indignation, when his wrath is poured out like fire, on the souls and consciences of men?” Because individuals disrupted the public peace, often causing consternation amongst witnesses, they self-evidently brought chaos upon the society in which they challenged authority. Moreover, religious groups such as the Quakers sought to tear down anticrhist wherever they saw it and themselves resembled the blasphemous forces of anticrhist to other religious onlookers. Paradoxically, both blasphemous participant, and scared and affronted audience, maintained separate conceptions of the encounter as a blasphemous challenge to the stability of the godly commonwealth. Such changes occurred wherever individuals cared to look. Whilst the Quakers were the most serious challenge in both England and America, similar threats were posed by groups such as the Ranters and the Fifth Monarchy Men.

Some of the best evidence of the connection between providence and blasphemy most readily occurred in sermons, as well as in manuals of instruction broadsides and pamphlets which all contained the sensationalist entertainment value of extreme didacticism. It is especially noteworthy that many of the sermons in particular were prompted by the threat of immanent danger or at least the fear of it. Examples abound of the connection and its explicit didactic purpose as well as the powerful impact it had on individual preachers. In 1685 Joseph Hill saw the sudden death of Mrs Mary Reve as an unequivocal warning to the living, yet constituting a move away from earlier examples of punitive justice.

This course God took especially with his church in its infancy, training Them, as we do Our children, with temporal threats and promises, mercies and judgements: whereas now in its maturity under the gospel or a better covenant, he uses more especially spiritual promises of grace and salvation, and threatenings of spiritual and eternal punishments, and deals with us accordingly, the more powerfully to allure us to holiness, and deter us from wickedness.

In 1703 Richard Chapman linked the inclement weather with the course of the War of the Spanish Succession and saw these as potentially bringing harm upon the nation at large

9. Benjamin Keach, A golden mine opened, or, The glory of God’s rich grace displayed in the mediator to believers, and his direful wrath against impenitent sinners containing the substance of near forty sermons upon several subjects (London: 1694), 7.
10. Joseph Hill, The Providence of God in sudden death ordinary and extraordinary vindicated and improved. In a funeral sermon for Mrs Mary Reve, wife to Mr. Nicholas Reve, Merchant. First preached to the English Church in Rotterdam, January 14th 1685 (Rotterdam, 1685), 26–27.
As to the nature and Quality of the sins of this land, we may find, I fear, too great a resemblance between ours and theirs: For that some of them strike directly against God, is too sadly evident from that spirit of atheism and irreligion, scepticism and prophaness which is so daring and triumphant amongst us; teaching some to deny God’s existence and being, and to say, with the Fool in their hearts, that there is no God. Others to deny the Sacred Trinity, and the Divinity of Christ; (by the one grieving the Holy Spirit of God, and by the other, making Christ’s merits insufficient and ineffectual for our salvation and redemption). In a word, teaching others, either to question the Divine Authority of three Holy Scriptures, or else to wrest and pervert them to their own destruction.\(^{11}\)

Seven years later Robert D’Oyly wrote more subtly on the subject. His sermon preached at Bath in 1710 began by establishing blasphemy as an implicit evil before he began his lengthy references to the issue of providence. He was anxious to note that God’s will sometimes favoured tyrants who were allowed to indulge their own passions and appetites. In citing the example of Senacherib (in 2 Kings 10:23–27) D’Oyly noted how “God, when a nation provokes him, sets many taskmasters over it, who turn the blessing of government into oppression.”\(^{12}\) D’Oyly also did not flinch from asserting the link between blasphemous and atheistical opinions and the collapse of good order:

And so, whilst some drudge through debauching on with a resolute gusto, and brutish abandoned violence; others of a more satanical complexon, advance the most detestable practices into principle, propagating lewd, seditious, and Atheistical Tenents, and writing villainous books to prostitute morality, libel religion, and undermine government.\(^{13}\)

The connection between providence and the preservation of worldly prosperity and order also appeared in other works and writings in a variety of contexts. This was also indicative of concerns that sins readily built upon one another and, if left unchecked, would undermine the morality which enabled civilised society to function. Challenging God’s authority, but more interestingly worldly authority, was increasingly construed as an assault upon Christian faith itself. Blasphemy was defined in most didactic texts as an assault upon God’s power — the so-called blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. Typical of these was a book of household advice written in 1683 by Richard Baxter. It describes the sin against the holy ghost as

When men are convinced that those miracles were done, and those gifts given, which are God’s attestation to Christ and his gospel, but they fixedly believe and say, that they were all done by the power of the devil, by conjuration, and not by God.\(^{14}\)

\(^{11}\) Richard Chapman, *The Necessity of Repentance asserted: In order to avert those judgements which the present War and strange unreasonableness of the weather at present seem to threaten the nation . . . in a sermon preached on Wednesday the 26th of May, 1703* (London, 1703), 19.

\(^{12}\) Robert D’Oyly, *Providence Vindicated, as permitting Wickedness and Mischief in a sermon preach’d at Bath, on September 17th 1710* (London, 1710), 12.

\(^{13}\) D’Oyly, *Providence Vindicated*, 16.

\(^{14}\) Richard Baxter, *The catechizing of families a teacher of householders how to teach their households: useful also to school-masters and tutors of youth etc.* (London, 1683).
Elsewhere others saw it as a species of dishonour to God demonstrated by the profligate use of profanity and oaths.\textsuperscript{15} The devil had been particularly active in Baxter’s earlier theology around the issue of blasphemy. Satan, according to Baxter, was capable of inspiring deep despair, the erroneous conviction of personal damnation and the temptation to embrace atheist views of the universe. Yet Baxter also describes how providence could also effectively restrain the devil, emphasising God’s capacity to intervene benevolently on behalf of mankind, clearly creating something of a difficult path for the association of providence with blasphemy. Whilst it was clear that the devil could tempt individuals to blaspheme against God, bringing down the judgement of providence upon them, Baxter’s theology also suggested that God’s intervention to remove the power of Satan over individuals occurred providentially.\textsuperscript{16}

Quakers offered a particular and peculiar challenge to the religious and secular authorities of the late seventeenth century. They were prepared to consider active assaults upon other religious groups and were an especially annoying nuisance to Cromwell’s Commonwealth and its promotion of wide religious toleration. What was seen frequently as their major assault upon the good order in society is best described by Anthony Burgess in 1658:

\begin{quote}
It is not they that do such things, but the flesh within them, and so make a mock of all sinner: yea some of late have arrived to such horrid blasphemy, as to say, It’s not they that do such and such evil actions, but God in them.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Texts appearing towards the end of the seventeenth century were often more precise about the link between Quaker ideas and the overturning of good government. Thomas Crisp writing in 1697 noted how numerous Quaker texts had deliberately addressed authority figures, notably the King. Crisp noted that Quaker authors were guilty of “Blasphemous, Seditious, Scandalous \textit{Ancient Testimonies} against the Protestant Religion, Ministers, and Bible.”\textsuperscript{18} The date here of 1697 is significant since it is coincident with the Blasphemy Statute (9 & 10 William c 32) which was eventually to find its way onto the statute book the following year. This enshrined in statute the explicit link between monarch, the Church of England established by law, and wider systems of morality and control. Crisp’s text showed how the defence

\textsuperscript{15.} Thomas Adams, \textit{God’s anger; and, Man’s comfort two sermons / preached and published by Tho. Adams} (London, 1652).
\textsuperscript{16.} Richard Baxter, \textit{A Christian directory, or, A summ of practical theologie and cases of conscience directing Christians how to use their knowledge and faith, how to improve all helps and means, and to perform all duties, how to overcome temptations, and to escape or mortifie every sin : in four parts . . . .} (London, 1673), 17.
\textsuperscript{17.} Anthony Burgess, \textit{A treatise of original sin . . . proving that it is, by pregnant texts of Scripture vindicated from false glosses} (London, 1658), section two. See also Joseph Wyeth, \textit{Anguis flagellatus, or, A switch for the snake being an answer to the third and last edition of The snake in the grass: wherein the author’s injustice and falshood, both in quotation and story, are discover’d and obviated, and the truth doctrinally deliver’d by us, stated and maintained in opposition to his misrepresentation and perversion / by Joseph Wyeth; to which is added a supplement, by George Whitehead. For an example of the Quaker’s defence against the accusations levelled against them} (London, 1699).
\textsuperscript{18.} Thomas Crisp, \textit{A just and lawful tryal of the Foxonian chief priests a perfect proceeding against them and they condem’d out of their own ancient testimonies . . . .} (London, 1697).
of crown, established religion and the Bible was seen as a tightly knit necessity.

Looking at some earlier sermons it is possible to argue that the ground had been prepared for this particular link from material that appeared in the public domain during the 1680s. It is even possible to trace the genesis of this idea back as far as the turbulent 1650s. Writing in 1681 Thomas Manton noted that blasphemy was specifically a crime rather than a sin. He linked it very closely with sedition noting how the accusation against Christ turned upon his apparent threat to the authorities of his age.\footnote{Thomas Manton, \textit{One hundred and ninety sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalm preached by the late reverend and learned Thomas Manton, D.D.; with a perfect alphabetical table directing to the principal matters contained therein} (London, 1681).} Another individual, Samuel Parker, writing three years later demonstrates that the link between blasphemy and the protection of the state was also a discourse considered attractive to James II, some years before it was associated with William III. Parker declared his

infinite abhorrence of all Treasonable and Rebellious Attempts against all Sovereign Powers whatsoever, as the rankest contradiction to their Christian Faith, and the boldest Blasphemy against their own Sovereign Lord.

Parker also noted in a somewhat pithy phrase just how far blasphemy in the seventeenth century had come to be linked to challenges against sovereign earthly power, He declared — “So prophane are these Men forced to be in their wickedness, as to justify Treason by Blasphemy, and no Blasphemy can be ranker than to make our Saviour a Patron of Rebellion.” That blasphemy was a link in the chain of challenges to secular authority seemed self-evident to Parker and he hoped his readership would conclude that:

But as to pretend to any such Power from our Saviour only over Subjects, is no less then Blasphemy against him; so to pretend to it over Sovereigns, doubles the Blasphemy by adding the Sin of Rebellion to that of Impiety, and utterly destroys not only the Being and Constitution of a Christian Church, but of all humane Societies.\footnote{Samuel Parker, \textit{Religion and loyalty; or, A demonstration of the power of the Christian church within it self the supremacy of sovereign powers over it, the duty of passive obedience, or non-resistance to all their commands} (London, 1684), 24–26.}

However precisely from where blasphemy emanated from within man was still a subject liable to debate. The work of Maureen Flynn on Renaissance Spain has emphasised how the individual was frequently questioned by the Inquisition and often found to have forgotten themselves and their actions or lost grip of their conscious mind.\footnote{See footnote 1.} This strongly suggested that blasphemous utterances were an alien phenomenon entering the mouths of individuals unwanted and largely unbidden. As such the Inquisition was motivated to treat the individuals that came before them with a degree of leniency.

We have already seen some individual writers who believed the devil placed such ideas and temptations within men but other potential explanations were also offered. Thomas Manton located the fault within man himself since “out
of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murthers [*sic*], thefts, covetousness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.*22* One especially interesting piece of theological dispute which slid into blasphemy emerged around the Socinian and Quaker doctrines associated with the supposed changeability of God’s nature. Joseph Wyeth writing in 1699 used language about this supposed blasphemy which emphasised the language of governance and implied control of personal conduct. Whilst declaring the doctrine to be plainly stated as “One of God’s attributes must fight with and conquer the other: And his justice must quit the field to his mercy.” In another section Wyeth noted the logical corollary to this argument which would state that a divided and potentially fallible God was also capable of “rage, malice or folly.” Wyeth saw this as dangerously portraying the ultimate authority as divided against itself; in defending the Quakers from such blasphemous ideas he asserted the apparent unity of God and thus of wider authority.*23* Other ideas of God’s fallibility and its connection to the idea of authority facing species of challenge emerged in writings that appeared earlier in the century. As early as 1638 Richard Younge described the blasphemer as “like a mad dog, which flieth in his masters face that keepes him.”*24* This would appear to associate the crime of blasphemy with challenges to legitimate authority. Around the Restoration, in emphasising the doctrine of forgiveness Richard Younge, writing in 1660 noted curiously that to doubt God’s own mercy was to be one who

conceivest of God, that he (sic) is unjust in his dealing, untrue in his word, a covenant-breaker; yea a perjured person (which were most horrible blasphemy once to imagine) . . . what is this but in effect, and at a distance to contradict the Lord, and to give the lye [*sic*] to truth itself.*25*

This work offered a clear analogy to accepting the power, mercy, and constancy of God alongside that of a restored monarch.

II. Blasphemy, Providence and Didactic Writing

Beyond exhortations to good behaviour and primers elaborating good government, associating blasphemy with almost instantaneous divine punishment was a staple form of entertainment genre in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The motif of the foolish uncaring individual who declaims against God or departs from the true faith became a staple of popular didactic literature. This appears in many instances — Edmond Bicknoll’s pamphlet of 1611 entitled “A Sword Against Swearers and Blasphemers” described a number of tales which strongly suggested the numerous different occasions on which blasphemy occurred and was punished. This volume contained stories concerning an unruly male youth in Tübingen, a Freiburg man blaspheming against his

22. Manton, Sermon CXXI, and Sermon CXXX.
son for his disobedience, the wife of a Spanish Conquistador, and a Silesian nobleman who, after he had blasphemed, discovered his child snatched by a devil in the guise of a bear.26 The most celebrated and widely read work of the seventeenth century described Anthony Painter’s blasphemy as prompting the earth to consume him up to his neck. After some time he was devoured by local wolves.27 Didactic literature and the didactic form which sought to educate individuals about the perils of blasphemy also took on a more formal character in more serious genres. In the early eighteenth century Bulstrode Whitelock’s advice to the magistrates of Middlesex contained a clear assertion that blaspheming was a temptation of providence which invariably provoked punishment:

When the *Laws of the Land* cannot keep down a Sin, but it becomes spreading, rampant and universal, I know no other Way, when human means can’t prevail, but that God himself should interpose by his almighty power; and by pouring down Vengeance from Heaven, try to reclaim that people whom human Laws can’t reduce.28

Moreover this declaration occurred in the context of instructions concerning good government and suggested that the role of discipline and laws was to prevent divine retribution. Another genre which frequently linked blasphemy and providence was the more middle brow story of an unexemplary life. These often portrayed the consequences of both serious minded religious deviance and thinking (if not always acting) blasphemously. The pamphleteer and sermoniser Benjamin Keach cited two individuals, Francis Spira and John Child, whose lives demonstrated the folly of persistent prophaneness and atheism. Spira renounced the Catholic Church only to be reconciled to it later. From this position he fell into a melancholy agnosticism which caused him to exclaim:

I find I can neither believe the Gospel, nor trust in Gods Mercy; I have sinned against the Holy Ghost, and God by his immutable Decree hath bound me over to perpetual Punishment: God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardneth; God hath taken away from me all power of Repentance, and brings all my sins to remembrance.29

Keach concluded that the condition Spira had brought himself to left him in a situation worse than Judas. Keach’s exposition of the life of the Baptist preacher John Child started optimistically enough with him described as “a man of considerable natural parts and ability,” however Keach was astounded to find Child express agnostic and quasi-atheist sentiments which were followed afterwards by an unrelenting collapse into despair. According to Keach, his wife testified that the torment of his soul made his hair stand on

27. Anthony Painter, *The Blaspheming Caryar. Who sunke into the ground up to the neck, and there stood two days*, 3 November 1613 (London, 1614). For other didactic texts see also William Turner’s *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences* (London, 1697), Part II.
end and Child eventually hung himself in Spittlefields in October 1683. Keach concluded his note about the Child narrative by demonstrating how his family and estate suffered “a strange blast” of providentially poor fortune giving a flavour of a species of anti-election that might afflict the atheistical and the blasphemous.

Taken together these three different sets of texts demonstrate a series of moving discourses about blasphemy and irreligious opinions. These centred upon issues associated with blasphemy as a challenge to good government and order and this was contemporary with wider early ancient regime projects of control and state formation. These believed that eradicating blasphemous and irreligious tendencies from society would protect that society from the wrath of an all powerful creator who all too obviously displayed the ability to intervene in human affairs. Didactic texts and sermons that discussed actual blasphemous incidents, however, did not show a unified explanation as to where blasphemy originated from nor who was to blame for its appearance or utterance. Proceedings against blasphemy in Catholic countries had treated the individual as a vessel from which the offence emanated. Protestant England more readily located the offence in the heart, mind, or soul of the individual as a consequence of lapsed religious discipline or inconstancy of mind.

Thus individual blasphemers, within this geography of blame and culpability became readily associated with the aim of sedition and overthrow of the existing religious and secular order — authorities that had been fused in the popular mind by the blasphemy statute and the Common Law judgements which had seen the two as interwined. The casting of the law in this manner also tried to demonstrate to the pious and the confused that they had much to lose from a collapse of this order. So often it was portrayed as venerable and supportive of prosperity or material safety that challenging it and its instruments of governance and consolation became a more modern providential calamity falling upon the blasphemer and their community. This is particularly interesting in the light of blasphemy’s legal development through English Common law in which the mens rea or, more latterly, the motivation of individual blasphemers has been a regular source of confusion. This is why for much of its history in England blasphemy was a crime of strict liability and was analogous to libel laws, indeed the Common Law offence was entitled “blasphemous libel.” This looked at the net effect of the blasphemous words being spoken or published and always associated such acts with challenges to authority. Intention became difficult to establish with certainty whilst modern legal reformers regularly insisted upon manner as a more vital and credible test. This would have more quickly and readily transformed blasphemy into a public order offence than one symbolically protecting Christian states and rulers. It is interesting that the desire to turn the offence into one of manner in England lagged behind developments in the United State of America where such opinions began to appear in the early years of the nineteenth century. This may have owed much to the absence of an established church. Without an institution to protect issues of public order alongside the rights and feelings of individuals, issues enshrined in both Church/State separation and
the First Amendment debate about the rights of free speech, both blasphemers and their motives became more central to debates.

III. Blasphemy and Providence — Some Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Moments

The connection between blasphemy, governance, law and providence has traditionally been located firmly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This has also tended to obscure areas where it survived and arguably flourished beyond this date. By the end of the eighteenth century the link between blasphemy and providentialism was a significant component of the conservative reaction to the turmoils of the French Revolution. The post Napoleonic upsurge in radicalism and discontent saw the high watermark of proceedings against sedition and blasphemy. As Philip Harling has shown prosecutions of publishers and vendors of blasphemous literature were a primary feature of establishment policies aimed at reigning in discontent, but this discontent was also faced by elements of popular loyalism which dwelt on the dangers of lawlessness and immorality. In these, twin obedience to God and the King remained arguably untouched since the seventeenth century. As the author of Christian Politics, a tract from 1820, argued:

Fear the King: My son, fear thou the Lord and the king: by which is meant, that our next care to that of keeping a good conscience towards God, should be that of behaving ourselves orderly and regularly in that station which God has placed us in, of subordination and subjection to those men that set over us by God with a power to order and enact such constitutions.\(^{30}\)

Reformers were also aware that blasphemy prosecution was also considered to be a central part of the loyalist armoury. The radical pamphlet “Jem Gudgeon or Radical conduct,” a radical counter pamphlet in imitation of Hannah More’s tales of loyal plebeians, ends with a section listing the offences which seemed targeted at radicals. The back cover of this pamphlet is given over to a section specifically devoted to “Blasphemy and Profaneness” which outlined the legal situation around 9 & 10 William and other prosecutions for obscene libel.\(^{31}\)

That the nation was preserved from continental godlessness and vice seemed itself providential in loyalist circles. In the aftermath of Peterloo loyal addresses from up and down the country began to again associate blasphemy with sedition and attacks upon the secular and religious established order.\(^{32}\) One which came from Oxford declared that:

we are led still more deeply, if possible to deplore the machinations of persons who would unchristianise this highly favoured country, by prostituting and profaning the

31. Jem Gudgeon or Radical Conduct by a Reformer (London, 1821), 56.
32. In the early nineteenth century providence was also cited as the mechanism by which the Protestant order was maintained. These arguments surfaced around the issue of Catholic Emancipation. See for example The Danger of Granting Roman Catholic Emancipation; to which is added, a petition recently presented to the legislature of the United Kingdom, expressive of the Ruinous Impolicy of the above measure; By the clergy within the archdeaconry of Northampton (Manchester, 1812), 7.

© 2008 The Author
Journal compilation © 2008 Association for the Journal of Religious History
holy scriptures, by exposing them to public scorn and derision, and by denouncing the awful truths which they contain.

One from Herefordshire declared with scarcely contained shock how:

Amongst the means most actively used for these pernicious purposes, we view with horror the widely extended circulation of blasphemous and seditious publications; the former calculated to poison the minds of men, and to deprive them of their greatest source of consolation — religion.

Another emanating from Dudley in the West Midlands was led to suggest that the country was at the mercy of “Designing and turbulent men, the agents of irreligion, rebellion and Treason.” Thus those loyal to the establishment should revere and protect the providential position provided by:

that happy constitution which was framed by the genius and wisdom Of Our ancestors, and has been proved and confirmed by the experience of ages, which is the glory of this country, and the admiration and imitation of surrounding nations.

Once again the infection that blasphemy represented was linked to the maintenance of order and good governance as well as a clear assumption that the nation had existed for some considerable time under the umbrella of providential favour. These were dangerous men who, in the words of a London petition were

men, who availing themselves of blasphemous publications to sap the foundations of religion, and of inflammatory writings and harangues to sow sedition and treason, take advantage Of the present distresses to impose upon the minds of the uninformed.33

These attitudes strongly suggest how deeply felt the connection between prosperity and God’s providence actually was as late as the start of the nineteenth century. Blasphemy against this established order was still considered dangerous and the blame for the nation’s calamities could still be seen as providential judgement. Historians have been acutely aware that the cholera outbreaks of the 1830s and 1840s were considered a divine punishment. Thus it should scarcely surprise us is that blasphemy as well was still considered capable of inviting divine judgement. The window into this subculture of blame comes from a French prayer book translated into English in 1847 and published expressly for an English audience and market. This outlined the divine revelation of a nun which had occurred in the same year as the book had been published. This had clearly identified blasphemy as the greatest evil afflicting France and pleaded for action against blasphemers and the hope of their final conversion. From this, a fraternity had sprung up which defined blasphemy as naming with disdain, unworthy expression of God’s greatness, attacking the essence of his divine nature. Alongside this were other facets of the offence, namely denying one of his perfections or insulting the virgin or the saints. Allegorical interpretations of God and pantheism as well were

pulled into this definition, whilst libertines who denied God’s perfection and his providence were also to be labelled as blasphemers.

The preamble to the prayer book also clearly embraced the idea of divine providence with the suggestion “we cannot often prevent ourselves from acknowledging, in the misfortunes of some Christians, the finger of an insulted God.” The miseries currently afflicting France were “a chastisement for her daily blasphemies” God will punish by famine and inundation. The prayer book also contained lamentations despairing of how many blasphemies occurred daily in the French nation alongside some classic didactic stories which would not have looked out of place in many seventeenth-century English pamphlets. The Book then becomes a collection of prayers including The Act of Amendment to the Holy Name of God which asked that France be pardoned from its guilt. Alongside this were various orders of service aimed at appeasing a God angered by blasphemy. The so-called Twenty-Four Acts of Adoration was clearly intended as a reparation for the acts of blasphemy committed during the hours of each day. A special version of the Rosary which contained a number of reverant salutations was again intended to replace blasphemy with praise. Perhaps most elaborate of all was a rite entitled The Litany of the Holy face. This used no less than fifty-four phrases invoking a different image of Christ’s face as a means of praying for the conversion of blasphemers. Again we may note here how the reactions outlined did not necessarily have to have specific knowledge of blasphemous incidents, but merely a belief and opinion that it was one of the evils bringing providentially adverse judgement down upon the nation.

The English editor of this edition noted that his foregoing descriptions of these rites might not readily appeal to Protestants but that the issues of providentialism were liable to make them draw similar conclusions. The translator observed that if English Protestant readers found this suggestion too severe then they need only look at the poor condition of the North of England as reported by the Poor Law Commissioners. This diatribe thereafter became a wake up call to seek out and rectify vice within England at large rather than saving African souls.

IV. Blasphemy and Providence into a New Millennium

As the twentieth century dawned blasphemy began to appear as a sometimes dramatic threat to public order. Many cases during the Edwardian period illuminated the fact that blasphemers with connections to anarchism and extreme forms of socialism were an intermittent threat to local and national authorities. Whilst many feared moral decline and a threat to public order posed by blasphemous meetings and speeches, complaints and proceedings against these people focussed upon the nuisance value of their activities. In

35. Association of Prayers, 15.
36. For an account of this area see my Blasphemy in Britain 1789–Present.
the cases against Thomas William Stewart, John William Gott, and Ernest Pack in Edwardian England the reaction to their sometimes juvenile assaults upon God’s nature generally turned around their capacity to incite a breach of the peace. On other occasions their writings and works were deemed obscene and an entirely different agenda overtook proceedings. In the years preceding the First World War, and those that immediately followed it, both parliament and the Home Office very seriously considered repeal of the blasphemy laws. Whilst this course of action never wholly appealed to political parties at large, or indeed certain sections of the Home Office, the suggestion that the offence was an anachronism clearly hung in the air and was taken very seriously.

Had the logic of this mood persisted, blasphemy in Britain would have lapsed from the public sphere taking with it its medieval associations and baggage, however the Munich crisis of 1938 displayed blasphemy’s sudden and contemporary relevance to the issue of providence. A matter of five years earlier Europe’s atheists had been allowed to meet quite unnoticed at a Freethought Congress in London. Dramatically, in 1938 the tense international situation provoked a campaign to prevent the Congress being staged in London. The Home Office was pressed into taking action, ordering MI5 surveillance of freethought organisations in Britain and close scrutiny of those intending to come from abroad. A number of politically active individuals who wished to attend were closely watched and discussed at the Home Office but in the end no action was taken against them. Nonetheless the situation allowed a right wing MP with Nordic League sympathies, Archibald Maul Ramsay, to introduce a private member’s bill to parliament which would have allowed the government to exclude Jewish communist freethinkers and to imprison those in possession of freethought literature. Although this passed a first reading in the House of Commons the government ensured that action was taken to prevent it going any further.

Although this panic merely lasted for the course of the year and was disarmed by government vigilance, an especially illuminating feature of it was the vast correspondence received at the Home Office which protested against the Congress. The sentiments contained in this correspondence demonstrated how individuals and organisations from the length and breadth of the empire were concerned about assaults on Christianity. They also saw the British empire, or community, as a creation of divine favour and assaults upon it as liable to stir up divine wrath. Although fear had moved from the focus of the individual to that of the wider nation, the sentiments were almost close echoes of those we have seen emanating from the seventeenth century.

A Letter from Mr E. S. Wingate of Woking in Surrey argued:

Convinced Christians are not as a rule very vocal, so the authorities do not realise (tho our King’s Coronation revealed it) what a large number in the nation still believe

37. For access to the letters sent to the Home Office and the opinion of local Police constables see HO 45 10665/216120
38. See HO45 24619/217459/101 for the MI5 report on the Freethought Congress which substantially concluded that those involved were likely to be harmless.
in the external verity & blessing of the Christian faith & these people will be solidly behind any steps taken by the government to prevent the holding of the Godless Congress in London on April 6th 1938. Our nation owes its unique peace and prosperity hitherto, to its acknowledgement of God & God will judge us nationally if we abandon that position. The Russians with a madman at their head are everyday losing weight in the councils of the nations. They would not dare to hold such a congress in Rome or Berlin. Why should they use England as an inoculation centre for the principle that has brought them to their present discredited position?

Whilst as Mrs White of Grantham demanded the government should:

use every effort against holding of a godless Congress which is anti-christ everyone should believe in almighty God & I am sure we cannot expect GOD’S blessing unless we stand for Him in such an effort as this He has graciously blessed our country by giving us peace.

R. V. Berkeley of Worcester wrote:

If we sincerely desire the blessing of god to rest on England, and the deliberations of His Majesty’s Ministers our belief in the almighty must be proclaimed and maintained at all costs. Gratitude for divine favours, and deep faith in the almighty Goodness. Compel our nation to refuse any countenance to the proposed insult to the divine majesty already banned by a neighbouring country.

Meanwhile G. J. Smith writing from Rosa Villa, Watford in Hertfordshire linked blasphemy squarely as an opponent of good and godly government:

I am enclosing a protest against the awful proposition asking us as a nation for permission to hold a Godless Conference in London . . . shame on us as a people who owe all they have to that good & gracious God whom those in Moscow were daily blaspheming -if we uphold such diabolical movements. what about the King who only a few months ago solemnly took the oath to steadfastly stand by his King the Lord God almighty. Surely we all shall endeavour to uphold the King our beloved monarch.

Others, such as George Dixon of Bicester, spoke for many who declared “I certainly believe that it has been our recognition of God (though that has been very imperfect) that has been our national strength.” Emily Luke of Exeter demanded that “this outrage will not be allowed to be committed on British Soil. Christian Britain will not take this calumny.” Linking blasphemy with providence and good government she demanded “safety from the possibility of any such stain on our race! While we honour God we are protected! ‘Satan’ is the instigator of this device!”

Whilst these letters came from all over the country (as well as from Canada, Australia, and South Africa) they tell a unified tale of national safety and individual

prosperity at the mercy of blasphemers and transgressors of God’s holy laws. Interestingly the MI5 report was at pains to note that the concern had been stirred up by a petition publicised by the Catholic Herald and others. This suggests that the letters to the Home Office were written by a cross section of the morally concerned who were either strongly religious or re-articulated their moral values through religious language and idioms. As such they arguably represented a wider cross section of those who had expressed their concerns at the end of the seventeenth century. In places both expressed belief in the power of the coronation oath and the role of the ruler to protect the nation’s subjects from harm. Their responses also show an astonishingly homogenous, and long-lived, conception of the link between respect for the almighty and secular authority, and how this could guarantee prosperity and security in this world and probably the next.

Although postwar Britain repealed its statute against blasphemy in the early 1960s it did not become a wholly secular country and links between the blasphemous and national calamity could still be drawn. Certainly some of this reappeared in the Gay News case of 1978 and in the mid-1990s the decision in favour of the British government in the Wingrove case specifically argued that a blasphemy law was a defensible part of Britain’s cultural heritage.

When the House of Lords Select Committee on Religious Offences considered the issue of repealing the blasphemy law in 2003 some of the written evidence published in the final report came from Christian individuals and Christian institutions. This used the enduring language associated with a generally benevolent God who had protected Britain, but could yet intervene in worldly affairs to withdraw this benevolence.

The British Israel World Federation wrote that:

If we fail to uphold our Christian traditions in this, and thereby deny our heavenly Father before men He, likewise, will deny us: nor will the blasphemer escape his just reward. . . . It has to be recognised that no true Christian could ever agree with anything that weakens any one of the Ten Commandments, in this case the third. Such a move could only lead to the further reduction in this country of due reverence to God, Who is the provider of the wellbeing of all who dwell here, and hence to greater future distress. . . . The proper out-working of the Queen’s Coronation Oath, and the maintenance of the centrality of the Holy Bible to the British legal system should be the object of all measures designed — as they ought to be — to implement the Will of God among His people. . . . That Great Britain’s true role in the world lies, as at all times in the past, in our being friend and companion to the oppressed and the just, but enemy of the oppressor; That this role lies not with supra-national organisations, that is, the EU, UNO, WTO, GATS and in bilateral agreements, which dismantle our God-given way of life in the nation state.

The submission from the Inverness Free Church of Scotland spoke particularly eloquently of the unbroken link between blasphemy, providence, and immanent danger:

40. HO45 24619/217459/101.
41. See Article 19 and Interights, Blasphemy and Film Censorship: Submission to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Nigel Wingrove V United Kingdom (London: Interights, 1995).
Our beloved country has over at least 1,000 years been blessed with a public and national confession of the Christian faith as the basis of our constitution and monarchy. This provision has been our glory and our strength and we must not tamper with our inheritance in these days of confusion and anarchy.43

Whilst in early modern England providentialism scared individuals about the welfare of their community and souls that were in peril such individuals were also conducting a dialogue about the dangers liable to corrupt and about the nature of temptation. This all turned especially upon conceptions of a God intervening in worldly affairs. In particular it stressed that such intervention could be providential — providing good luck for the well behaved and perdition for the disobedient, disrespectful, and the blasphemous. Conventional histories of providence, and some of the modernisation theory histories of magic, see causality as redrawn by enlightenment speculations about probability.44 In England the providential is traditionally seen as dying out with rationalism and the rise of a secular nation state. The evidence of this article suggests that this eclipse has been overstated. Whilst early modern protagonists, preachers and didactic writers were warning their communities, much later commentators were taking a stand against modernism, modernity, and the changes they threatened. Moreover the ideas of providence and divine intervention did not wane in the popular mind but remained to be initiated by national rather than local or individual misfortune. Blasphemy was one of the phenomena that was capable of igniting this instant connection between religious respect, good governance and the prosperity of the individual through their nation. The existence of these moments of fear also questions linear histories of secularisation. These in turn suggest that sudden national and local events could make religious dialogues and the observance of even comparatively archaic religious ideas become part of a modern society’s ability to cope with changing times.

43. Select Committee on Religious Offences Volume III submission from the Inverness Free Church of Scotland, received 28 June 2002.