

Acknowledgements

In the contemporary world we do not need to look any further than the callous murder of Frenchman Samuel Paty on October 16, 2020, to know that blasphemy and violence can combine in dramatic ways. On that day, the history and civics teacher taught a class about freedom of expression during which he showed two caricatures depicting the Prophet Muhammad; the images had some years earlier been published in the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. As we know, the editorial offices of this periodical had been targeted by an Islamist killing spree in 2015 that left twelve men and women dead, including a Muslim policeman rushing to the scene to confront the murderers. In previous years Paty's invitation to his fourth grade pupils to critically think about the thin line separating freedom of expression and religious liberty had not drawn any negative response. Yet the class he taught on October 6, 2020 at the Collège du Bois d'Aulne near Paris unleashed a dramatic string of events that ended with his murder two weeks later. Complaints by a girl, suspended from school and so that day absent from class, that she had allegedly been forced to look at the cartoons were used by her father to incite hatred against Paty, which in turn led a Chechen-born man to shoot and behead the teacher.

The murder of Samuel Paty is only one of the more recent and extreme examples of the relationship between blasphemy and violence that forms the focus of this book. The idea for this volume originally came from Liberas, the principal archive and research centre for the history of the liberal movement in Belgium.¹ In late 2018, institute director Peter Laroy and research coordinator Dr. Christoph De Spiegeleer invited us to combine our expertise in the areas of religion and violence as well as blasphemy and crime respectively for a colloquium on blasphemy and violence in modern history. Convinced of the subject's historical importance and its relevance for contemporary society, as well as enthused by the prospect of collaboration, we invited fellow scholars to reflect on the phenomenon of blasphemy and its potential link to violence from three angles: acts of blasphemy that lead to forms of violence; instances of general societal upheaval in which offences against the sacred are one aspect of a much broader culture of violence; and situations in which believers both internalise and actively describe the hurt stemming from the impact of blasphemy as a species of experienced violence.

¹ More information can be found at the website of Liberas: www.liberas.eu.

The colloquium took place in Ghent on March 4 and 5, 2020, literally just before Covid-19 made international travel impossible and shifted all academic discourse to the internet. We thank all participants, including those who did not contribute to this volume, for sharing their ideas on the relationship between blasphemy and violence in modern history – a subject that remains a niche but developing field. Apart from being a wonderful opportunity to meet and share ideas, the colloquium also provided important impulses for this volume, which is the second book to be published in the series ‘New Perspectives on the History of Liberalism and Freethought’ from the publishing house De Gruyter Oldenbourg – an open access series devoted to the results of international scientific workshops and colloquia organised by Liberas. Both our colloquium and the present proceedings intimately connect with the research work conducted at Liberas, which focuses on conflicts surrounding Church-State relations in the modern world as well as pertaining to freedom of conscience and religion. More generally, research at the centre is concerned with the haphazard link between religious pluralisation on the one hand and the advance of secularism on the other hand – an aspect that returns in this book.

The preparation of this book was challenged by the realities of a global pandemic: closed libraries, inaccessible archives and the considerable burden of digital teaching. Luckily this did not prevent the authors from complying with guidelines, sticking to deadlines and patiently answering our questions. We thank them for their flexibility and diligence, just as we are grateful to the external reviewers for providing us with critical yet constructive feedback, both of the individual chapters and of the volume as a whole. This volume would never have materialised were it not for the support and endorsement it received from a number of individuals and institutions. Staff at Liberas welcomed us with open arms. It is impossible to overstate Christoph De Spiegeleer’s intellectual contribution to the project, valuable comments, practical support and kind words of encouragement; his input did much to improve the quality of the overall project. Peter Laroy not just had great faith in this project but also secured the necessary financial resources to turn a vague idea into a real colloquium and a tangible book. At De Gruyter Oldenbourg, we thank Rabea Rittgerodt, Verena Deutsch and all other staff for their enthusiasm, efficiency and flexibility. This book would never have seen the light of day without the monetary support offered by Liberas, which is in turn funded by the Flemish government. It also financed an open access edition of this publication. Finally, rather than the end of a discussion, this book is intended to encourage future debate, hopefully in a world with fewer lockdowns, more social interaction and above all greater appreciation for the freedom of individuals and groups alike.

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