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1 Blasphemy and Violence: Crossing Social Norms and Religious Boundaries in the Modern World

Fig. 1: Tom Herck's installation 'Holy Cow' in the former parish church of Kuttekoven in the Belgian province of Limburg, 2017. Despite its abysmal state, the building's function as a previous place of worship is evident. Photo by Erik Jamar. Kindly reproduced with permission of the artist.

An altar and stained-glass windows were the only religious symbols left in Kuttekoven's church. With the plaster on the walls displaying the results of a merciless humidity and without a pulpit, confessional chair or prayer bank in sight, the building bore all the hallmarks of desertion. In November 2017, however, this parish church in the eastern Belgian province of Limburg suddenly became a focal point for Catholic attention. The reason for this sudden interest was an installation that artist Tom Herck had placed in the nave.[1] It consisted of a mas-

1 "Holy Cow (2017)," Website of Tom Herck, accessed on November 16, 2020, http://www.tomherck.com/holy-cow-2017.

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sive basin measuring over eighty square metres filled with five thousand litres of a milky substance. Over the tub hung a crucified cow – the plaster cast of a real animal – with its heart pointing forward, creating a visual echo of images of the Sacred Heart; the legs of the cow were crossed and its head faced upwards, mimicking depictions of Christ on the crucifix. Responding to criticism, Herck declared his work to be a critique of modern consumerism and the "waste in our society".[2] The happy cow frequently featured in the food industry's fancy marketing campaigns had made way for a besieged animal, emblematic of the destruction involved in industrial livestock farming. Meanwhile, the enormous basin recalled the surplus production of dairy, the infamous "milk lakes" that were an eerie by-product of the European Union's generous agricultural subsidies.

For all the artist's efforts to tie his installation to ethical questions about animal welfare and the environment, the religious implications of 'Holy Cow' were evident. The decaying building, the dead animal and the slowly evaporating milk-like substance read as an analogy of religious decline in contemporary Belgium. Yet whilst secularisation was from a Church perspective something to be lamented, it did not offend. Herck's appropriation of the crucifix for socio-political commentary was a different matter. The diocese of Hasselt argued that the sacred symbol had been defiled by the display of a cow "at the place where Christ hung on the cross". That the artist had launched the project aged thirty-three, the same age at which Christ had died, added insult to injury. Diocesan officials called the artwork "harmful" and "derisive," whilst others saw in it "a satanic image and a disgusting insult to God and to Catholicism."[3]

In the absence of blasphemy legislation in Belgium, some went further.[4] Father Eric Jacqmin from the ultraconservative Society of Saint Pius X staged daily

2 "Katholiek protest tegen 'satanische koe' in Kuttekoven," *Het Belang van Limburg*, November 19, 2017, accessed November 16, 2020, https://www.hbvl.be/cnt/dmf20171119_03194455. The motive of commercialisation also inspired Andres Serrano's photograph 'Immersion (Piss Christ)' from 1987, which caused believers to attack the artwork. Donald Brook, "Urinating to Windward," *Artlink* 18, no. 1 (1998): 13.

3 "Katholiek protest".

4 Belgium has never known anti-blasphemy legislation. Although the Sovereign Decision of 23 September 1814, taken by King William of the Netherlands, had criminalised "ridiculing religion," the Belgian Provisional Government decreed on October 16, 1830 to cancel every law curtailing freedom of expression; many saw this as the *de facto* liquidation of William's erstwhile decision. The deterioration of Church-State relations around 1860 saw a number of cases still brought to Belgian courts before, in 1863, the Court of Cassation officially nullified the Sovereign Decision of 1814. Bram Delbecke, *De lange schaduw van de grondwet: perswetgeving en persmisdrijven in België* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2012), 167–170.

Fig. 2: Destroyed installation 'Holy Cow' in Kuttekoven church, 2017. The graffiti on the wall includes religious references and antisemitic symbols; the words "Rex Vaincra" refer to a far-right Catholic and nationalist party active in Belgium during the years 1935–1945. Photo by Tom Herck. Kindly reproduced with permission of the artist.

protests at Kuttekoven's church. On November 18, an act of arson was committed at a nearby chapel that housed another artwork by Herck; three days later, Father Eric and right-wing extremist Robin Vandenberghe smashed a window to gain access to the church to cut the rope on which the plaster cow hung; on the night of December 1, Vandenberghe and four friends destroyed the legs of the cow, created a hole in its stomach and poured acid in it. They also sprayed several religious and antisemitic references onto the church wall, including celebrations of Christ, the motto 'Vive la Croix!' and a swastika underneath the artist's name. Father Eric later defended his actions by querying the artistic value of "art [that brings] no beauty, but only wants to insult and hurt".[5] Together with the other five assailants, he was subsequently put on trial for the destruction of both Kuttekoven church and the installation 'Holy Cow' as well as for arson.

5 "Ultrakatholieken veroordeeld voor vernieling *Holy Cow*," *De Standaard*, June 23, 2021, accessed on July 10, 2021, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210623_96186544.

In June 2021, the court of Tongeren labelled the men's behaviour an example of "religious fundamentalism," handing out sentences of up to sixty hours community service and 400 Euro fines.[6]

'Holy Cow' is part of a long line of artistic interventions for which their supposedly blasphemous nature has invited legal sanction, public censure or even physical violence.[7] During the 1790s, the city of Rome saw French artists with Jacobin predilections mock religious processions; after the papal restoration, officials prosecuted these actions which they regarded as a political insurrection and religious offence in one.[8] A century later, a painting of young Jesus at the Temple was scorned for depicting the Messiah as a beggar boy, dirty and with dark features, pressing the artist to repaint the image. By giving Jesus light skin and blonde hair, Max Liebermann, an artist of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, yielded to antisemitic charges packed as blasphemy accusations. In the late-twentieth century, publication of *The Satanic Verses* led to death threats against its author, British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. It also prompted real violence, including riots and the murder of the book's Japanese translator – actions ostensibly legitimated by the fatwā that the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had issued against all those involved in the book's publication.

Although these cases share artistic agency, they illuminate a different relationship between offences against the sacred (including blasphemy) and acts of retaliation (including violence). The havoc that the colony of French artists in Rome wreaked on Catholic ritual and imagery was part of a broader revolutionary turmoil, with attacks on God and his worldly representatives echoing ideological antagonism and purification attempts on a grand scale. Blasphemy in this case accompanied a more comprehensive culture of violence. By contrast, the accusations levied at Liebermann drew on anger at the injurious way in which the painter was said to have depicted Christ. Here, the faithful both internalised and described the hurt stemming from the impact of blasphemy as a spe-

6 Whereas the charge of destruction was upheld, that of arson was dropped. "Voor de een is het kunst, voor de ander provocatie," *De Standaard*, May 27, 2021, accessed on July 10, 2021, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210526_97643578.

7 For blasphemy in art see, e. g., Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias, eds., *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008); Roberto Cuppone and Ester Fuoco, *Blasphemia: il teatro e il sacro* (Turin: Celid, 2019); S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

8 For this and following examples see chapters by Marco Emanuele Omes, Christoffer Leber and Manfred Sing in this book.

cies of experienced violence. Finally, Rushdie's portrayal of Muhammad as a fallible prophet unleashed physical retribution on the part of the faithful. In this regard, (perceived) offences against the sacred preceded violence. This threefold link between blasphemy and violence – blasphemy as a companion to, a form of and a trigger for violence – is the subject of this volume.

Scholarship on blasphemy is booming. After years of being considered a ghost of ages past with little relevance for today's world, the threats made against Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and the mob killings of (alleged) blasphemers in Pakistan – to name just two examples – have prompted a surge in interest in offences against the sacred.[9] As David Nash has put it elsewhere, "[d]iscourses of blasphemy [...] are back with a vengeance".[10] Since 2009, the International Blasphemy Rights Day is celebrated annually on September 30. Renewed interest also returns in a burgeoning scholarly literature.[11] One field of enquiry charts the position of blasphemy in the legal system, mapping differences across countries and probing the link with religious hate speech, which has in some places, especially in multi-religious societies, replaced blasphemy as a crime.[12] Other scholars examine blasphemy from a theological or philosophical perspective, linking it either to heresy (the profession of different religious ideas) and apostasy (their renunciation) or to the position of religion in modern liberal and secular societies.[13] A third category traces blasphemy across time – an often

9 E. g. Lasse Linkilde, "Per Mouritsen and Ricard Zapata-Barrero. The Muhammad Cartoons Controversy in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnicities* 9, no. 3 (2009); Sana Ashraf, "Honour, Purity and Transgression: Understanding Blasphemy Accusations and Consequent Violent Action in Punjab, Pakistan," *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 1 (2018).

10 David Nash, "Blasphemy and Sacrilege: A Challenge to Secularisation and Theories of the Modern?," in *Negotiating the Sacred II*, ed. Burns Coleman and Fernandes-Dias, 11.

11 The day was launched by American nonprofit organisation The Center for Inquiry to coincide with the anniversary of the publication of cartoons featuring the prophet Muhammad in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. Website of The Center for Inquiry, accessed on June 30, 2021, https://centerforinquiry.org/cfe/international-blasphemy-rights-day/.

12 E. g. Christopher S. Grenda, Christ Beneke and David Nash, "Introduction: On the Modern Confluence of Blasphemy, Free Expression, and Hate Speech," in *Profane: Sacrilegious Expression in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Christopher S. Grenda, Christ Beneke, and David Nash (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Jeffrey Haynes, "From 'Blasphemy' to 'Hate Speech': Changing Perceptions of 'Insulting God'," in *Blasphemies Compared: Transgressive Speech in a Globalised World*, ed. Anne Stensvold (London: Routledge, 2020). For the legal debate see Jeroen Temperman and András Koltay, eds., *Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression: Comparative, Theoretical and Historical Reflections after the Charlie Hebdo Massacre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

13 E. g. Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood

hazardous task given the changing legal meaning, position and appreciation of blasphemy in different historical contexts.[14] Hence most publications, including well-known overview works, ultimately privilege a national or regional focus.[15]

The present volume aims to contribute to scholarship on the history of blasphemy in two ways. First, it brings together cases from across modern European history, extending it to contacts between European actors and the non-European world. Second, it looks at blasphemy's interaction with violence. Even if enquiries into its nature and impact necessarily address questions of physical retribution and symbolic denigration, the conceptual link between blasphemy and violence has rarely been examined *sui generis* – echoing an anomaly in the historiography on religion and violence more broadly.[16] When this connection is investigated, its multifaceted character is rarely appreciated. For instance, early-modern historian Francisca Loetz' claim that blasphemy equates to violence "because blasphemers hurt [believers] so much that their actions invoke a sanctioning counter-reaction," captures just one understanding, albeit it an important one, of the link between blasphemy and violence.[17] Simultaneously, political scientist Ron E. Hassner's focus on the actions of Muslims illustrates a

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Matthias Gockel, Jürgen Mohn and Matthias D. Wüthrich, eds., *Blasphemie: Anspruch und Widerstreit in Religionskonflikten* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); Anshuman A. Mondal, "Articles of Faith: Freedom of Expression and Religious Freedom in Contemporary Multiculture," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 1 (2016). See also other articles in the same issue.

14 Gerd Schwerhoff, *Verfluchte Götter: Die Geschichte der Blasphemie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2021), 9.

15 Alain Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème en Occident, XVIe–XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jacques de Saint Victor, *Blasphème: brève histoire d'un "crime imaginaire"* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016). Geographically more expansive are Leonard Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Schwerhoff, *Verfluchte Götter*; and, with a focus on recent history, Anne Stensvold, ed., *Blasphemies Compared: Transgressive Speech in a Globalised World* (London: Routledge, 2020).

16 For this argument see my "Glaube und Gewalt: Ein Beziehungsgeflecht auf dem Prüfstand," in *Glaubenskämpfe: Katholiken und Gewalt im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Eveline G. Bouwers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 29–33.

17 Francisca Loetz, "Gotteslästerung und Gewalt: Ein historisches Problem," in *Religion und Gewalt: Konflikte, Rituale, Deutungen (1500–1800)*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz and Kim Siebenhüner (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 310. See also Christoph Baumgartner, "Blasphemy as Violence: Trying to Understand the Kind of Injury That Can Be Inflicted by Acts and Artefacts That Are Construed as Blasphemy," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6, no. 1 (2013).

scholarship that ties blasphemy and violence to specific faith groups.[18] This volume, by contrast, shows the manifold connections between blasphemy and violence across cultures, citing examples from an intra-Christian, Christian-Muslim and religious-secular context. In doing so, it sheds light on questions of public morality, national identity, freedom of opinion, Church-State relations, the chequered pacification of religious conflict and on processes of secularisation in the modern world.

This introduction will first examine two key concepts at the heart of this book. The first part is dedicated to blasphemy, a label that has alternately (and often incorrectly) been used to describe an insult of the sacred, disrespect for objects invested with the sacred, heterodox religious ideas, revocation of belief or oppositional politics – effectively blurring the lines between blasphemy on the one hand and sacrilege, heresy, apostasy and lèse-majesté on the other. The chapters in this book testify to this conceptual richness. Hence the following pages provide a – necessarily generalising – synopsis of blasphemy's origins, its relation to other offences against the sacred and its changing meaning across time, space and faith groups. The second part of the conceptual overview concentrates on violence, referencing its physical, symbolic and structural dimension as well as alerting us to the way in which blasphemy, as a form of religious hurt, could be perceived as a form of experienced violence. It also revisits the argument of a general decline in *violentia* across the modern period, which it links to the civilising process (Norbert Elias) but also – and in the case of violence pertaining to religion especially – to tolerance, secularisation and religious pluralisation, in short, to processes of modernisation. The concluding pages of the introduction summarise the structure of the book and introduce the individual chapters according to the featured connection between blasphemy and violence.

Blasphemy: A Conceptual Chameleon

What constitutes blasphemy has been described differently across time, place and religious culture. Almost all legal definitions in modern Europe have, centred on Christianity, defined blasphemy as an insult of God, sometimes extended to include the Virgin Mary, the saints or even, as in the case of Spain's 1850 penal

18 Ron E. Hassner, "Blasphemy and Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2011). See also Nilay Saiya, "Blasphemy and Terrorism in the Muslim World," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 3 (2017).

code, "sacred things".[19] Some anti-blasphemy laws were tailored to protect a single faith group – the focus on Anglicanism in English jurisprudence is a case in point – whilst others shielded all officially recognised religious communities in a given country from attacks against their God (the German penal code of 1871 protected Protestants, Catholics and Jews).[20] Criminalisation was justified by pointing at the nefarious impact of blasphemies on public decency, social order and political stability but also by a fear of divine retribution – which had been key to mediaeval and early-modern anti-blasphemy legislation. It defined blasphemy as a public speech act that transgressed social norms and crossed religious boundaries or the line separating the sacred from the profane.[21]

Speech had been key to blasphemy from when the concept was first coined in ancient Greece. Yet whereas *blasphēmía* – from *bláptein* (hurting or discriminating) and *phḗmê* (reputation) – and its Latin derivative had still referred to random verbal abuse, late-medieval Christian Europe saw the concept narrowed down to insults against God.[22] Echoing a rise in interest in "the sins of the tongue", and a consolidation of Christian culture, *blasphemare* now meant "to express a vilification or any sort of slander [that contributes] to the degradation of the creator" (thirteenth-century scholastic Alexander of Hales).[23] Blasphemy's new association with the divine was attended by a process of increased legal prosecution. After a sixth-century Justinian Novel had already reserved the death sentence for "godless" behaviour, efforts to criminalise insults against the divine – and against the saints and the Virgin Mary – multiplied from the thirteenth century onwards. These offences encompassed the attribution of a character trait to God that he did not have, the denial of a feature that He possessed and the ascription to a person of an attribute that was exclusive to Him.

19 This is explained in Julio de la Cueva's chapter.

20 See the chapters by David Nash and Manfred Sing (England) as well as Christoffer Leber (Germany).

21 E. g., Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 11–13; Schwerhoff, *Verfluchte Götter*, 19; Gabriel Levy, "Blasphemy as Transgressive Speech, a Natural History", in *Blasphemies Compared*, ed. Stensvold.

22 For the following Levy, *Blasphemy*, 3–57; Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*, 2–6 and 42–71; Martha G. Newman, "Defining Blasphemy in Medieval Europe: Christian Theology, Law, and Practice," in *Blasphemies Compared*, ed. Anne Stensvold; Gerd Schwerhoff, *Zungen wie Schwerter: Blasphemie in alteuropäischen Gesellschaften, 1200–1650* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005), 27–45.

23 Cited in: Schwerhoff, *Zungen wie Schwerter*, 28. See also Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *I peccati della lingua: disciplina ed etica della parola nella cultura medievale* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1987), esp. 229–240.

Apart from straightforward insults, invoking God's name in relation to sinful thoughts or to back up trivial claims was considered blasphemous too.

Christian authorities criminalised blasphemy on two levels. In line with a decree issued by Pope Gregory IV, church courts often handed out fines that had to reconcile a blasphemer with God and save their soul. By contrast, secular courts focused on protecting the public from His wrath (plagues, hunger, diseases) and defending civil authority, which in the late-medieval and early-modern world obtained its legitimacy directly from God; thus, from an exercise in soul-saving, the judicial prosecution of blasphemy had become an issue of public order for which secular courts had recourse to pecuniary sentences, but also to sentences of a symbolic nature such as wearing penitential garments, mutilation of the mouth or cutting off tongues. Biblical reading effectively legitimated a harsh crackdown on those accused of offending the sacred. In Leviticus 24:15–16, for instance, God instructs Moses to "[s]ay to the Israelites: 'Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death'," thereby "fix[ing] the precedent in Judeo-Christian history for punishing blasphemy as a crime."[24] At the same time, courts occasionally recognised mitigating circumstances such as excessive alcohol consumption or emotional rage.

Blasphemy was far from the only offence against the sacred prosecuted in early-modern Europe. Because intentionality was often decisive for the degree of punishment, heresy (*haíresis*, choice or preference) was taken especially seriously and prosecuted accordingly; after all, professing a faith that dissented from established teaching challenged not just religious but also political authority and threatened the sociocultural order. Since there could be no excuse for heresy, those professing it typically became the victims of cathartic orgies of violence, as confirmed by the bloodshed caused by confessional conflict in early-modern Europe. Another offence to meet with brutal punishment was apostasy (*apostasía*, revolt), a concept usually applied to those who had actively renounced or clandestinely abandoned their belief, and which appears to have been especially prevalent in Islamic culture where it is known as *ridda* / *irtidād*.[25] Finally, sacrilege – from the Latin *sacra* (sacred) and *legere* (pick out) – referred to the stealing of ecclesiastical property, though was additionally used for the desecration or destruction of holy places and objects as well as for the profanation of practices deemed sacred. When institutional power was in jeopardy, sacrilege was a

24 Levy, *Blasphemy*, 8.

25 For apostasy in Islam see Frank Griffel, "Apostasy," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Kate Fleet, et al., (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2007). See also the chapters by Laura Thompson and Manfred Sing in this volume.

frequent companion, as incidents from the European Reformation era and revolutionary times show. Although clearly circumscribed, the different offences against the sacred often interacted with and reinforced each other – a kind of overlap that persisted in modern times, as some of the chapters in this book show.

The concept of blasphemy, and the same applies to other religious offences, remained much the same during the early-modern period as it continued to be treated as an insult against God requiring persecution to save the blasphemer and protect the community. In Europe, the period from the late-sixteenth century onwards witnessed a noticeable standardisation of blasphemy statutes.[26] Things began to change in the eighteenth century. Institutional religion came under fire from princes keen to expand their power – among others, they seized control of monasteries, curbed ownership of church property and expanded the jurisdiction of secular courts – and from *philosophes* demanding liberty of religion and conscience.[27] Secularisation and religious pluralisation continued during the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras and even persisted under the Restoration, when most rulers showed little inclination for returning power and wealth that had previously belonged to the Church.[28] Despite a process of revival, the Churches were thus less able to pressurise political authority into disciplining religious misbehaviour.

Penal reform impacted upon legal responses to offences against the sacred too. Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria advocated the abolition of torture and the death penalty but also urged the decriminalisation of blasphemy (alongside adultery, homosexuality and other 'sins' that, he argued, did not cause damage to society). He even hinted at the impossibility of blasphemy's legal prosecution, arguing that by "punishing intentions to act as sins," lawmakers risked "usurping God's authority" – an argument that critics of blasphemy legislation have used more often, as Alain Cabantous shows in his chapter by citing from the writings of Montesquieu and François Dareau.[29] Beccaria's call for clemency inspired a string of penal reforms that saw among others Czarina Catherine the

26 Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*, 150 – 166.

27 E. g. S.J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); William J. Callahan and David Higgs, eds., *Church and Society in Catholic Europe of the Eighteenth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

28 E. g. Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750 – 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

29 Dale Jacquette, "Beccaria on Discounting Intentions in Adjudicating Punishments for Crimes," *Philosophical Inquiries* 2, no. 2 (2014).

Great and Habsburg Emperor Joseph II reclassify blasphemy as an illness that needed treatment rather than an evil that required punishment. Consequently, the 1787 penal code for the Hereditary Lands of the Austrian monarchy declared that a blasphemer should be treated as a "lunatic" to "be kept locked up in the madhouse until his recovery will have been ascertained."[30] However harsh conditions in hospitals could be, individual blasphemers tended to be better off as a result of a process that can be described as a medicalisation of blasphemy.

In short, changes in the legal framework, the onset of secularisation and religious pluralisation help explain why the present enquiry into the link between blasphemy and violence starts in the late-eighteenth century. Even so, it is worth remembering that the decriminalisation of blasphemy was neither a universal nor an irreversible process. Take the case of the German state of Bavaria. In 1801, legal scholar Anselm von Feuerbach had claimed with regard to blasphemy: "[t]hat the Divinity gets insulted, is impossible, that she revenges herself on people because of injuries, is unthinkable, that she can be reconciled through punishment of her insulter, is foolishness."[31] After the 1813 Bavarian penal code, drafted by Feuerbach, had omitted blasphemy, the 1871 code accompanying the creation of the German Empire again criminalised blasphemy. Religious revival, Christian morality, popular unrest, the looming threat of communism and Church-State cooperation ensured that this clampdown on offences against the sacred possessed a transnational dimension – with blasphemy legislation re-emerging in Denmark (1866), Norway (1902), Italy (1930) and Malta (1933) among others. In some cases, lawmakers responded to a specific case of blasphemy; thus, the 1932 Dutch law on "scornful blasphemy" was a direct response to an image published in the communist daily *De Tribune*, included on the cover of this book, which showed two labourers putting their axe to the cross of Christ.[32] This newfound concern for offences against the sacred has not been confined to Christian cultures only. In the Muslim world, as a result of among others "the transformation Islamic law underwent when it became integrated into the legislative codes of the new nation-states," blasphemy and apostasy

30 Cited in: *Textbuch zur Strafrechtsgeschichte der Neuzeit – Die klassischen Gesetze*, ed. Arno Buschmann (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1998), 269.

31 Paul Johann Anselm von Feuerbach, *Lehrbuch des gemeinen in Deutschland gültigen peinlichen Rechts*, cited in: Eveline G. Bouwers, "Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Gotteslästerung in Europa: Religionsvergehen und Religionskritik seit 1500*, ed. Eveline G. Bouwers (Schwalbach im Taunus: Wochenschau Verlag, 2017), 82.

32 "'Goede vrijdag' – De oude en nieuwe wereld", *De Tribune* (March 25, 1932).

have been the object of increased political and judicial censure.[33] Examples include the introduction of relevant legislation in post-colonial Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan – with the latter two countries lately registering a marked increase in court trials.[34]

In recent years, several parallel but largely unconnected processes have reinvigorated the debate on blasphemy. In some areas, the fall of secular or atheistic regimes and the subsequent restoration of Church-State relations has seen a surge in laws protecting religious authority and expressions of faith; examples are evident and include Orthodoxy in Russia, Catholicism in Poland, Sunni Islam in Turkey and Shia Islam in Iran, to name only a few. Elsewhere, rising numbers of non-believers and the arrival of new faith communities in the slipstream of migration have stimulated debate about the protection of specific religious worldviews. These altered realities explain why the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, has called for the decriminalisation of blasphemy – citing the 2007 recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly that "national law should only penalise expressions about religious matters which intentionally and severely disturb public order and call for public violence".[35] Tightening blasphemy regimes in some parts of the world notwithstanding, many countries have abolished blasphemy laws and today prosecute religious hate crime instead. More recognisant of a pluralistic world, these new laws still enable tackling the violence immanent in blasphemous action as well as anti-blasphemous retaliation. Yet they too leave space for legal interpretation on where freedom of expression starts and religious liberty stops.[36]

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33 Baber Johansen, "Apostasy as Objective and Depersonalized Fact: Two Recent Egyptian Court Judgments," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003): 687.

34 On Egypt see Maurits S. Berger, "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases of Egypt's Highest Courts," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003). The case of Indonesia is discussed in David Cohen et al., "Interpretations of article 156 A of the Indonesian Criminal Code on Blasphemy and Religion Defamation (A Legal and Human Rights Analysis)," *Indonesian Institute for the Independent Judiciary, Jakarta* (2018), accessed March 21, 2022, https://humanrights.stanford.edu/sites/humanrights/files/blasphemy_and_religious_defamation.pdf. For recent developments in Pakistan see Sana Ashraf, *Finding the Enemy Within: Blasphemy Accusations and Subsequent Violence in Pakistan* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021), 5–11 and 31–60.

35 Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law), *Report on the Relationship between Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Religion: the Issue of Regulation and Prosecution of Blasphemy, Religious Insult and Incitement to Religious Hatred* (October 17–18, 2008), accessed on July 3, 2021, https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2008)026-e.

36 E.g. Barbara Rox, *Schutz religiöser Gefühle im freiheitlichen Verfassungsstaat?* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

A conceptual chameleon, blasphemy has across time, place and religious culture been defined in a variety of ways. Some chapters in this book define blasphemy as a public speech act denigrative of the sacred – be it God, Christ, adjacent figures such as the Virgin Mary and the saints, the prophet Muhammad or even an abstract idea of ideological Truth (as in revolutionary thought). In other cases, blasphemy lies in the visual or written ridicule of religious ideas, rituals and communities, in the insult of feelings of believers or even in partaking in alternative cults. The multifaceted nature of blasphemy as discussed in this volume ties in with its frequent connection to other offences against the sacred: heresy, apostasy and sacrilege – and even, in the case of the Papal States, lèse-majesté. Its conceptual richness also explains the different trajectories that the prosecution of blasphemy has followed in modern history. Whereas some countries refused to prosecute blasphemy, or sanctioned it indirectly before making it a criminal offence, others registered challenges to legislation that protected some faith communities only. Or else they saw a deterioration of interreligious and religious-secular relations in response to the introduction of blasphemy laws. Hence the present volume shirks from providing a clear-cut definition of blasphemy, allowing historical sources to lead in what counts as blasphemous.

To adequately cover contemporary interpretations of blasphemy and other offences against the sacred, the authors in this volume adopt a wide range of methodological approaches and make use of a rich spectrum of sources. They analyse written texts such as legal documents, police reports, pamphlets, press commentaries and literature; they examine visual sources including ceremonial, caricature, photography and internet recordings; and they investigate performative actions such as sound and the deliberate formation of rival cults.[37] In spite of this versatile approach, a problem in studying blasphemy and religious hate crime remains that offences against the sacred exist primarily in the eyes of the believer. This too shows how important it is to adopt a high degree of conceptual freedom when examining blasphemy and its manifold links to violence.

Violence: Of Harm and Hurt

If interpretations on what constitutes blasphemy have varied across history, so the concept of violence has long been open to debate. An important element shaping these discussions pertains to the (il)legitimacy of violence, which revis-

37 See especially the analysis of 'sonic violence' in the chapter by Matthew Kerry.

its the distinction between *potestas* and *violentia* that shaped early-modern European jurisprudence. Whilst *potestas* referred to the capacity to achieve a specific aim through the rule of law, *violentia* was the ability to impose oneself with brutish power.[38] The distinction between enforcing power legitimately and inflicting corporeal assault regardless of legal constraints returns in the various theoretical approaches more recently proposed by scholars of violence.[39]

A first strain of research contends that violence is always physical; in other words, it is impossible to speak of violence "when it is not perceived as something bloody."[40] Murder, lynching and massacre are forms of violence because they administer a tangible physical harm. Others find this focus on the body too limited and point at the psychologically destructive impact that gestures and words can have.[41] Although critics are wary of such a conceptual enlargement for fear it opens a Pandora's Box in which every act of discrimination, marginalisation or exclusion is labelled violence, a more inclusive understanding of violence can be helpful. After all, physical violence is often preceded by and interacts with forms of hurtful verbal or symbolic action. A focus on "blood" only would unjustly isolate violence from the historical context in which it emerged and to which it responded.

One example of an enlarged conceptual understanding of violence was proposed by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in the 1960s. What they called "symbolic violence" refers to a form of non-physical violence located within social structures.[42] Specifically, it describes a mechanism whereby a dominant social group imposes its norms – with regard to gender, class, sexual orientation et cetera – on other social groups in order to maintain a position of

38 Claudia Ulbrich, Claudia Jarzebowski and Michaela Hohkamp, "Einleitung," in *Gewalt in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Claudia Ulbrich, Claudia Jarzebowski, and Michaela Hohkamp (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 11–13.

39 Whilst among others the English and French languages distinguish between force and violence, other languages use the same word to describe both meanings. Thus, the German word "Gewalt" refers to legitimate authority (as in *Staatsgewalt*) but also to illegitimate acts of physical or mental maltreatment.

40 Jörg Baberowki, *Räume der Gewalt* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2015), 11. See for violence as physical action e. g. C.A.J. Coady, "The Idea of Violence," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (1986); Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, "Überlegungen zum Gewaltbegriff," in *Gewalt: Entwicklungen, Strukturen, Analyseprobleme*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 27–38.

41 E. g. Peter Imbusch, "The Concept of Violence," in *International Handbook of Violence Research*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003).

42 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction: éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970).

privilege. Since subordinated groups not only internalise these inequalities but come to perceive them as legitimate, symbolic violence helps reproduce an exclusionary social order. Systemic violence can also exist at an institutional level. Johan Galtung has called this "structural violence," which he describes as the product of among others income, health and gender disparities; it likewise keeps deprived groups in a state of dependency and destitution.[43] Structural violence is visible in the social system protecting the interests of those it already benefits. Like symbolic violence, it is a form of non-physical action that perpetuates power and powerlessness. Both structural and symbolic violence can accompany acts of tangible physical violence – sometimes contributing to the latter's escalation, at other times serving to legitimate corporeal assault. A final conceptual understanding of violence relevant for this book emphasises its link to affect. Violence is here seen as an act producing emotional hurt that can prompt a counterreaction; the motive of divine retribution, present in many religious cultures, connects to this.[44]

The chapters in this volume attest to the importance of being conceptually flexible about the definition of violence when examining its interdependency with blasphemy. Some contributors see violence as physical action that includes the killing of religious personnel, the destruction of churches or the smashing of sacred objects. Others locate violence in the attempts by church and state authorities to silence dissent or criminalise difference. A third group ties violence to an emotional experience, pointing at how believers described blasphemous actions as a form of spiritual hurt. In all these instances, violence is seen as an act of religious boundary-crossing or a breaching of social norms – be it in the insult of God, in the challenge to church officials or in the infraction of religious feelings.[45]

Other than showing how religious revival and processes of secularisation alternated in the modern age, the present volume takes issue with the alleged decline of violence during this time. The thesis of a supposed decrease in corporeal assault over the last centuries has a long history. In his phenomenal *The Autumn*

43 Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969).

44 See, e. g., Sybille Krämer, "Sprache als Gewalt oder Warum verletzen Worte?," in *Verletzende Worte: Die Grammatik sprachlicher Missachtung*, ed. Steffen K. Hermann et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007).

45 Francisca Loetz, *Sexualisierte Gewalt, 1500–1850: Plädoyer für eine historische Gewaltforschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2012), 17; Dirk Schumann, "Gewalt als Grenzüberschreitung: Überlegungen zur Sozialgeschichte der Gewalt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 37 (1997): 372–373.

of the Middle Ages (1919), Johan Huizinga described medieval man as "enslaved [...] to the passions [..] quick to anger and insensitive to the misfortunes of others," which contrasted to modern man's capacity for self-restraint.[46] A similar idea inspired Norbert Elias to argue that from the later Middle Ages onwards, a new sense of shame contributed to a decrease in violent behaviour.[47] At the same time, the formation of states possessing a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force helped check bloodshed within communities. Elias' theory of the civilising process has been criticised for its Eurocentrism, exaggeration of mediaeval brutality, blindness for the coercion operated by modern states and disregard for more recent examples of extreme violence – illustrated by among others a surge in homicide numbers during the mid-seventeenth and genocidal violence during the twentieth centuries.[48] Yet despite these criticisms, Elias' basic argument about a long-term decline in physical violence is still widely shared.[49] More recently, it inspired Steven Pinker to claim how from the eighteenth century onwards, a rise in empathy, self-control, morality and reason (the so-called "better angels of our nature") tamed man's propensity for violence.[50]

Among other things, Pinker has been rebuked for his selective use of historical data and for linking violence to irrationality, unjustly treating the Enlightenment not just as a great educator but a great pacifier too.[51] A quick glance at the industrial scale on which violence occurred in the twentieth century suffices to

46 Stuart Carroll, "Introduction," in *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Stuart Carroll (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

47 Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation: soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 14th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). Ted Gurr agrees about "increasing internal and external controls on the show of violence" in European history. Ted Robert Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence," *Crime and Justice* 3 (1981): 342.

48 E. g. Stuart Carroll, "Violence, Civil Society and European Civilisation," in *The Cambridge World History of Violence: Volume III, 1500–1800 CE*, ed. Robert Antony, Stuart Carroll and Caroline Dodds Pennock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Robert van Krieken, "Violence, Self-Discipline and Modernity: Beyond the 'Civilising Process'," *The Sociological Review* 37, no. 2 (1989); Gerd Schwerhoff, "Zivilisationsprozess und Geschichtswissenschaft: Norbert Elias' Forschungsparadigma in historischer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift* 266, no. 1 (1998).

49 Support for Elias' thesis can be found in Andrew Linklater and Stephen Mennell, "Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations – An Overview and Assessment," *History and Theory* 49, no. 3 (2010): esp. 404–410; Pieter Spierenburg, "Violence and the Civilizing Process: Does it Work?," *Crime, History & Societies* 5, no. 2 (2001).

50 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Books, 2011).

51 Philip Dwyer, "Whitewashing History: Pinker's (Mis)representation of the Enlightenment and Violence," *Historical Reflections* 44, no. 1 (2018).

understand that tying the advance of rationalism and modernity to non-violence is deeply problematic. Indeed, the decline in interpersonal violence appears to have had other causes. For Stuart Carroll, a reconfiguration of social life made man less "tolerant of violence," even if the human propensity for anger remained unchanged.[52] Jean-Claude Chesnais cites as key factors for the decline of violence the development of modern states with their repressive powers (police, justice) and an ability to create new social spaces (school, army), the decrease in scarcity – famine had always been a major catalyst for conflict – and the fact that a diminishing mortality rate prompted an "unprecedented valuation of human life".[53] Robert Muchembled ties the general decline in violence to changing concepts of masculine honour, as young males were historically overrepresented in the statistics of homicide and other forms of violence.[54]

Although its causes remain contested, and occasional returns to extreme violence cannot be denied, few historians challenge the idea of a long-term drop in physical violence – a decrease also visible in relation to violent actions pertaining to public religion. The latter includes clashes in which "members of a community [would] acknowledge the framing of their [...] violent practice as in agreement with their worldviews and paradigms" but also fights "undertaken against religious targets".[55] In Europe, the decreasing impact of religion on politics and the conclusion of treaties regulating confessional coexistence greatly reduced chances for religiously-motivated violence from the seventeenth century onwards.[56] Yet as the chapters in this book show, decline did not equate "disappearance".[57] As long as religion remained an object for contention, and this

52 Carroll, "Introduction," 37.

53 Jean-Claude Chesnais, *Histoire de la violence en Occident de 1800 à nos jours* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981), 14–16. Modern policing and legal disciplining are cited more frequently as factors for declining violence. Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 44–116.

54 Robert Muchembled, *Une histoire de la violence: de la fin du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 8–11, 25–43 and 70–76. According to the author, a focus on the link between violence and virility, as in Fascism, may explain temporary increases in lethal violence.

55 Hans G. Kippenberg, "Searching for the Link between Religion and Violence. A Theory of Social Action," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 98; Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past & Present* 59 (1973): 52.

56 Philip Benedict, "Religion and Politics in Europe, 1500–1700," in *Religion und Gewalt*, ed. von Greyerz and Siebenhüner.

57 Claude Langlois, "La fin des Guerres de Religion: la disparition de la violence religieuse en France au 19e siècle," *French Historical Studies* 21, no. 1 (1998). See also Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, "Introduction: The European Culture Wars," in *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic*

still applied to the period from the late-eighteenth century onwards, violence remained a possibility. It manifested in physical form against religious personnel, sacred objects and holy places – often in conjunction to more latent forms of violence: blasphemies hurting religious feelings, heresies challenging religious doctrine and apostasies undermining religious authority. Hence, an investigation into the link between blasphemy and violence also sheds light on the relationship of religion and violence.[58]

Overview of the Chapters

As an act of demystifying the sacred, blasphemy can be found in different religious cultures across time and space. The scope of this volume is however more modest. Geographically, the book concentrates on case-studies from Europe or involving European actors; temporally, the emphasis is on the period from the late-eighteenth century onwards when secularisation, religious pluralisation and the decriminalisation of blasphemy changed the dynamics and legal position of commentary attacking the sacred in its manifold forms; faith-wise, the volume's focus is on intra- and interreligious conflict as well as on religious-secular clashes. In terms of organisation, the volume is divided in three sections. Although each is drafted around a specific relation of blasphemy to violence, the sections show considerable overlap, with some chapters revealing more than one way in which the two concepts interact.

The first section examines situations of general societal upheaval in which offences against the sacred accompany a broader culture of (symbolic) destruction. 'Blasphemy as a Companion to Violence' opens with Alain Cabantous' inquiry into the erratic use of the concept of blasphemy in France around 1800. The dechristianisation campaign of the early revolutionary period involved a confiscation of ecclesiastical property, crackdown on convent life and reform of church structures; to this was added, from Year II onwards, the construction of a new sacred known as the Supreme Being. Despite these attempts to eradicate old regime religion, the past continued to loom large over revolutionary cul-

Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe, ed. Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

58 The link between religion and violence in modern history has not been served well by scholarship. Comparative contributions include Bouwers, ed., *Glaubenskämpfe*; Silke Hensel and Hubert Wolf, eds., *Die katholische Kirche und Gewalt: European und Lateinamerika im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2013). Specialist subjects such as sectarianism or antisemitism have been better studied.

ture, as ongoing references to blasphemy demonstrate. Cabantous describes blasphemy as a "public speech act" intended to disrupt the boundary between the sacred and the profane that often complemented the violation of sacred places, destruction of holy objects or mockery of religious personnel. Yet in this new revolutionary world, boasting a new revolutionary sacred, blasphemy allegations also formed a strategy to discredit political opponents. The Montagnards attacking the Girondins in the Convention, the Jacobin clubs lashing out at the Catholic faithful, French revolutionaries confronting foreign powers: at a time of massive unrest and violence, they all used the label 'blasphemer' to damage and delegitimate a political Other. This recycling of a concept from the old regime shows, according to Cabantous, the revolutionaries' failure to "eradicate the deep-rooted references to Christianity" in French culture and create "another civilisation".

The contested creation of a new sacred returns in the chapter of Marco Omes, which scrutinises blasphemy and its persecution in the Papal States during the two periods of French occupation rule around 1800 – first by the revolutionaries and then by the forces of Emperor Napoleon. The historic concentration of spiritual and temporal power in the hands of a single man, the pope, ensured that in Rome blasphemy was both a religious sin and political crime. The Jacobins who controlled the city during the late-1790s were acutely aware of this dualism and even used "religious misbehaviour", as papal officials put it, to criticise theocratic government. They expressed blasphemies, committed acts of sacrilege and venerated secular cults. The imperial administrators who arrived in Rome a decade later preferred amicable relations with the Church, which made them less tolerant of anti-religious excesses; at the same time, they pushed hard for the glorification of Napoleon and for forms of civic religion. Omes examines the acts of religious misbehaviour that occurred under both periods of French rule and traces repercussions during the papal restorations, highlighting the interconnectedness of regal and divine lèse-majesté. The prosecuting *Giunta di Stato* and the *Congregazione dei Disordini* cited religious misbehaviour to tackle political disloyalty to the embattled pope, seeking to "purg[e] oppositional voices" and "restor[e] the sacred nature of papal authority." Different from the restoration of 1799 – 1800, which followed on a period of widespread violence and irreligion, the focus during the post-imperial years of 1814 – 1816 was on re-establishing "political allegiance towards the pope" – with blasphemy accusations doubling as forms of institutional violence. This explains the prosecution of clergy who had endorsed the cult of Napoleon. After all, "[c]riticism of the pope's kingship," which participation in a secular cult amounted to, was "an attack on religion, too."

The clergy was also paramount to the story of blasphemy in Civil War Spain. This bloody conflict followed on the collapse of the republican government in

summer 1936 and merged religion with politics in a peculiar way. In his contribution, Julio de la Cueva examines numerous cases of blasphemy and incitement to blasphemy that occurred in the province of Toledo during the early period of the war. Whereas official definitions of blasphemy in Spanish law limited it to a verbal insult of the sacred, the Civil War saw it become a companion to revolutionary violence, which included the mass killing of priests, desecration of churches and destruction of religious images. The revolution borrowed from established categories of political culture that equated the Left with anticlericalism and the Right with religious observance. Hence, De la Cueva argues, blasphemy became a cultural code that distinguished supporters from opponents of the Republic. Seen from the former's perspective, "[n]ot to blaspheme [...] cast a shadow of suspicion over whomever did not do so." By accompanying revolutionary violence, blasphemies thus helped to demarcate ideological belonging. This is why republicans not only offended the divine and destroyed sacred objects but made the clergy and faithful commit blasphemies too. That blasphemy and sacrilege shaped the revolutionary struggle to such a large extent confirms the centrality of religion to the Civil War – and to Spanish culture as a whole.

Blasphemy could be a companion to a violence that was revolutionary and secular in nature. Yet as section two shows, believers could also assimilate it in terms of experiencing violence. 'Blasphemy as a Form of Experienced Violence' opens with a chapter by Christoffer Leber on fin-de-siècle Germany that examines the case of Lutheran pastor Carl Jatho (1851–1913), whose prosecution for heresy by church authorities prompted popular allegations of blasphemy. It also illuminated the ambivalent response to religious dissent and fed dreams of religious change in Wilhelmine Germany. Jatho professed pantheistic ideas, rejected the idea of revelation and ascribed an identity to God that appealed to an elite receptive to reform but hesitant to leave the Protestant faith and Church entirely. Secularist groups such as the Monists celebrated the pastor's belief in religious progress as proof of him being a new Martin Luther who could guide Germans through a process of reformation to culminate in a new scientific age. Unsurprisingly, church officials were less generous about his theological subservience and invoked the recent heresy law to remove Jatho from his clerical post. Feeling their faith hurt by the pastor's unorthodox claims, lay critics instead branded Jatho a blasphemer, which under the German imperial code of 1871 referred to anyone insulting a recognised religious community. Revisiting the arguments of Jatho's supporters and opponents, Leber shows that the accusation of dissent, followed from a sense of hurt feelings and experienced violence, was an act of structural violence intended to stifle reform debates within the Lutheran Church, an expression of symbolic violence from among the faith-

ful and, for critics, an encouragement to become a "pioneer of religious freedom and a modernizer of Christianity".

Whereas in most European countries, charges of blasphemy were backed by a written legal framework that allowed little room for interpretation, English common law tradition placed the persecution of offences against the sacred in the hands of individual judges. This also impacted upon the prosecution of blasphemy, which David Nash claims was closely connected to contemporary concerns for public order and morality. England prided itself on having escaped the worst of early-modern religious war and late-eighteenth century revolutionary upheaval that had tormented mainland Europe. But despite a legacy of "tolerant peaceability," the English could frequently "imagine (and be persuaded to imagine) a fear of violence emanating from blasphemy." This dread for the destabilising effects of offences against the sacred explains the comparably heavy-handed sentences handed to those accused of blasphemy. This was regardless of whether they had printed cartoons borrowing from biblical scenes and citing holy texts – as in the case of George William Foote – or had held inflammatory speeches that uprooted Edwardian concepts of public peace (see the example of John William Gott). The fear that England's peace and prosperity would be damaged also confirms why some believers protested against the organisation of a freethinkers' congress in London in the late 1930s. What emerges from Nash's chapter is the picture of a people proud and frightened, a country where the interpretative flexibility inhibiting the legal system both allowed an early crackdown on blasphemy and an exaggerated sensibility for its violent potential as well as its possible detrimental impact on public order.

The capacity of blasphemy to injure the feelings of believers to the point of it being experienced as a form of violence returns in the case that Russian courts have lately brought against Ruslan Sokolovskiy, discussed in Marcin Składanowski's chapter. In 2016, this young blogger staged a performance in the Church 'On Blood' in Yekaterinburg during which he filmed himself searching for a "rare Pokémon": Jesus Christ. Sokolovskiy uploaded the video to YouTube, commenting that his hunt for Pokémon – conducted at the very same place where the Bolsheviks had murdered the last tsar and his family – was meant to tease out the limits of blasphemy legislation in the modern Russian Federation. Whereas other recent protests against the Russian Orthodox Church involving blasphemies have tended to focus on the Church's connections with state officials and business, and are thus essentially political protests, the Sokolovskiy case centred exclusively on religion. Składanowski dubs it a "public blasphemy" that combined "an intentional violation of a sacred space [with] the introduction of secular elements into it, aimed at desacralising that space." Put differently, Sokolovskiy's broadcasted search for Pokémon was less connected with the Church's political

reach than its social influence. An "anti-church and anti-religious" protest, the performance ended with the artist being sentenced to three-and-a-half years imprisonment and the obligation to remove all offending content from the internet. The ruling responded to a sense of violence contained in Sokolovskiy's offence of religious feelings, though it also revealed structural violence in the disadvantaged legal position enjoyed by non-believers in contemporary Russia.

Apart from being a companion to or a form of (experienced) violence, blasphemy could also function as a trigger for physical action. Section three 'Violence as a Reaction to Blasphemy' opens with a chapter by Laura Thompson that focuses on nineteenth-century Tunis, specifically on blasphemy accusations involving Jewish cart-pusher Batto Sfez and Muslim reformist Abdelaziz Thaalbi. Although blasphemy was widespread in the region, local authorities often refrained from prosecuting it, provided that the accused denied all involvement. In both of these cases, however, the charge of "hurting Muslims' feelings" led to a death sentence. Thompson explains these extraordinary decisions by citing the minority position that Sfez and Thaalbi occupied in the city of Tunis. Yet she also points at how each charge came at a moment of political crisis. In 1857, the local Bey, desirous to mark out his own position, refused to follow Ottoman orders and free Sfez, indicating the Sublime Porte's waning influence on the ground. Half a century later, Tunisian officials found their authority over Thaalbi usurped by the French, then in the process of establishing a protectorate. Therefore, it was mundane power struggles accompanying processes of political transition that turned blasphemy accusations into a death sentence. The "visceral reaction [that] it allegedly provoke[d] among Muslims" convinced local authorities to prosecute blasphemy in a way that intended to show who was in charge. It is the same mindset that, Thompson argues, is behind the more recent crackdown on blasphemy in Tunisia following the Arab Spring.

The violent potential of blasphemy returns in the chapter by Matthew Kerry, which examines the meaning of blasphemy in Spain at a time in which the influx of rural migrants fed urban elite fears of public disorder and moral degeneration. Conservative commentators lamented the steady rise of blasphemy, calling it both repugnant and pointless (different from theft since it had no material benefit). Arguing that "cursing God was a threshold sin that opened the door to committing further wickedness," and in the absence of adequate legislation, Madrid elites launched a campaign in 1909 to eradicate "vulgar, sonically conspicuous behaviour," including when it defiled the sacred. As a form of anti-social conduct, blasphemy was bemoaned not just by the Church and its supporters, but also by liberal-leaning elites. As Kerry writes, "[e]ven if the latter defended Spaniards' right to curse God, they nevertheless deplored blaspheming as a dirty habit" that imperiled the moral state of Spain. Elite anxieties about the dangers

emanating from blasphemy seemed confirmed by subsequent events in Barcelona. What came to be known as the Tragic Week broke out following a general strike in opposition to a call for reservists to fight in the Spanish-Moroccan War but soon saw protestors burn down religious buildings, desecrate holy objects and attack clergy. Believers complained about the many instances of blasphemy accompanying the anticlerical violence and sacrilegious acts, an indignation further increased by the working-class background of perpetrators. Spanish officialdom responded with a mix of physical retribution and symbolic imposition. Military intervention suppressed the protest, executed one of the alleged ringleaders and continued the anti-blasphemy campaign.

One of the most famous cases of blasphemy prompting violence is the novel *The Satanic Verses*, published by Indian-born British-American author Salman Rushdie in 1988. Manfred Sing's chapter examines international responses to the book, showing that whilst many in the Islamic world were shocked by the blasphemies it contained, few initially advocated retribution. In fact, it was the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose call to murder (*fatwā*) from early-1989 escalated international Muslim opinion. Sing traces the shaky theological and legal basis on which the *fatwā* was based, as contemporary Islamic and Iranian law did not automatically foresee a death sentence for cases of blasphemy or apostasy. The document, he shows, did not meet the formalities of the *fatwā*, nor did it coincide with the death of the *muftī* who published it or contain any provisions for repentance. Its deviation from the required standard explains why neither Sunni authorities nor other Muslim states backed the call to murder. That Khomeini, who was himself a legal scholar, nonetheless issued the call had more mundane reasons. As Sing argues, the *fatwā* had to support his "claim to political authority in Iran" at a time when demands for constitutional reform and discussions about succession had plunged the Islamic Republic into a state of political crisis. Additionally, the call to murder was intended to stimulate "a Muslim transnational self-empowerment beyond the State" that would prevent religious transgressions in the future. It is this interconnectedness with politics that helped mobilise Muslim opinion to the point that the *fatwā* "created what has been termed the 'Rushdie affair' in the first place" and brought (the threat of) violence to those implicated in it.

In his concluding remarks, David Nash examines the link between blasphemy and violence from a conceptual viewpoint as well as highlights aspects for future study. Revisiting the work of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, he points at how blasphemy's continued occurrence – and its occasional connection to a broader culture of anticlericalism – seems to contradict modernisation theory by challenging the policing and disciplining capacity of the modern State. At the same time, Nash emphasises the importance of regime change for shaping

official responses to offences against the sacred, warns against the dangers of a Eurocentric approach to studying blasphemy as well as highlights how blasphemy should be appreciated as a form of imagined violence. He reveals the limits of the civilising process by showing how, despite a rise in legislation cracking down on blasphemy in some countries, state officials elsewhere actively surrendered their policing role in relation to the realm of religion. In fact, a focus on blasphemy's interaction with violence discredits the idea of linearity in offences against the sacred, instead showing a trajectory in which the charge of blasphemy was activated to serve political, social or cultural purposes. Nash contends that historians would do well to adopt a case-study approach when studying blasphemy; this not only reveals the absence of linearity across time and place but also uncovers the impact of class, race and lifecycle, among other things, on the occurrence and reception of blasphemy.

Drawing on cases involving both those acting in an official capacity and the general public, the present volume illustrates the manifold ways in which blasphemy and violence interact in the modern world. It shows that blasphemy could be a companion to, but also a form of and a trigger for (experienced) violence. Additionally, the contributions in this book highlight that attempts at "demystifying the sacred" were variously perceived as a threat to religious leadership, a danger to political authority, a menace to the social order and a risk to national morality. In terms of agency, the volume illuminates the pre-eminence of men in stories of blasphemy and violence. Whilst this gender bias may result either from blasphemy happening in a male-dominated public sphere or from men's disposition to use physical violence, it also connects to the medicalisation of female norm-deviating behaviour; charges of hysteria have often freed women from legal persecution in the field of religion, hence reducing their presence in historical documents such as police reports or court proceedings.[59] In a similar vein, the contributions in this volume show that blasphemy allegations have disproportionately affected minority groups, be them members of small religious communities or atheists. Additionally, many of those charged with offences against the sacred were disadvantaged in more ways than one, for instance, for being both poor and religious dissenters.[60] This led to a consolidation of their position as outsiders that increased changes to be persecuted for blasphemy, as happened to impoverished Jewish cart-pusher Batto Sfez in mid-nineteenth-century

59 For the preponderance of males in stories of violence see e. g. Carroll, "Introduction," 20 – 27; Loetz, "Gotteslästerung und Gewalt," 310, fn. 11; Muchembled, *Une histoire de la violence*.

60 For an introduction to intersectionality research see Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013).

Tunis or blogger Ruslan Sokolovskiy (born Ruslan Gofiullovich Saybabtalov) in contemporary Russia. At the same time, the coexistence of differences created opportunities to re-join a majority society, allowing poor people to highlight their support for Throne and Altar during the Spanish Civil War or enabling Lutheran dissenters to emphasise their bourgeois belonging in Imperial Germany. Blasphemy thus functioned as both a strategy for social marginalisation and a tool for community reintegration.

Finally, on a conceptual level, the present volume shows the connection between blasphemy and other offences against the sacred: sacrilege, heresy, apostasy and even lèse-majesté. It also illuminates the inadequacy of understanding violence as physical aggression only; the spiritual hurt that blasphemy caused and the risk of godly retribution it entailed necessitate a more comprehensive understanding of violence that includes symbolic and structural aspects as well as recognises the emotional impact of offences against the sacred.[61] More generally, this book reveals the chequered path of religion in modern history, with processes of religious pluralisation and secularisation vying for primacy with the protection of single-faith communities and religious revival.[62] It is this interconnectedness with questions of plurality and secularity that makes an investigation into the link between blasphemy and violence, which revisits the relation between religion and violence, both fascinating and important.

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61 See for this argument also Loetz, "Gotteslästerung und Gewalt," esp. 318–319.

62 On these phenomena, and warning against linear explanations, e.g. Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Steven Bruce, *Secularisation: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter: Religion in der modernen Kultur* (Munich: Beck, 2004); Gilles Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu: chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); David S. Nash, "Believing in Secularisation – Stories of Decline, Potential, and Resurgence," *Journal of Religious History* 41:4 (2017): 505–531; Martin Riesebrodt, *Die Rückkehr der Religionen: Fundamentalismus und der "Kampf der Kulturen"* (Munich: Beck, 2000).

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