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## 2 Violence and the Sacred, or Blasphemy during the French Revolution

As the classical works of Sigmund Freud, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert and more recent studies of René Girard and Denis Crouzet have amply shown, there exists a close relationship between the concepts mentioned in the title of this chapter.<sup>1</sup> If one considers that human society lives according to norms that at some point in time are considered intangible, inviolable (in the sense of taboo or the sacred) and indispensable for its internal cohesion and hierarchy, then these very same concepts necessarily create a form of social separation. The divide that thus emerges is historically variable but remains a divide nevertheless; it encourages both a desire to defend the separation as well as an urge to breach or even destroy it.

To attack such a prohibition (i.e. breach a supposedly inviolable norm) means to enter the transgressive field of many varieties of violence. Essentially the gestural, verbal and mental actions that accompany these acts of boundary-crossing – which can be voluntary or compulsory, symbolic or real and collective or individual; they also can be directed against persons, places or objects and lead eventually to the punishment of the perpetrators. When it comes to the acts of violent boundary-crossing addressed in this chapter, treatises on moral theology clearly distinguish between blasphemy and sacrilege. Blasphemy manifests itself through public speech acts, first in oral and then in written form. Sacrilege, by contrast, remains primarily a gestural and often destructive violation of sacred places, temporalities, objects and even persons. Despite these different meanings, the distinction is not always as clear-cut. Indeed, blasphemy can sometimes be seen as a sacrilege and a sacrilegious act can be accompanied by one or more blasphemous utterances, as we will see in this chapter.

This chapter investigates the relationship between violence, the sacred and blasphemy during the heyday of the revolutionary moment in France, i.e. during the period 1789–1794. It underscores the mounting number of hostile expres-

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<sup>1</sup> René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Hachette, 2002 [1972]); Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2005 [1990]).

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sions then issued towards old regime religion and shows the power with which new forms of the sacred were invested, as well as the extent to which this transfer to new sacred items was denounced. Without assuming a necessary link between violence and revolution, the French case reveals a co-existence between two concepts of blasphemy.<sup>2</sup> Jacques Cheyronnaud and Gérard Lenclud distinguish between “blasphemous” (*blasphématoire*), which refers to a fundamental and enduring form of blasphemy, and “blasphemic” (*blasphémique*), which is historically conditioned and prone to change.<sup>3</sup> The category of the blasphemous applies not only to outrages against God, but also to what makes these outrages blasphemies according to a Christian system of thought. To analyse the blasphemous means to question the ontological nature of (revealed) divinity through the construction of another form of sacred. By contrast, blasphemic is linked to a certain historical era and to a specific context within the broader category of blasphemous; it is determined by acts of judgement and political instrumentality.

The special status and traditional importance that blasphemy retains in the religions of the Book, in this case specifically Christianity, result primarily from the role that the Word of God, or the Word inspired by Him, has for the communication of the believer. This Word is both a revelation and a means to glorify the divine. According to Augustine, the line from the Lord’s Prayer, ‘hallowed be Thy Name’, means that ‘He should be deemed holy within you, that He should not be scorned but honoured by your innermost person.’<sup>4</sup> Blasphemy, which is an attack on the Word by the word, thus becomes the perfect inversion of the religious intention embedded in this prayer – all while still establishing a strong link between the human and the divine. A formidable link too. On the one hand, blasphemy – which, we repeat, is a form of public impious speech directed against a sacred element, be it religious or not – functions as an expression to cancel the separation between the profane and the sacred, i. e. to displace, modify or even

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006). For a broader chronological overview see Emmanuel Fureix, ed., *Iconoclasme et Révolutions (XVIIIe–XXIe siècle)* (Ceyzélieu: Champ-Vallon, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Cheyronnaud and Gérard Lenclud, “Le blasphème, d’un mot,” *Ethnologie Française* 3 (1992); Alain Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème en Occident, XVIe–XIXe siècle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015), 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> Augustin, *De Diversio*, cited in: Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6.

temporarily erase the dividing line between these two categories.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the link between these two spheres is no longer ensured through the intermediary role of the Catholic priest – that special character who, because of his status as a man of sacrifice, helps create the sacred; any man can provoke an intolerable mix of the vilest profanities with regard to a space (the sacred) that is principally out of ‘his’ reach.

The masculine is appropriate since research into accusations of blasphemy shows that it was almost exclusively the business of men. As Arlette Farge once put it, ‘men blaspheme, women curse’.<sup>6</sup> It is as if men staged a fleeting attack against the present, while women took a mortgage on the future. Ultimately, then, the sacred gives blasphemy its performative quality by legitimising, even authorising an act of judgement on the part of those who think they are its legislators, organisers, guardians or victims.<sup>7</sup> As Jeanne Favret-Saada argues convincingly: “A statement is not qualified as blasphemous on account of its distinctive content but because of an act of judgement from a religious authority on another person’s communication [...] There is no blasphemy without a jurisdiction, whether this jurisdiction is exclusively religious or also civil.”<sup>8</sup>

The French Revolution (1789–1799) abolished the institutional prosecution of blasphemers. Profound legal reform undertaken by the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies ensured that the crime of blasphemy, which had previously been qualified as an act of lese-majesty against God or the king, ceased to exist. Despite this change, blasphemy remained present in French revolutionary culture, devoid of religious references, but still in need of the sacred. The aim of this chapter is to explain this apparent contradiction. First, we will look at how Enlightenment thinkers began questioning the ‘crime’ of blasphemy during the eighteenth century. We will subsequently explore how blasphemy continued to exist in both the political and religious spheres, first as a means to stigmatise those with opposing ideas and then in the form of a more or less explicit support of sacrilegious acts.

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the development and the diffusion of written texts and the advance of literacy, accusations of blasphemy will be increasingly directed at the content of literary, political, judicial and theological writings as well as at visual material such as caricatures and paintings.

<sup>6</sup> Arlette Farge during the radio programme *Les Lundis de l’Histoire*, broadcasted by France Culture (November 1999), cited in: Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 138–140.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Cabantous, “La parole entre nécessité et contingence: blasphème et cultures (XVIIe–XXe siècle),” in *Le blasphème du péché au crime*, ed. Alain Dierkens and Jean-Philippe Schreiber (Brussels: Éditions de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Favret-Saada, “Rushdie et compagnie. Préalable à une anthropologie du blasphème,” *Ethnologie Française* 3 (1992).

## Recycling a Taboo

Already before the French Revolution, the crime of blasphemy had come under scrutiny from judicial institutions, following up on interventions by magistrates and *philosophes*. A pioneer of sorts, Montesquieu writes already in *L'Esprit des lois* (1748):

The harm has issued from the notion that we must avenge the Divinity. Instead we must honour the Divinity and never avenge him. Indeed, if we acted on this last notion, where would retributions end? If the laws of men must avenge an infinite being, they will be gauged by his infinity, and not by the frailty, the ignorance, and the impulses of humankind.<sup>9</sup>

Montesquieu thus argues that because man is unable to know what offends the divinity in the utterance of a blasphemy, it is not up to human justice to punish it. In his *Traité des injures* (1775), French lawyer François Dareau argues along the same lines when he claims:

God stands above all vain insults by men. Nothing can alter his grandness and his glory. Let us come back, if possible, from these times of fanaticism where barbarity – interfering with the interests of the Divinity – only resulted in tortures, breaking wheels and burnings at the stake, awful torments to atone for heresies and impieties. [...] Today, more enlightened and maybe more religious than we could be in those times, we know that we are not permitted to anticipate on the sacred rights reserved for God. How much blood could have been spared by following the maxim that only He can avenge himself.<sup>10</sup>

Both standpoints were not without risk for the foundations of Christianity itself. When people refused to understand what could undermine the sacred honour of God, this created an immeasurable distance between them and the divine, leading to what Bernard Cottret describes as the “crisis of the Incarnation”.<sup>11</sup> This was akin to inverting the status of the blasphemer, who could be held as an intermediary close to the divine, perhaps known to be vulgar and clandestine too, but an intermediary nevertheless. Some rare eighteenth-century theologians even questioned, understandably in a timid manner, the appropriateness of

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<sup>9</sup> Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des lois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), vol. 1, book XII, chapter IV, 199. For an English translation of the book by Philip Stewart, dated 2018, see <http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2748>, accessed May 29, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> François Dareau, *Traité des injures* (Paris: Prault, 1775), 98. See also Jean-François Robinet, “Blasphème,” in *Dictionnaire Universel* (London: s.n., 1779), vol. VIII.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Cottret, *Le Christ des Lumières. Jésus de Newton à Voltaire 1660–1760* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1990).

the Church's vengeful and violent enquiries regarding blasphemers; they did so in the name of God!<sup>12</sup> Even if such thinking meant to minimise the violence of speech acts, and reject its suppression, this view was not yet broadly shared on the eve of the French Revolution, it nonetheless indicates some important shifts during the preceding decades.

The first change involves a progressive decriminalisation of blasphemy, already underway since the 1730s. This is followed by another shift that places the category of the blasphemous in the domain of written culture; as a result, blasphemy begins to embrace the alleged impieties of both famous, and not so famous, writers who contest the foundations of religious heritage. To illustrate this point, we can cite an article by the Abbé Augustin de Barruel in *Les Helvétiennes*. After alluding to the text of the Beatitudes, he writes concerning the group of intellectuals known as the Encyclopaedists: "I know, this language is still too sublime for you. Your wise men blaspheme against it."<sup>13</sup> A third more discrete change manifests itself through the radical questioning of certain theological claims. For example, in *Les Nuits de Paris* (1788–1794) Nicolas-Edme Rétif presents a Jansenist who publicly corrects a woman who had shared the gossip that "[t]he good Holy Virgin was everywhere". While reminding the woman that only God is everywhere, he is accused as a "blasphemer of the Virgin".<sup>14</sup> Even more radically, the theologian Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier writes in 1785 to a colleague that the damnation either of children who die without being baptised or of "infidels" who do not know Christ is a blasphemy against the principle of redemption, which delivers Christians from sin.<sup>15</sup> In this case, (the accusation of) blasphemy is inserted into the heart of the doctrines officially taught by the Church.

The legislators of the early revolutionary period accelerated this cultural process of religious alienation, as evidenced by the penal code of October 1791, the first such document to be issued in revolutionary France. The second part, which is dedicated to crimes against both the common good and individu-

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<sup>12</sup> Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 196–200.

<sup>13</sup> Abbé Augustin de Barruel, "Lettre 76," in *Les Helvétiennes* (Paris / Amsterdam: Briant, 1781), 383. The author repeats the accusation in 1801, when he writes regarding literary production in eighteenth-century France: "Seventy years of blasphemies, of sophisms, of sarcasms, of falsehoods, and of hatred against Christ and all of his saints have made Voltaire the star of the godless of this century." Abbé Augustin de Barruel, *Histoire du clergé pendant la Révolution française* (London: s.n., 1801), vol. 1, 127–128.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne, "L'homme aux cheveux plats. LXXXI Nuit," in *Les Nuits de Paris* (London: s.n., 1789), vol. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Cabantous, "Le blasphème de l'abbé Bergier," in *Homo Religiosus: Autour de Jean Delumeau* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

als, does not include any reference to blasphemy; it is simply gone from the list of crimes and offences. French legal historian Jacques de Saint-Victor writes about this sudden absence:

In his presentation of the penal code, the legislator [Louis-Michel] Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau [...] specified on the new document: 'You will no longer find here those great crimes of heresy, divine lèse-majesty, sorcery, magic [...] for which, in the name of heaven, so much blood has stained the soil [...]' By abolishing the crime of blasphemy, France became the first European nation to separate so clearly [secular] law from religion.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, the speeches of those elected by the Nation, from the Constituent Assembly through to the Thermidorian Convention, repeatedly used the term blasphemy to designate ignominious words and ideas expressed either by their political adversaries or their enemies abroad.<sup>17</sup> The continued invocation of the offence of blasphemy, regardless of its legal abolition, resulted from a double transfer of the sacred undertaken by the revolutionaries. They replaced the sacred of old regime religion, in whose name the efforts to repress blasphemy had previously found their justification, with a string of replacement notions that made novel use of Catholic vocabulary. Mona Ozouf cleverly observes that "the Mountain" was "saintly," that its assemblies were temples while the fatherland had its altar, similarly the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen became the (Holy) Book.<sup>18</sup>

In an address held at the Society of the Defendants of the Constitution in Vic-la-Montagne in Thermidor Year II, the Jacobin speakers still called the Mountain 'saintly and sublime, [whilst] continuously watching over the liberty of the People'.<sup>19</sup> This period even saw the creation of the Cult of the Supreme Being and the belief in the immortality of the human soul, which were both presented as 'the affirmation of a new afterlife, somewhere between its total denial and the old system of eternal punishment'.<sup>20</sup> This did not prevent some revolutionaries from openly professing their atheism; for instance, Joseph-Marie Lequinio, a

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques de Saint-Victor, *Blasphème: Brève histoire d'un crime imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> It seems that only the bishops who had sat on the Legislative Assembly did not use it. Caroline Choplin-Blanc, "La prise de parole des évêques-députés à l'Assemblée Législative," *Parlement(s). Revue d'Histoire Politique* 3, no. 6 (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire (1789–1799)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 323–324.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Bronislaw Backzo, *Comment sortir de la Terreur. Thermidor et la Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 64.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Vovelle, "La Révolution française: mutation ou crise des valeurs," in *Idéologies et mentalités* (Paris: Folio, 1992), 323.

member of the Convention, loudly claimed to be a godless man “because I only have my conscience as moral rule, [...] and [my] righteousness as God”.<sup>21</sup> This change of beliefs altered the relationship between the profane and the sacred as well as the status of blasphemy. Importantly, it did not efface either.

The revolutionary upheavals inspired the emergence of a new political culture that crystallised around a novel set of values, which provided for a system that not only founded a different type of political regime, but wanted to impose a radically different civilisation that boasted a clear educational programme.<sup>22</sup> New forms of solidarity centring around the idea of the Nation and a united People replaced the plural universe of the Old Regime; a new paradigm emerged that saw the father-land and liberty receive transcendent meanings, whilst the Republic battled revolutionary war and other existential threats; a new humanity arose drafted around notions of fraternity, dignity, happiness or righteousness as well as around family and filial piety.<sup>23</sup> The following extract of an address by the Society of Jacobins held at the National Convention in Floréal Year II perfectly expresses the principles of a new sacred: ‘a certain number of sacred principles on which draws the Republic’s collective and civil ethos: [these include – A.C.] the existence of the Divinity, the life to come, the saintliness of the social contract and of the laws [...]. The one who dares to say he does not believe in them raises himself against the French people, against the human race and against nature’, thereby becoming a potential blasphemer.<sup>24</sup>

## Of the Good Use of blasphemy

Having become foundational for the revolutionary project, the aforementioned notions will also constitute an essential framework for public speeches. Since some of these lectures are held by institutional actors and get published, this grants political speech a fundamental, accusatory, combative and often fiery character. The circulation of words and their rhetorical importance makes revolutionary speech a major issue of power, an important form of political engage-

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Marie Lequinio (de Kerblay), *Les préjugés détruits* (Paris: s.n., year II), 363.

<sup>22</sup> Christina Schroér, “Une rhétorique sacrée au service de la République profane,” *Histoire, Monde et Cultures Religieuses* 3, no. 35 (2015): 95–110. The author clearly shows that this state-based regime reached its apogee under the Directory.

<sup>23</sup> Lequinio, *Les préjugés*, 315–318.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Alain Cabantous, “L’articulation des sacralités comme lecture chronologique de l’époque moderne” (paper presented at the colloquium *Caricature et sacré* held at the University of Paris VIII at Saint-Denis, Paris, 2008).

ment and a mark of civic loyalty for the participation in assemblies, clubs and societies.<sup>25</sup> Abbé Grégoire indicates the frequent involvement of verbal violence, justifying his membership of the Committee of Public Instruction at a time “when the Convention made it no longer possible for reason to have access to the tribune [because] blasphemy, furious declarations and the paroxysms of frenzy had replaced the language of humanity and wisdom”.<sup>26</sup> In view of these new forms of the sacred, how should we understand the use of the traditional concept of blasphemy to discredit those who questioned the Revolution’s foundational principles? When we consult the records of the term’s use between 1790 and 1794, we see that the accusation of blasphemy was used in both distinct and identical ways.<sup>27</sup>

Distinct because speeches in the National Convention have to highlight different values as events unfold. The notion of the people’s sovereignty and the right to insurrection become important in 1792–1793, especially so in relation to the federalist movement that challenges the Convention’s drive for a unitary state; the concept of the fatherland acquires a new urgency after the declaration of war against Austria in April 1792; the struggle in the Convention between Girondins and Montagnards dominates in spring 1793.<sup>28</sup> Despite the changing focus, the blasphemy accusations used in these situations are also identical because, according to their accusers, blasphemers always threaten the revolutionary regime in a direct and violent way. Those doing so include kings, tyrants, federalists, refractory priests, fanatics, profiteers and unscrupulous speculators.<sup>29</sup>

In one of first issues of *L’Ami du Peuple* published in 1789, Jean-Paul Marat defends his newspaper by denouncing “the enemies of the fatherland [who] cry blasphemy” and writes how “the timid citizens who never experience either outbursts of the love of liberty or the delirium of virtue, turn pale reading it”.<sup>30</sup> In the course of a particularly offensive and lengthy *pro domo* speech on May 27, 1793, Jacques Pierre Brissot boasts about having pronounced “a horrible blas-

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25 Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 213–214.

26 Henri Grégoire, *Mémoires* (Paris: Dupont, 1837), 339.

27 For example, there is no mention of blasphemy in Anne-Marie Bourdin et al., eds., *Correspondance de Gilbert Romme* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2006–2019).

28 Jacques Guilhaumou, “Un argument en révolution: la souveraineté du peuple,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 4, no. 298 (1994): 695–714.

29 Compare this to the address of Étienne Hallot, deputy for the department of Gironde, in July 1793: “The Convention is free, they say. What a blasphemy!”. Address of July 21, 1793, in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, ed. Louis Lataste and Louis Claveau (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1905) [hereafter *A.P. (Lataste-Brunel)*], vol. 69, 307.

30 Jean-Paul Marat, *L’Ami du Peuple*, September 25, 1789.

phemy in the eyes of the majority when, in July 1791, he had denounced ‘the crimes of the king and the party of the Court’.<sup>31</sup> In a speech delivered at the end of Ventôse Year II (March 1794), Maximilien Robespierre labels the federalists Roger Ducos and Jean-Baptiste Boyer-Fonfrède as well as the corrupt Joseph Delaunay and the Abbé d’Espagnac as an “impure horde being paid to blaspheme”.<sup>32</sup>

A few examples will suffice here to illustrate the different accusations of blasphemy levied at (alleged) opponents of the Revolution. They underline the progressive shift of the meaning of blasphemous as a category within a revolutionary chronology that was particularly eventful, both because of major legislative decisions and because of political events that led to the end of the constitutional monarchy and the foundation of the First Republic in September 1792. Still in 1791, deputy Jacques Veillard asks the Constituent Assembly with regard to the oath that all priests are obliged to swear on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy: “Would demanding an oath [from priests, A.C.] not be a blasphemy? What sort of priest swears an oath that would not only go against the principles of his religion, but also against his conscience?”<sup>33</sup> This traditional use of blasphemy is quickly reversed when the Republic is confronted with the clergy’s resistance from 1791–1792 onwards. Bishops, who are henceforth paid by the State, attract special scorn. During the debate in the National Convention on July 19, 1793 concerning the removal of bishops opposing the Republic’s laws, Jean-François Delacroix, deputy for Eure-et-Loir, leaves no room for doubt.<sup>34</sup> The refusal to obey would be “a blasphemy against the sovereignty of the people”. He adds: “bishops who oppose the marriage of priests not only merit dismissal, [but] they would merit a year of imprisonment in iron chains”.<sup>35</sup>

The invocation of blasphemy is especially frequent on the occasion of the trial of Louis XVI, when the term is used to defend its legitimacy, in particular after Robespierre questions its necessity by declaring that the king has already been judged by the nation and ‘that he should be punished’.<sup>36</sup> He repeats this argument in his lengthy speech of December 3, 1792: “In opening an arena to the champions of Louis XVI, you renew all the strife of despotism against liberty;

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<sup>31</sup> Address of May 27, 1793, in A.P. (*Lataste-Brunel*), vol. 65, 428.

<sup>32</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), vol. X, 403.

<sup>33</sup> Address of February 14, 1791, in A.P. (*Lataste-Brunel*), vol. 23, 177.

<sup>34</sup> The bishops had become state functionaries in accordance with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

<sup>35</sup> Address of July 19, 1793, in A.P. (*Lataste-Brunel*), vol. 69, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Albert Soboul, *Le procès de Louis XVI* (Paris: Julliard, 1966), 92–94.

you consecrate the right to blaspheme against the Republic.”<sup>37</sup> He ends his argument with the famous sentence: “Louis must die so that the nation may live.” In reaction to this radical proposal of the king’s immediate execution, numerous members of the National Convention who remain in favour of a trial try to mobilise support by invoking blasphemy. Lequinio, a deputy for Morbihan, believes that questioning the legitimacy of the trial is “at the same time an insult to the French people and a blasphemy against justice”.<sup>38</sup>

During the same session on December 3, his colleague Antoine Claire Thibaudeau, deputy for Vienne, denounces this debate, which permeates French society, as an attack on liberty: “That the French, free since four years ago, question whether a nation can judge a king, is [...] a blasphemy against liberty.”<sup>39</sup> The day before, Bertrand Barère had, as chairman of the session, been even more explicit when trying to determine the limits of the debate: “To ask whether he who was hitherto king of the French can be judged, is a political blasphemy.”<sup>40</sup> Arguing in favour of the trial, François-Agnes Mont-Gilbert, deputy for Saône-et-Loire, had talked about two opposite scenarios, both of which led to the same conclusion: “If he [Louis] is guilty, it is necessary that he can be judged; if he is innocent (forgive me for this blasphemy, an innocent king... but this is just an assumption), it is still necessary that he can be judged.”<sup>41</sup> Some weeks later, on the eve of the vote, when the defendants of the king become more insistent, Pierre Dartigoëye (deputy of Landes) considers it “a revolting absurdity, a blasphemy in morals [that] a nation should be asked whether a crime should be punished”.<sup>42</sup>

Charges of blasphemy return in a similar manner during discussions in the National Convention that is elected in September 1792, thus shaping the opposition between the Gironde and the Mountain until the latter’s victory following the insurrection of May 31–June 2, 1793. These accusations shape the fiery battles between the representatives of the two major political factions in the Convention, and between the Parisian sections and the Girondin deputies. It is Robespierre who accuses Armand Gensonné of uttering “a blasphemy against the liberty [of the people, A.C.]” when he suspects “the factions of re-establishing the monarchy”.<sup>43</sup> Vice versa, François Antoine de Boissy d’Anglas promotes the separa-

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<sup>37</sup> Address of December 3, 1792, in *A.P. (Lataste-Brunel)*, vol. 54, 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>40</sup> Address of December 2, 1792, in *Ibid.*, vol. 65, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Address of December 3, 1792, in *Ibid.*, vol. 65, 270.

<sup>42</sup> Address of January 3, 1793, in *Ibid.*, vol. 56, 172.

<sup>43</sup> Address of April 17, 1793, in *Ibid.*, vol. 62, 29.

tion of powers in the new constitution by accusing those who “defend the idea that there can only be one power delegated by the people” of being blasphemers.<sup>44</sup> Girondin minister Jean-Marie Roland is in turn charged with blasphemy himself, in this case because he had trampled “this beautiful word of equality” by mentioning the existence of “superior classes”. Deputy Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois calls him out in no uncertain terms: “you have blasphemed by designating citizens using the humiliating words of inferior classes”.<sup>45</sup>

A similar accusation is used on June 1, 1793 by the Montagnard François Chabot, a former priest, when he denounces Marc-David Lasource, an ex-clergyman close to the Girondins, for having boldly “pronounced the political blasphemy that the only human right is force,” adding that “the lecture of this phrase prompted the ringing of church bells”.<sup>46</sup> This allusion to the repercussions of political debates within popular society recalls the habit of deputies who wrote addresses “to their brothers in the departments”. In the violent debate that pits the two big political forces of the National Convention against each other, Étienne Hallot (deputy for the department of Gironde) and Bernard Fonvielle the Elder (deputy for Bouches-du-Rhône) address themselves to “their brothers in the department of the Drôme” to inform them of the menace and try to rally them to the federalist cause: “The Convention is free, they [the Montagnards] say, she has declared it so herself. What a blasphemy! It is the conspirators of the Mountain who today cast a shadow over the Convention.”<sup>47</sup>

As a result of military and political threats from abroad, the charge of blasphemy is also used as an accusation against foreign powers. After William Pitt’s manifesto is published in November 1793, Robespierre writes: “They accuse us of rebellion, [us] slaves rising up against the sovereignty of peoples. Do you not know that this blasphemy can only be justified by victory? But look at the last of our tyrants on the scaffold; look at the French people armed to punish his fellow tyrants. That is our response.”<sup>48</sup> After the Federalist uprising in Marseille and the revolt in Toulon, with the port eventually being delivered to the British navy, representative Antoine Albitte, who is dispatched to the Army of the Alps, writes to the soldiers by condemning the “so-called Marseillais who cry out for

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>45</sup> Address of April 18, 1793, in Ibid., vol. 62, 608.

<sup>46</sup> Address of June 1, 1793, in Ibid., vol. 65, 678.

<sup>47</sup> Address of July 21, 1793, in Ibid., vol. 69, 306.

<sup>48</sup> Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 10, 229. On April 18, 1793, Anacharsis Cloots accuses Guadet with regard to the declaration of war against the United Provinces of “having committed blasphemy” by declaring: “What do we care whether the Dutch, traders of cheese, are free men or slaves.” Address of April 18, 1793, in *A.P. (Lataste-Brunel)*, vol. 62, 673.

the destruction of Paris and whose cries of liberty respond to those of the rebels of the Vendée; they repeat over and over again the blasphemies of the infamous Bouillé, of the traitor La Fayette, of the villain Dumouriez, of Pitt, of Cobourg, of Brunswick".<sup>49</sup>

After the fall of Robespierre, the Thermidorians try disciplining political clubs by forbidding them to meet or even to present joint petitions (decree of Vendémiaire 25, Year III / October 16, 1794).<sup>50</sup> At the same time, well-to-do royalist youth forces known as the “jeunesse dorée” physically assaulted Jacobins.<sup>51</sup> This prompts the submission of numerous addresses to the Convention that raise charges of blasphemy. Some use the label to denounce the clubs’ political aspirations; others borrow it to defend the position of the popular societies within the revolutionary movement (given that Jacobin clubs were under direct attack in Thermidorian France, this is however rare). An example of the first use of the concept is the address that the members of the popular society ‘Amis de la République’ in Breteuil (Eure) send to the Convention: “Never, no never, will we support a section of the people who make themselves a censor of laws, who divide the French Senate in patriots and non-patriots. We vow to abhor such a blasphemy and its authors, whoever they might be.”<sup>52</sup>

The second use of blasphemy can be found in the proclamation of the deputation of the Parisian section named after Roman consul Publius Mucius Scaevola, which is held at the Convention in Vendémiaire Year III (October 1794): “The assembly rejects the political blasphemy of those who pretend that this right [the right to lead public opinion, A.C.] belongs to popular societies in which – or so they pretend – resides the sovereignty of the people”.<sup>53</sup> Although this is not the first time that the concept of ‘political blasphemy’ is used, the addition of this adjective means a considerable shift in the term’s application, confirming a new functional use for blasphemy. Almost at the same moment (Brumaire 20, Year III / November 10, 1794), the same expression is used by the popular society of Saint-Jean du Gard (Gard) to vilify those who accuse two representatives sent on an official mission to the south of France of organising a coun-

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<sup>49</sup> Address of July 27, 1793, in *Ibid.*, vol. 69, 599.

<sup>50</sup> The decree forbids “affiliations, aggregations, federations and correspondences between popular societies,” which are “subversive to revolutionary government,” and refuses “petitions or addresses made in a collective name”. Address of October 16, 1794, in *Ibid.*, vol. 95, 215 – 216.

<sup>51</sup> On the “jeunesse dorée” see Backzo, *Comment sortir*, 185 – 186.

<sup>52</sup> Address of November 16, 1794, in *Ibid.*, vol. 101, 288.

<sup>53</sup> Proclamation from October 11, 1794, in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, edited by Marie-Claude Baron and Françoise Brunel (Paris: CNRS Édition, 2005) [hereafter *A.P. (Baron-Brunel)*], vol. 47, 122.

ter-revolution. Society members dismiss these accusations as “a political blasphemy uttered by some resourceful schemers who, deluded by a misguided zeal, see enemies of the Republic everywhere”.<sup>54</sup> The address of the society’s counterpart in Ussel (Corrèze), dated Vendémiaire 11, Year III / October 2, 1794, likewise affirms “in the strongest possible terms that the destruction of popular societies would mean the destruction of all liberty and equality; this proposal alone is blasphemy”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, confronted with the changes that affect the Convention’s internal dynamics in autumn 1794, blasphemy’s earlier political instrumentality is reversed. Some now use the concept to highlight the sacred nature of the new laws, whilst others borrow it to denounce these very same laws and their (supposedly) traitorous authors, thereby citing the political principles that prevailed before the coup that inaugurated the Thermidorian Reaction.

In response to the religious orientation of the new revolutionary reality, blasphemy returns in a more familiar manner without however losing its presence. During the debate on the trial of Louis XVI, Pierre-Florent Louvet, deputy for the Somme, scolds the defenders of the king in the following terms: “Vile impostors, it is not royalty, it is liberty that has descended from heaven. God had created men before you had made kings and it is blasphemy to attribute to Him [the creation of, A.C.] despots.”<sup>56</sup> In a similar vein, the establishment of the Cult of the Supreme Being in the name of “the existence of the Divinity and the life to come” leads Pierre Victurien Vergniaud to claim: “The existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul does not depend on the recognition of men, because it would then be evident that this existence could be questioned, which would be a political absurdity and divine blasphemy.”<sup>57</sup> For their part, those who had been prominent Jacobins in Year II – before the Montagnards’ appropriation of the revolution – denounced “the wicked clamours of atheism and the blasphemy of Brutus repeated by impure mouths”.<sup>58</sup>

Several popular societies thus applaud what in their eyes amounts to the halt of militant atheism. For example, the society of Vernoux-en-Vivarais (Ar-

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<sup>54</sup> Address of November 10, 1794, in *Ibid.*, vol. 101, 61. In their address of 1 Brumaire Year III, the administrators of the department of Deux-Sèvres mentioned having heard “individuals masked behind the holy name of patriots” utter the “nation-killing blasphemy” of the incompatibility between “humanity and patriotism”. *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Address of October 2, 1794, in *Ibid.*, vol. 98, 226.

<sup>56</sup> Address of December 3, 1792, in *A.P. (Lataste-Brunel)*, vol. 54, 245. Louis-Pierre Manuel included this comment in his *Opinion sur Louis XVI* (Paris: s.n., 1793), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Address of April 17, 1793, in *A.P. (Lataste-Brunel)*, vol. 62, 280.

<sup>58</sup> Address of the Society of the Jacobins (22 Floréal year II) in François-Alphonse Aulard, ed., *La Société des jacobins* (Paris: Quantin, 1897), vol. 6, 135–137.

dèche) reports to the Convention on Thermidor 1, Year II / July 19, 1794: 'The Supreme Being, whom you have avenged of the blasphemy of the wicked, has with his all-powerful hand shielded two representatives from the blows directed against them; we offer our thanks to him for this.'<sup>59</sup> However, even after the success of the celebration of Prairial 20, Year II / June 8, 1794, Robespierre in particular did not seem to want to ally himself with this cult of additional sacredness. Proof of this was his decision to reject a petition from Citizen Magenthier of the Parisian section 'L'Unité', submitted to the Jacobins on Thermidor 7 (July 25), which envisaged a return to harsh punishments for those who blasphemed the divinity:

Legislators, deign to pass a decree that, in order to confirm the man who has recognised the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul, and to validate the memorable festival of last 20 Prairial, punished with death the first individual in the whole of the Republic who would dare to express and pronounce the infamous blasphemy that manifests itself daily among the public and societies of any kind. This blasphemy, punishable by a people that wish to dictate laws and set great examples, is the phrase 'Sacré nom de Dieu' [In the bloody name of God! or 'Goddammit!', A.C.]. I shudder at having to spell out these four words, but hope makes them a law for me, because I dare to believe that they will be erased and banished from the hearts of all my brothers and sisters.<sup>60</sup>

This is a remarkable observation, for the offending expression was very popular in the vernacular language and had at the time of the monarchy only rarely been considered a blasphemy. Whilst it invokes the same assumptions concerning an offence of the divinity, the remark reflects possible opposition towards a codified belief that had been imposed by law and was, for some, too close to the religion of the old regime.<sup>61</sup> However, the religious dimension became only one of the various aspects making up the category of the blasphemous, nevertheless preserving the violent element that is natural to this form of verbal transgression.

## Another Type of Transgressive Violence

If, on the one hand, politicians and other revolutionaries seized on blasphemy to discredit opponents, many Catholics, on the other hand, deemed the measures

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<sup>59</sup> Cited in Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution contre l'Église: de la Raison à l'Être Suprême* (Brussels: Complexe, 1988), 179.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in François-Alphonse Aulard, *Le culte de la Raison et le culte de l'Être Suprême* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1892), 361.

<sup>61</sup> Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 218.

taken against the Roman Church a rupture of the sacred or a breakdown of the sacrosanct. Did Pope Pius VI not consider the election of bishops in March 1791, decreed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, a blasphemy?<sup>62</sup> An overwhelming majority of the population in revolutionary France were still loyal to Rome; from the autumn of 1793 until March 1794, they witnessed often violent demonstrations against religion in among others the North, the West, Burgundy, the Lyonnais and Provence. This was especially the case during the heyday of the dechristianisation campaign in Brumaire and Frimaire Year II (late October until late December 1793).

The reasons behind this crackdown on religion and the aims of its initiators are still the object of scholarly debate. The revolutionary government's antireligious policies, especially the oath it demanded the clergy to swear on the Civil Constitution (November 29, 1791) – which was followed by a decree regulating the deportation of refractory priests (May 27, 1792) – and the satirical as well as violent anticlerical representations, prepared the ground. According to Michel Vovelle, “the outbreak [of anticlerical violence, A.C.] had already existed in dreams, fantasies and a symbolic way before it became a [physical] act”.<sup>63</sup> Catholics who during the revolution see, hear and experience this kind of violence that is directed against the rituals and symbols of their religion consider it both blasphemous and sacrilegious.<sup>64</sup> Even if both types can exist simultaneously and reinforce each other, with sacrilege possibly leading to blasphemy, they are not the same. Old regime dictionaries are clear about this difference. Whereas Pierre Richelet sees blasphemy as “an insulting word [addressed] to God,” he qualifies sacrilege as a “profanation of sacred things, the theft of holy things from a sacred place”.<sup>65</sup> A more precise definition is provided by Antoine Furetière, who describes sacrilege as a “crime by which one desecrates, steals, violates or treats shamefully a thing or person that is sacred or devoted to God. Beating or mistreating a priest, abusing a religious sister, desecrating a church, stealing sacred vessels are all sacrileges”.<sup>66</sup> In both examples sacrilege describes

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<sup>62</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, *Le christianisme et la Révolution française* (Paris: F. Rieder, 1925), 62.

<sup>63</sup> Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 90. See the very accessible book on the French Revolution by Michel Biard and Pascal Dupuy, *La Révolution française (1787–1804)* (Paris: A. Colin, 2014), 186–189.

<sup>64</sup> The bill on the freedom of religion (decreed by Lequinio in Nivôse Year II and taken back by the administrators of the Mayenne department) “was a series of blasphemies against religion”. Cited in *Mémoires ecclésiastiques concernant la ville de Laval par un prêtre de Laval* (Laval: s.n., 1841), 157.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois* (Geneva: J.H. Widerhold, 1680), 81.

<sup>66</sup> Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (The Hague: Arnoult et R. Leers, 1690), vol. 1, s.p.

physical acts, be them attacks against persons (maltreatment, abuse) or church property (theft). They often take place in public and are considered to be criminal behaviour, whereby the offence is greater when the sacrilegious act takes place in a sacred space. This specific spatial dimension does not play a role in the case of blasphemy.

In the cities or villages hit hardest by the dechristianisation campaign of Year II, those submitting liturgical objects to a “shameful treatment” and destroying the instruments, clothes, books as well as furniture used for Catholic services aim at a “defanatisation” and purification by fire that forms a prelude to “civil regeneration”.<sup>67</sup> In an address to the Convention on October 2, 1793, the Society of Patriots of Beauvais justifies this destruction by calling the crucifixes, Calvaries and crosses covered with *fleurs de lys* “apocryphal idols” and the statues of saints “plaster phantoms”.<sup>68</sup> On many occasions, patriots destroy reliques that are still actively venerated. This is what happens in Corbeil on Pluviôse 20, Year II /February 8, 1794:

At two o'clock, the mayor, municipal officers and the president of the popular society went to the church of Saint-Pire. The bones of Saint Yon and a bunch of others of this kind were taken from the ossuary where they had been thrown in. They were loaded onto a dump cart, used by the commune to remove trash, and brought to the Place de la Révolution. There the remains were burned at a stake specially erected for this purpose; together with the linen and the boxes that carried them, the remains were reduced to ashes. They were taken with the same dump cart to the arched bridge over the river Seine and thrown into the river.<sup>69</sup>

In Saint-Flour (Cantal), the record of the proceedings of the city council describes the *auto-da-fé* of November 26, 1793 as follows: ‘In the middle of these cries and powerful expressions of public joy, the magistrates of the people, armed with vengeful torches, set fire to the titles of pride and shameful moments of servitude. [While these impure remains [...] turned into smoke, A.C.], the people dance around the fire while singing the cherished tunes of republican hearts while pushing energetic cries of “Long live the Republic”’.<sup>70</sup> In this case, jubila-

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67 Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 96.

68 Maurice Dommange, *La déchristianisation à Beauvais et dans l'Oise (1700 – 1801)* (Besançon: Millot, 1918), 40.

69 Cited in Serge Bianchi, *La déchristianisation dans le district de Corbeil (1793 – 1797)* (Corbeil: Société Historique et Archéologique de Corbeil et de l'Essonne, 1990), 70.

70 Cited in Pierre Chassang, *La Révolution dans les districts de Saint-Flour et de Murat, 1789 – 1794* (Brioude: Éditions Créer, 2008), 523.

tion and positive political slogans seem to dominate, not blasphemous remarks, in spite of the fact that Catholics considered these practices sacrilegious.

Dances and songs could thus accompany the burning of objects, such as the title deeds that represented feudalism. We have the following description of the *auto-da-fé* in Tarascon-sur-Ariège on Germinal 18, Year II / April 7, 1794: ‘All statues in gold and silver, the playthings of superstition and fanaticism, were consigned to the flames amid general applause and public dancing.’<sup>71</sup> These episodes of destruction are often preceded by processions in the form of masquerades, resuming forms of classic carnivalesque inversion whereby lay-people wear liturgical vestments and sit backwards on their horses, while “fallen” animals (cats, owls) evoke superstition and mitres are placed on the heads of donkeys. Some participants in the procession carry liturgical books upside down and shout distorted Latin phrases normally used in church services. Others drink from chalices or pronounce blasphemies against past beliefs.<sup>72</sup> Canon François Cattin emphasises this last aspect in his memoirs. Describing the patriots’ conduct towards refractory priests that have been arrested, he denounces the blasphemies committed by revolutionaries. On the day of the Festival of Reason in Lyon, for which the cathedral church is turned into a Temple of Reason, “a woman dressed as a goddess is seated on the altar of the living God, a donkey in sacerdotal clothing with a mitre placed on its head [...]. Thus dressed, the animal is led in the centre of the procession, [which is] accompanied by shouts, sarcasms, [and] blasphemies pronounced by lost [i.e. fallen, A.C.] women, [as well as] by frightening men followed by monstrous beings.”<sup>73</sup> A similar procession in Bourg is, according to Cattin, marked by the same verbal outbursts on the part of “demons, men and women, [who are] screaming atrocious blasphemies and republican, impious and bloodthirsty hymns”.<sup>74</sup> Many imitations of these “religious mockeries” aimed at destroying “the pious, naïve faith of the flock” might in reality have been more directed at ecclesiastical personnel than at the dogmas or liturgy.<sup>75</sup>

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71 Cited in Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 95.

72 “Wearing chasubles, surplices, [and] copes, [Patriots] stimulated each other on the path to destruction, using blasphemies, foul comments, singing and dancing”. Cited in Dommangeat, *La déchristianisation*, 48.

73 François Cattin, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire ecclésiastique des diocèses de Lyon et de Belley* (Lyon: P. Josserand, 1867), 378.

74 Ibid., 382.

75 Address of the Republican society of Rodez on January 3, 1794, cited in Henri Affre, “Tableau sommaire de la Terreur dans l’Aveyron,” in *Mémoires de la Société des Lettres de l’Aveyron*, vol. 13 (Rodez: Virenque, 1886). We should however not forget how the “crime” of blasphemy had received an increasingly broad meaning over the course of the seventeenth century, when

Given the unusual violence accompanying the event, especially in comparison to other departments in the south-west, we should mention the almost complete sacking of the Cathedral of Vabres (Aveyron) by troops from nearby Saint-Affrique in Frimaire Year II (January 1794). The latter turned the furniture and statues upside down, destroyed the altar, broke the tabernacle and scattered the communion wafers around. Women wanting to gather them up were molested and a man was beaten up.<sup>76</sup> Depending on the region, countryside churches were also sometimes completely sacked and levelled “to the ground,” as happened to numerous religious buildings in the district of Compiègne.<sup>77</sup>

Some of those who took offence at the former idolatrous displays of Catholic culture interpreted these destructions as the positive erasure of an insult to the divinity. Yet spectators remaining faithful to the old religion experienced these acts – parodic, burlesque and sacrilegious – as forms of both symbolic and physical violence that hurt their deepest beliefs, as well as the personnel of the Holy Church. Aside from sacrilegious acts, those responsible for the dechristianisation campaigns of Year II committed a kind of reversed blasphemy. When they defamed old regime religious symbols and attacked what they called fanaticism, they challenged the Christian God who, once again, “responded” with a silence that could be interpreted in two ways.<sup>78</sup> This silence was either proof of heavenly emptiness or confirmed that the divinity agreed with the revolutionaries in desiring a purified “and egalitarian” worship.<sup>79</sup> With regard to this sense of defying the heavens, Mona Ozouf writes: “In this noisy self-satisfaction one senses the ambiguity of blasphemy that conceals within it, like a distant call, the fear behind all the bravado, a very acute sense of scandalous transgression.”<sup>80</sup>

The idea of a celestial void radically questioned an entire literature that had been meant to terrify and instruct believers by citing various examples of how God, when he was insulted, never failed to take revenge. In fact, his curse

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it was applied to every kind of harm afflicted on members of the clergy. Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème*, 244–245.

**76** Valérie Sottocasa, *Mémoires affrontées. Protestants et catholiques face à la Révolution dans les montagnes du Languedoc* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 159–160.

**77** Jacques Bernet, “Recherches sur la déchristianisation dans le district de Compiègne (1789–1795)” (PhD diss., University of Paris 1, 1981), 315–316.

**78** Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 96–99.

**79** The same reasoning can be found among Protestant iconoclasts during the destructive outbursts of the period 1560–1580. See for this argument Olivier Christin, *Une révolution symbolique, l'iconoclasme huguenot et la reconstruction catholique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991), 43–50 and 64–66.

**80** Ozouf, *La fête*, 110.

would not only fall upon the blasphemer himself but also upon the community to which he belonged. In other words, God responded to the verbal violence of one person by delivering a retributive justice that affected all.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the delay caused by God's silence in the face of the profanities he suffered at the hands of popular societies, was bound to raise questions among sincere Christians whose feelings had been hurt.<sup>82</sup> Most believers were certain that a quick intervention from the divinity would repair the wrong done by individuals. Thus, the mayor of Chanay (Ain), who wrote a commentary on the “blasphemous” addresses of Lequinio, “buys the village church, takes up residence in it and dies there, in agony, as is just and proper”.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, Nicolas François Blaux, a member of the Convention, writes to the Committee of Public Safety that the severe subsistence crisis during the spring of Year III is used by refractory priests in Amiens to encourage counter-revolution: “They say that this food shortage is a punishment of Heaven because the Convention has abolished the religion and cut off the head of the king.”<sup>84</sup>

However, only afterwards and through a rewriting of history God would come to punish the men of the dechristianisation campaign by making them suffer “an agonising death”.<sup>85</sup> Abbé Arthur Prévost of the diocese of Troyes reassures himself when he writes, as late as 1909 no less: “The retributions of divine justice [vis-à-vis profaners] are too obvious not to be mentioned occasionally; we keep to ourselves the names of those wretches who were struck by God in punishment for their sacrilegious acts.”<sup>86</sup> Even so, the stories collected with the help

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<sup>81</sup> Canon Jean Marguet of Nancy repeats this in his *Essai sur le blasphème*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition (Besançon: A. Montarsolo, 1825), 9–10.

<sup>82</sup> This field of research is completely absent from the historiography of the French Revolution. Exploring the impact of these anticlerical or anti-religious scenes on both Catholics and religious personnel is made more complicated by a lack of sources. This subject is overlooked in e.g. François Lebrun and Roger Dupuy, eds., *Les résistances à la Révolution* (Paris: Imago, 1987) as well as Yves-Georges Paillard, “Fanatiques et Patriotes,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 233 (1978). Neither Jacques Bernet’s excellent thesis about the district of Compiègne that is cited above, nor the instructive proceedings of the colloquium *Église, vie religieuse et Révolution dans le Nord* that were edited by Alain Lottin (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Septentrion, 1990) offer any help. A systematic analysis of accounts by nineteenth-century parish priests concerning the period of dechristianisation would be necessary to gain insight in the reception of blasphemy and sacrilege. These testimonies were often put on paper at the bequest of the Vatican.

<sup>83</sup> Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 223.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to the Committee of Public Safety (April 16, 1795) following the riots in Amiens. Cited in Bernet, *Recherches*, 430, note 1.

<sup>85</sup> Sottocasa, *Mémoires affrontées*, 250–251.

<sup>86</sup> Abbé Arthur Prévost, *Histoire du diocèse de Troyes pendant la Révolution* (Troyes: s.n., 1909), 23.

of surviving witnesses a few decades after the events of Year II seem to favour epithets such as “vandalism,” “excesses,” “horror” and “devastations” over accusations of blasphemy. Some people, however, equate the men of the dechristianisation campaign with Protestants, thereby continuing the stigmatizing registers of the sixteenth-century wars of religion that associated blasphemy with heresy.<sup>87</sup>

## Concluding Reflections

Although this general overview needs to be substantiated with more archival research, there is no doubt that blasphemy and violence were intimately connected during the French Revolution. First, there is the hurt stemming from the impact of blasphemy on believers who experience impious speech as a species of violence. This aggressive verbal intrusion should be distinguished from sacrilege. Both sacrilege and blasphemy hold a relationship with the sacred, but whereas sacrilege harms persons and objects, blasphemers attack God and the heavenly Court (the saints). Sacrilege is more often an act committed in a private or closed space, whereas blasphemy is necessarily a public act. Sacrilege found its echo in criminal law, especially with the increase in theft during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whilst blasphemy echoed a form of slander, which was always a minor offence.<sup>88</sup>

Then there is the fieriness, even violence of oral exchanges during the revolutionary period that gifts blasphemy a new meaning. Suppressed as a crime, it reappears in its ‘blasphemic’ meaning in political discourse and continues to serve as an instrument to stigmatise all those who contest, ignore or flout the values on which the new political culture is built. The desire to create another civilisation, based on new foundations, cannot however eradicate the deep-rooted references to Christianity. The result of this is a transfer of the sacred that affects iconoclastic movements, which some consider purifying and regenerative, while others dub them sacrilegious and/or blasphemous. In fact, the organisation of, and reference to, the sacred is central to blasphemy, of which the defence and contest of can either peacefully gather a community together or unleash unlimited expiatory violence.

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<sup>87</sup> See the ecclesiastical conferences during the 1840s, analysed in Sottocasa, *Mémoires affrontées*, 331–332. It is however tricky to generalise this thesis in the absence of similar studies.

<sup>88</sup> This is probably the reason why the law enacted by King Charles X in April 1825, only punished sacrilege and not blasphemy. The Anti-Sacrilege Act was abolished in October 1830 without having ever been used.

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