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6 The Imagined Violence of Blasphemy in England

In the context of Europe emerging from its seventeenth century wars of religion, political culture in England developed a potent narrative about its own exceptionalism. One vital component of this was a particular attitude to religious non-conformity and its extreme manifestation in the form of blasphemy.¹ The latter's definition was slippery and sometimes uneven, which indicates perhaps why it was periodically reached for when felt necessary rather than being a familiar ongoing presence within the legal system. Blasphemy laws protected the Anglican Church against malicious attacks upon its doctrines as well as insults but also, confusingly, would lapse into expressions that sought to protect a vision of wider 'Christianity'. On occasion when lawyers, judges and civil servants were pressed for a definition they would merely cite past precedent as their preferred method of describing what the law protected.² This relied upon the coherence of past judgements, which did not always pass satisfactory scrutiny.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Civil Wars in the three kingdoms (England/Wales, Scotland and Ireland) had been superseded by a restoration of monarchical government, and a legacy of law and religion fused in a mutually supportive relationship.³ Even when Catholicism became a threat to the throne in

1 The history of blasphemy has been rather different in the separate legal entities of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Ireland). The former experienced some blasphemy campaigns in the nineteenth century but many of these were ostensibly cases that had links with agitation at large. Blasphemy at the time of writing this chapter is set for repeal as a criminal offence in Scotland. Ireland operated the English Common Law until independence when the requirement to have a blasphemy law was a part of the 1937 Constitution; a subsequent law of 2009 was finally repealed in 2019. See David S. Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain, 1789 to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) and Tarlach McGonagle, "A Draft Obituary for the Offence of Blasphemy in Ireland," in *Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression: Comparative, Theoretical and Historical Reflections after the Charlie Hebdo Massacre*, ed. Jeroen Temperman and András Koltay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also David S. Nash, *Acts Against God: A Short History of Blasphemy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

2 See Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, 1–2.

3 See Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars: 1640–1660* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2009); David Scott, *Politics and War in the Three Stuart Kingdoms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004); Julie Spraggon, *Puritan Iconoclasm during the English Civil War* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003); D. Alan Orr, *Treason and the State: Law, Politics and Ideology in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

the 1680s, provoked by the monarch himself favouring Catholic factions and beliefs, the monarchy was preserved upon his deposition. James II was replaced by the Protestant William of Orange, then becoming William III of England. This ‘Glorious Revolution’ and the narratives weaved around this relatively bloodless coup play an important part in our story. They became an indispensable element in a sustained belief in English peaceful exceptionalism and providential protection from the horrific violence, which had periodically broken out within fiercely divided European societies.

England’s own blasphemy statute of 1698 had itself been one of a range of measures that the new government enacted to protect the Protestant monarchy of William III. Although this statute was never used successfully, its existence was testimony to the fear of outside influences that would potentially disrupt the regime and community. Such attitudes were further reinforced in Scotland with a tide of providential foreboding in the 1690s, which resulted in a new blasphemy statute and the only execution of an individual for the offence in the British isles.⁴ Meanwhile the history of the law’s use in England was itself enshrined in the country’s Common Law of blasphemy. This was judge-made law which meant that each blasphemy case had the choice, at the discretion of the judge, of following previous precedent or allowing the judge to respond to the case in front of him, also taking account of the contemporary social and legal context. The end of the seventeenth century had also witnessed a legal landmark that created a significant precedent in the case against John Taylor in 1675–1676. Taylor’s opinions echoed earlier antinomian ones that spoke out against religious authority and certainly frightened the government, just as earlier Ranters, Quakers and Muggletonians had. In passing sentence the learned judge Sir Matthew Hale created precedent by arguing that an attack upon religion constituted an explicit attack upon the law because the latter acted in defence of morals propagated by the former.⁵ This ‘Hale judgement’ remained influential and would still be cited into the twentieth century. The nature of blasphemy law, created here and sustained as a Common Law offence, linked it inextricably with each context in which fear might be generated and dealt with. This organic approach to prosecuting blasphemy ultimately differed from many regions on the continent of Europe and made the exercise of English justice around the crime of blasphemy fundamentally different.

⁴ See Michael F. Graham, *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: Boundaries of Belief on the Eve of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) and Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash, *Law, Crime and Deviance Since 1700: Micro-Studies in the History of Crime* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 19–35.

⁵ See Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, 32–37.

The Genesis of Blasphemy as Modern Threat

The ripples of the French Revolution were felt in security concerns and a robust counter insurgency campaign by those who coalesced around loyalism to Church and monarchy.⁶ These individuals themselves stressed English exceptionalism as an experience that had been both beneficial and was to be wished for further in the future. Chief amongst these was Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) became the rallying cry for conservative notions of English exceptionalism. Eschewing the rapidity and dangerous destruction of revolutionary turmoil and deliberate breaks with the past, Burke saw the ‘Glorious Revolution’ as a work of distinctive organic English genius to be placed alongside the similarly organic achievements of the Common Law. Achievements that foregrounded a unique approach to immensely gradual and piecemeal change, singularly bequeathed to the English through the wisdom of generations. He argued that

By adhering to our forefathers in *this* way and on those principles, we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians but by the spirit of philosophical analogy. In this choice of inheritance we have given to our political structure the image of a blood-relationship, binding up the bosom of our country with our dearest domestic ties, adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections, keeping inseparable (and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities) our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars.⁷

A further advocate of tranquil exceptionalism was Hannah More. Her loyalist pamphlets were targeted at every corner of the land and intended to stamp out Jacobin dangers wherever they appeared, in a fairly obvious riposte to Thomas Paine. English exceptionalism was a key weapon in her armoury and this is perhaps best exemplified in her *Village Politics* (1792). The book had one village rustic persuaded out of his curiosity about the achievements of the French Revolution by being systematically shown the benefits of English isolation. The English constitution is described as a building and the Civil War glossed over as “a little needful repair”.⁸ Revolution appeared as deceitful imposture that would destroy every cherished British institution:

⁶ Nash, *Acts Against God*, chapter five.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), 18, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/burke1790part1.pdf>.

⁸ Hannah More, *Village Politics* (London: F. & C. Rivington, 1792), 9.

Pretend liberty of conscience, and then banish the parsons only for being conscientious! – Cry out liberty of the press, and hang up the first man who writes his mind! – Lose our poor laws! – Lose one's wife perhaps upon every little tiff – March without clothes, and fight without victuals! – No trade! – No bible! No sabbath nor day of rest! – No safety, no comfort, no peace in this world – and no world to come!⁹

Thus the narrative of both Edmund Burke and, particularly, Hannah More actively voiced English exceptionalism. In describing what England had escaped, it evoked the violence that other places had seen. This phenomenon was imagined violence, which had twin manifestations in the shape of stories of what had happened in revolutionary France and what might happen in England if vigilance was not adequate enough.

Whatever the flavour of England's internal dissent, it was always successfully portrayed by this narrative of exceptionalism as both 'other' and foreign. Radicals would struggle hard against such narratives, but this was largely because those who chose infidelity found themselves diametrically opposed to the narrative of English exceptionalism. Instead they appealed to universalism and universal truths codified in plainly constructed codes and edicts, starkly in contrast to narratives of organic justice and well-being. In the 1790s, political unrest surfaced in Jacobin form, although its presence in England was only sporadically dangerous.¹⁰ Where it conducted an assault upon the link between Church and State it did so with the logic and arguments of the Enlightenment found in Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791). As far as the attack upon religious aspects of English exceptionalism was concerned, radicals latched upon Paine's subsequent text *The Age of Reason* (1794). Paine, whilst hating organised religion, attacked it with calculated argument that sought to rob it of its intellectual power and credibility. For him and radicals around him this emphasis was far more important than forms of violence against religion or religious objects, something which otherwise invested such objects with a power they patently did not deserve. After the Napoleonic Wars came to an end, Jacobin influence and threats persisted and likewise expressions of loyalism found their way into a number of addresses to the monarch. These offer a further window onto a world of fear where threats to exceptionalism and its achievements were everywhere. To take one example, amongst many, an address from the east coast (vulnerable) port of Yarmouth declared in 1819:

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, chapter three.

Convinced as we are of the mischievous and criminal designs and machinations of those, who, under the specious pretext of Reform and Liberty, are industriously circulating blasphemous and seditious publications, with a view of poisoning the minds of the unwary, and of detaching them from their duty to God, and their allegiance to their Sovereign, we feel it incumbent on us to repeat to your Royal Highness the solemn assurance of our fidelity and loyalty to the King, our firm adherence to the Constitution, and our determination to enforce to the utmost of our power, the due execution of the laws against all / who, by their writings or otherwise, shall endanger the public tranquillity, by their endeavours to incite the ignorant and the poor to acts of sedition and violence.¹¹

Paine's ideological successor was Richard Carlile, who organised his immediate family and a coterie of individuals to challenge censorship in the 1820s through works that came to be regarded as blasphemous and seditious. He campaigned against what he saw as religion's tyrannous control of society and culture. Throughout the first half of the decade, his publishing operation reprinted works by Paine and even continued its operation with Carlile himself, his wife and sister in prison. Prosecutions for blasphemy and sedition were brought against Carlile and a number of others in a campaign waged by an upper middle class moral regulator called the Vice Society, an organisation that operated with tacit government support. Importantly, Carlile and his fellow defendants furthered a universalist message of unfettered freedom of thought and communication which spoke of how religious hierarchies prevented the spread of true and beneficial knowledge, forestalling something that they argued would invariably liberate the people. They even stated boldly in court that they would comply with the authorities and desist from publicising their views if it could be satisfactorily demonstrated that they were causing widespread harm to society at large.¹² This again displayed an overtly Enlightenment sentiment, essentially arguing that the spread of knowledge would benefit all of society and work against vested interests, an iniquity that seemed beloved of conservative English exceptionalism.

11 See this alongside numerous examples in *British Loyalty; or Declarations of Attachment to the Established Constitution, in Church and State, opposed to Blasphemy, Anarchy, Sedition and Innovation. By the Merchants, Bankers, Civil Corporations and Parishes of Great Britain* (London: W. Hughes, 1819). See also the argument in Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

12 See Richard Carlile, *Report of the Trial of Mrs Susannah Wright for Publishing, in his Shop, the Writings and Correspondence of R. Carlile; before Chief Justice Abbott, and a Special Jury in the Court of King's Bench, Guildhall, London, on Monday, July 8, 1822: Indictment at the instance of the Society for the Suppression of Vice* (London: R. Carlile, 1822). For more on this agitation see Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, 84–88.

England's generally successful Reformation and its resulting Protestant ascendancy in place, more or less, undisturbed since the Restoration ensured a successful creation of orthodoxy in which religious words and texts were the currency of both veneration and scorn. Moments of iconoclasm, such as they were, appeared as episodes in the Civil War (or War of the Three Kingdoms). England, conversely, did create a Protestant pluralist religious settlement after the Civil War, partly in response to the dangers of Antinomianism and its implications for monarchical government. Thus, the seventeenth century in England was largely devoid of the vibrant cultural history of blasphemy and laws against it as a municipal disciplinary code described by Francisca Loetz in her important study of Calvinist Zurich.¹³ Later, the England of the nineteenth century considered itself to be ruled by an undogmatic Protestantism which, especially after Catholic Emancipation in 1829, was relatively tolerant of all citizens and their religious beliefs and practices. Even atheists, after some alternative and counter-cultural projects, effectively strove to be equal citizens alongside the religious, seeking a widening of plurality rather than an iconoclastic ascendancy of the secular. Given this consensus of sorts, the impact of blasphemy in Victorian England was associated with the courtroom and the trial, which hints significantly at something else.

Nineteenth Century Blasphemy in Britain – the Violence Within?

Blasphemy in Britain, with some later exceptions, was predominantly written and published. This crucially meant that it concerned readerships and publishers and the whole culture of print censorship. The fact that 'harm' was not visible, as the result of forms of direct action, meant that it was almost wholly imagined 'harm' and also imagined violence that England's blasphemy laws equipped its society to deal with. Throughout proceedings, roughly between 1880 and 1920, it is possible to see motifs and ideas of violence to the sacred emanating both from blasphemers, and from the authorities that found themselves confronting this apparent menace. In some particular ways blasphemers dealt in describing violence, portraying violence and shaping its consequences as a critique of religion. In a degree of contrast, authority regularly envisaged the impact of such imagined violence upon the coherence of belief, the psychological

¹³ Francisca Loetz, *Dealings with God: From Blasphemers in Early Modern Zurich to a Cultural History of Religiousness*, trans. Rosemary Selle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

well-being of the populace and the concepts that helped maintain these. Yet words could still be deeds that influenced observers and listeners and this idea emerges in the language of court indictments which described the damaged peace. This also had further repercussions since the language used by blasphemers was considered to be consciously calculated to bring ruin upon the populace and potentially rob them of salvation. The last of these narratives was a pre-occupation of Hannah More. There was also a significant element of providentialism in popular responses to blasphemy that obviously made words into deeds. Deeds themselves were not wholly absent from English conceptions of damage to the sacred, since the separate crime of sacrilege envisaged higher penalties for the defacement, damage to or theft from church premises. The concept of sacrilege also came to have an important meaning within Britain's wider empire when it came to be used as a method of providing legal equality to religions others than Christianity. When the English jurist James Fitzjames Stephen constructed the Indian Criminal Code definition of blasphemy in 1860 after the Indian Mutiny a similar style of solution was constructed. When refereeing between competing religious groups in this colonial context the focus upon the deed avoided doctrinal partiality and problems, whilst also emphasising the paramount importance of public order.¹⁴

The later nineteenth century saw freedom of expression augmented by a more subtle assault upon Christianity that used elements of its own story against it. The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed secularists seek parity with their fellow citizens over access to rights of free speech and publication alongside representation within institutions. Many of these battles coalesced around the character of Charles Bradlaugh, who was President of the National Secular Society during this period. His quest to enter Parliament was one such struggle which dragged on for many years into the mid-1880s. Many joined Bradlaugh in the struggle and one such individual was his compatriot George William Foote, the editor of *The Free-thinker*. Foote was appalled by attempts to ruin Bradlaugh through cynically constructed lawsuits. In his indignation, he turned this secularist periodical into a strident organ prepared to ridicule and do what he hoped would be lasting damage to the reputation of Christianity in England – even boasting the paper sought a blasphemy case to bring the law into disrepute. One tactic used by Foote in the early 1880s, in his self-conscious desire to take on the Christian Britain which he saw stalking Charles Bradlaugh, was to critically analyse the nature of the

14 David S. Nash, "Blasphemy through British (Post) Colonial Eyes. The Indian Criminal Code: from a History of Sustained Paternalism to the Genesis of Hate Crime," in *Blasphemies Compared: Transgressive Speech in a Globalised World*, ed. Anne Stensvold (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

Christian God in his publishing. Upon examination it seems obvious that Foote wanted to undermine the cozy safety offered by English Protestantism by portraying its God as vengeful and capable of enacting premeditated and random violence. This violence was portrayed as not simply physical but also as psychological and moral. Such suggestions sought to undermine the reputation of the Supreme Being and to demonstrate that the agent apparently securing England's domestic peace was immoral and prone to acts of violence. In using the content and implications of biblical episodes this critique also suggested that the sacred book of this Christianity, supposedly handed down by this vengeful God, had a warped didactic power which promoted immorality and violence.

Soon after its launch, *The Freethinker* began publishing cartoons of biblical scenes.¹⁵ These images sometimes sought to portray stories from the Bible as depictions of more obviously incongruous texts, often with the intention of displaying their inherent absurdity. At other times these scenes were placed in a contemporary context and located in England to make them anglicised versions of continental anticlericalism. Foote readily acknowledged that the cartoons would prove to be offensive and he periodically delighted in this fact, rapidly warming to the idea of producing highly visible and eye catching illustrations for the front cover of *The Freethinker*. These gave the paper a tabloid appeal – almost before this was an established publishing idiom. As was later stated in his compendium of illustrations, *Comic Bible Sketches* (1885), his original intention was to reuse images which he found elsewhere that he perceived to be useful. His first port of call were the anticlerical cartoons of the Frenchman Léo Taxil, which he found in the latter's volume *La Bible Amusante* (1882). Foote initially believed that English society and its sensibilities was incapable of rivalling the cogent and targeted anticlericalism of its French counterparts. In this he did, unwittingly, feed the often expressed belief, maintained almost since the early part of the century, that blasphemy was somehow 'foreign' and almost always emerged in English society as an import from elsewhere. Foote and his illustrators used some of Taxil's cartoons unaltered, but others had details that were modernised or anglicised.

In imitation of Taxil, Foote reproduced some of the epigrams from *La Bible Amusante*, but realised that this quasi-didactic style was less suitable for English audiences. At the same time he realized that he could undertake a form of destructive biblical criticism by reproducing passages from the Bible underneath

¹⁵ See Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, chapter four; Joss Lutz Marsh, "'Bibliolatry' and 'Bible-Smashing': G. W. Foote, George Meredith, and the Heretic Trope of the Book," *Victorian Studies* 34, no. 3 (1991) and Joss Lutz Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture and Literature in Nineteenth Century England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

pictorial illustrations of their content and apparent message. This innovation, he argued, was more hard hitting and effective, since elements of the Holy Book and Christian teaching seemed perfectly capable of lampooning and undermining themselves. Several of these concentrated upon biblical inconsistencies and incidences that seemed absurd to the rational mind. As Foote himself saw it:

Pictorial ridicule has the immense advantage of visualising absurdities. Lazy minds, or those accustomed to regard a subject with the reverence of prejudice, read without realising. But the picture supplies the deficiency of their imagination, translates words into things, and enables them to see what had else been only a vague sound.¹⁶

What emerges from an in-depth analysis of Foote's work is quite how many of his cartoons exhibit themes of violence within them. They often depict Christianity as the product of barbarism and, all too often, as the chief unhelpful encouragement to its persistence. In many of these images, the figure of the Christian God is depicted as both destructive and violent. Such behaviour, whilst obviously irrational, was frequently shown as the product of arbitrariness and even active malevolence to humankind. The God of these cartoons was vengeful and abusive towards his defenceless creation, apparently taking pleasure and joy in the suffering of humans and animals alike.



Fig. 9: Plate 18 'Abraham's Ordeal,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

One cartoon that Foote borrowed from a Taxil original but placed into a visibly English setting portrayed Abraham on the point of executing a fearful and crying

16 G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885), 1.



22.—THE LORD'S WRESTLING MATCH.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him.—GENESIS xxxii, 25.

Fig. 10: Plate 22 'The Lord's Wrestling Match,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

Isaac, all constructed upon the idea of a supposedly necessary 'sacrifice'. The cartoon, entitled 'Abraham's Ordeal', showed God reaching down from the clouds to hand Abraham a shotgun. A perplexed Abraham looks apprehensively at the firearm arguably feeling hemmed in by the biblical text emblazoned underneath the image.¹⁷ In two other instances, Foote repeated depictions from the same book of the Bible to display images of the Christian God wrestling semi-naked with Jacob and the latter also wrestling with an angel.¹⁸

The cartoon 'Jehovah Throwing Stones' depicted the Almighty engaged upon smiting an army with pebbles and rocks cast down from the clouds (echoing

¹⁷ The text is from Genesis 22:1–2.

¹⁸ The text is Genesis 32:11 and 32:25. See Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches*.



28.—JEHOVAH THROWING STONES.
The Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto
Azekah and they died.—JOSH. x., 11

Fig. 11: Plate 28 'Jehovah Throwing Stones,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.



31.—A BIBLE HERO.
And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad; and
he also delivered Israel.—JUDGES iii., 31.

Fig. 12: Plate 35 'A Bible Hero,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.



35.—THE CHAMPION GIANT-SLAYER.

So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone and smote the Philistine, and slew him.—1 SAM. xvii., 50.

Fig. 13: Plate 35 'The Champion Giant-Slayer,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

Joshua 10:11). Related to this illustration's theme was an image entitled 'A Bible Hero' portraying Shamgar's celebration after he had 'delivered' Israel by slaying six hundred Philistines. Martial violence was also the subject of the cartoon 'The Champion Giant-Slayer', exaggerating the respective sizes of the two protagonists, David and Goliath. The theme of cruelty to animals was invoked through two cartoons demonstrating the calculated callousness of God for this part of his creation. This was significant since Victorian middle-class sensibilities had moved to domesticate animals and to now invest them with hitherto absent affection. This period saw the creation of Crufts and the Cat Fancy, institutions that organised the classification of animal breeds, whilst their welfare was

now being cared for by the recently founded Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.¹⁹



27 — BALAAM'S ASS.

And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand. . . . And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?—Numbers xxii. 28, 28.

Fig. 14: Plate 27 'Balaam's Ass,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

'Balaam's Ass' was a text regularly alighted upon by freethinkers as presenting the biblical absurdity of a talking ass. In this instance, the Foote version showed a Victorian figure chastising the ass with an umbrella. The animal's mouth is open, in the act of uttering the words put into the creature's mouth by the Almighty. The cartoon asks a range of questions, but chief of these is the instiga-

¹⁹ See Harriet Rivo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).



32.—SAMSON AND THE FOXES.

And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines.—JUDGES xv., 4, 5.

Fig. 15: Plate 32 'Samson and the Foxes,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

tion of an incident in which the Almighty permits the performance of violent cruelty (Numbers 22:23, 28). The incident reaches its absurd conclusion with the image of God invoking the animal to chide its owner for his violent behaviour. This asks the question why God finds it necessary to empower man to cruelty so that he can then be chastised himself by other parts of creation. The themes of animal cruelty and absurdity is revisited in Foote's portrayal of Judges 15:4–5. This cartoon, entitled 'Samson and the Foxes', shows Samson setting fire to the tails of a number of foxes so that they can be sent amongst the 'standing corn' of the Philistines in the hope of destroying it. This particular image is interesting in that it is anglicised by the inclusion of a cottage and familiarly English parish

church in the distance beyond the cornfield. The event is also enabled through the thoroughly modern touches of a visible tin of kerosine and a packet of Bryant and May matches.



24.—ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OF MOSES BY JEHOVAH.

And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.—EXODUS IV., 24.

Fig. 16: Plate 24 'Attempted Assassination of Moses by Jehovah,' published in G.W. Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1885). Photo courtesy of G.W. Foote & Co. LTD, Beckenham.

Perhaps most provocative of all was Foote's illustration of Exodus 4:24, which appeared above the biblical text "And it came to pass by the way in the inn,

that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.”²⁰ Foote linked this text to the contemporary phenomenon of assassination that echoed recent anarchist outrages. The cartoon, entitled ‘Attempted Assassination of Moses by Jehovah’, depicts a tableau of contemporary-style violence. Moses is sat by a table, within the confines of a public house, with a pot of beer in front of him. He looks astonished as he views the doorway where the figure of ‘Jehovah’ has burst into the building urgently pointing a loaded pistol aimed at him (Moses). Three other patrons of the inn have urgently rushed forward and are in the process of, variously, reaching for the pistol or seeking to restrain ‘Jehovah’. Occasionally, Foote would tie biblical texts and phrases to contemporary events, once again to link the Almighty with species of violence. On November 3, 1882, *The Freethinker* portrayed the British Army’s victory over a rebellious Egyptian army at the battle of Tel El Kebir on its front cover. The scene showed cannons firing upon the Egyptians, and close combat between members of both armies. Presiding over this is a union flag waving Jehovah breathing “pestilence,” “famine” and “murder” (noticeably different from “death,” which is the description of the last of these in the relevant text in the Book of the Apocalypse).²¹ Whilst this displayed a liberal freethinking critique of imperialism (espoused by both Bradlaugh and later by J.M. Robertson) which saw it as an evil to be managed, it also made it plain that Britain’s population should confront the fact that the violence perpetrated in their name was at the behest of their God. A deity who appeared to actively revel in the violence he could stir up and sustain.

Taken together these images suggest an association with barbarism and violence as a clearly intrinsic factor in such religiously motivated behaviour. The God sustained by Church and State within the religious establishment is made to appear here as manifestly unworthy of such privilege and veneration. He emerges as irrational, capricious and needlessly cruel. Through the threat of violence, the Christian God abuses his power against weaker and often defenceless species. Moreover, such episodes which quote verbatim from biblical texts are portrayed as symptomatic of a religion where violence appears casual and endemic. Consumers of these images are invited to contrast these barbaric explosions of unwarranted mayhem with the civilisation of life enacted by the forces and tendencies of an age that is growing ever more secular. Foote’s introduction again noted this:

²⁰ Cartoon number 24 ‘Attempted assassination of Moses by Jehovah,’ in Foote, *Comic Bible Sketches*.

²¹ *The Freethinker* (November 5, 1882).

Christians read the Bible without realising its wonders, allowing themselves to be cheated with words. Mr. Herbert Spencer has remarked that the image of the Almighty hand launching worlds into space is very fine until you try to form a mental picture of it, when it is found to be utterly unrealisable. In the same way, the Creation Story is passable until you image the Lord making a clay man and blowing up his nose; or the story of Samson until you picture him slaying file after file of well-armed soldiers with the jaw-bone of a costermonger's pony.²²

By the Edwardian period, the imagining of violence to the established order through blasphemy had to envisage the danger of another form of threat. This emerged as offshoots of the arrival of anarchism within the eyeline of western governments and their policing authorities. Although in Britain this again incorporated ideas surrounding the distant and dangerous 'other', real violence was involved elsewhere. Anarchism was responsible for the Chicago Haymarket Massacre of 1886 when a bomb thrown at police killed eleven people and wounded dozens of others. It had also been responsible for the assassination of President William McKinley, and certainly anarchists were prepared to link this with the murder of the French President Sadi Carnot in 1894 and the King of Portugal in 1908. England had its own anarchist outrage at this time with the siege of Sidney Street, in which Russian anarchists were cornered in London, resulting in a protracted gun fight involving the police and the army. This was instrumental in persuading the public of anarchism's connection to dangerous Russian emigres.²³ The imagining of violence also had cultural dimensions which have been explored by literary scholars such as Sarah Cole. In her examination of how violence colonised the literary imagination and formed a symbiotic relationship with actual acts of violence in England (in the form of anarchism) and Ireland (in the form of Republican violence), Cole shows that violence entered the imagination to be portrayed in a number of early and mid-twentieth century literary works.²⁴

²² Ibid.

²³ Haia Shpayer-Makov, "Anarchism in Victorian Public Opinion, 1880–1914," *Victorian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1988); Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). See also Richard Bach Jensen, *The Battle Against Anarchist Terrorism: An International History, 1878–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and H. Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983).

²⁴ Sarah Cole, *At the Violent Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Morals, Public Order and Blasphemy in Edwardian England

The year 1910 saw the police dealing with three individuals who had worrying links with the anarchist-syndicalist milieu. Thomas William Stewart, Ernest Pack and John William Gott were all members of the Freethought Socialist League that had its headquarters in Bradford where Gott was based.²⁵ Since the start of the decade, these men had been lecturing sporadically in different localities. Their message, and episodically their mode of delivery, was closely related to that operated by G.W. Foote. As such they focused their attention upon material which undermined the morality inherent in the Bible and its teachings. Unlike Foote, who delivered most of his attacks on Christian religion in writing and illustrations, the trio did so predominantly at public meetings in provincial cities. The latter were closely monitored by policing authorities convinced that they needed to take action against the burgeoning threat to both morals and public order that the three men posed.

The idea of these street orations, and the fact that they gathered considerable crowds filled with sympathetic well-wishers, the actively curious and sometimes quite vocal opponents, preyed on the mind of police authorities since this was a public order problem in the making. These authorities were, in the event, regularly placed in the frontline of these blasphemous assaults upon the peaceable sensibilities of the urban bourgeois population. Initially there was considerable reluctance and inertia about confronting this apparent menace, substantially because there was no acceptable *modus operandi* about tackling the problem of outdoor events where blasphemy might have concrete impact. This impasse came to an end in 1910, when the Leeds Chief Constable took action, citing a serious number of previous incidents. What was significant about this was that he noted how one speaker, T.W. Stewart (who lectured under the pseudonym Dr. Nikola), had used language of a “violent character”.²⁶ This process continued with further notes that “blasphemous expressions” were presumed to be “most offensive and distressing to respectable persons passing by”.²⁷ Stew-

²⁵ Nash, *Blasphemy in Britain*, 168–169.

²⁶ This persona is a quasi-villain drawn from the 1890s crime novels of Guy Boothby. This link in itself fed concerns amongst the police and hostile commentators. ‘Nikola’ was depicted in the novels, and described, as both a criminal mastermind and an individual interested solely in making money from humankind.

²⁷ Report from the Leeds Chief Constable (December 10, 1911), in: Home Office Papers [hereafter H.O.] 45 10665/216120/6.

art's rhetoric arguably played on this dialogue with bourgeois sensibilities citing his declaration that "God is not fit company for a respectable man like me".²⁸

When Stewart came to trial it became obvious that there was more to this accusation. A policeman's account of the speech demonstrated how his brava-do-infused lecturing style could do violence to Christian doctrines. Stewart imagined himself confronted by the Creator after death and finding himself consigned to hell for denying belief in the creation story and the story of the flood. He then believed he was immediately followed up to heaven by three of the most notorious murderers of recent times who had earned themselves a grotesque fame within the Victorian psyche. Hawley Harvey Crippen, a notorious doctor who had murdered his wife to elope with his mistress was mentioned alongside Charles Peace, a violent criminal who had used a revolver to murder two people. Lastly, completing this frightening triumvirate was Amelia Dyer, a notorious baby farmer and murderer of an unknown number of infants entrusted to her care. Stewart had brought intimate, and importantly premeditated, violence to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, also invoking psychological violence against the foundation of modern civilised morality. He finished this accusation with the declaration that he "would rather be in hell with honest men". This assault upon the immorality and spuriousness of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness had been a theme freethinkers had explored before, notably in G.W. Foote's cartoon 'Going to Glory' that appeared in *The Freethinker* in September 1882. In this instance, Foote indicated the unjustness of a murderer going to heaven whilst his murdered victim is consigned to hell. Once again this tableau was completed by a malevolent God presiding over proceedings.

In his summing up of the case the judge (Justice Thomas Gardner Horridge) took particular note of the context in which Stewart's declaration that "God was not fit company for a respectable man like me" was made. This indicated that there was a difference between the drawing room and the street – just as there was between what he called "common ridicule" and "argument". He noted that an individual was "free to speak what he likes as to religious matters, even if it is offensive, but when we come to consider whether he has exceeded the limits, we must not forget the place where he speaks, and the persons to whom he speaks."²⁹ This concentration upon the importance of context and place by Horridge shows that he went beyond the pronouncements of Justice Coleridge in the Foote case of 1883. Coleridge had argued that a conception of man-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Shorthand notes of the trial of Thomas William Stewart, Leeds Town Hall December 5, 1911, in: H.O. 4510665/216120/18.

ner was crucial to testing whether blasphemy had been committed. It spoke about the niceties of debate being observed and was a distance away from assessing public order issues in real life situations. Horridge instead foregrounded public order and violence so that the content and offensiveness of blasphemy were closely entwined with its outdoor interpersonal context. The case, as Horridge forcefully demonstrated, turned upon “language which is likely to irritate, and lead possibly to even a breach of the peace by religious minded feelings being hurt to such an extent by the language used”³⁰. Given such direction to the jury it was scarcely a surprise that Stewart was convicted.

What this outcome pointed to was the fact that judges had effectively concurred with policing authorities through a recognition of the importance of public order dimensions. This was a crucial transition from the printed page agitation of Foote and the publications of Pack, Gott and Stewart to something more public and openly threatening. Policing authorities had fallen foul of trying to tie specific editions of works to specific defendants who had sold them. Moreover, with the precision inherent in the Coleridge judgement of 1883, it was no wonder that individual policemen, and even the authorities, could see problems with defining what was blasphemy and what was not. In the absence of this it felt somewhat natural that policing authorities of all varieties, and at all levels, would gravitate towards viewing blasphemy as a public order issue. They may not have known the niceties of debate, but they understood the implication of blasphemous words leading directly to violence. However, in making this imaginative leap, imperatives to police blasphemy became co-existent with the policing ‘gaze’ – one which was constantly imagining the capacity for violence to break out from any potentially blasphemous utterance in public contexts. This was a defining moment since henceforth public discussion of religion tended to be framed for government and policing authorities as entailing a quest to prevent damaged feelings progressing on to violence. In this respect policing authorities had been pushed into this conception of imagined violence by these twin dimensions of public order imperatives and the constructed phenomenon of public peace, something in many narratives described as providentially gifted to British society.

Yet, it was surprising how the logic and rationality of this thinking on the part of policing authorities escaped wider opinion that opposed the laws against blasphemy. A petition against Stewart’s imprisonment argued that to “punish persons for coarseness or violence in the expression of opinions which may be promulgated without punishment if soberly expressed is to make a lapse from

30 Ibid.

good taste into a crime and is cruelty.”³¹ This was signed by, amongst others J.M. Robertson, F.W. Jowett, Edward Clodd, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Frederic Harrison, Walter Crane, Patrick Geddes, G.K. Chesterton, John Galsworthy, A.E. Housman and Bernard Shaw. Whilst this panoply of literary figures and thinkers was intended to impress the Home Office, it did merely serve notice that there was a dichotomy between literary productions, the circumstances of their reception, and the dangers posed by similar opinions appearing and being heard on the street.

Inside the Violence of Blasphemy

Throughout these displays of blasphemy there is a specific jarring and mocking tone, one that often appears in both the language and visual tropes offered by blasphemers for the consumption of respectable England. We might identify this as possessing distinctive elements of childishness, and such an approach and idiom requires considerable unpacking. Framing critiques of religion in this manner linked humour with the sacred, where previously it had no possible connection with it. This struck a chord with readers because it frequently reached back into the childhood memories of its audiences, with the clear intention of reminding them of the potential absurdity that imagining the truth of biblical stories and religious doctrines may have had for them in their previous juvenile existence. Childishness as a behavioural trope also enabled freethinkers to make light of the earnest and overly serious nature of authority ranged against them both legally and culturally. This, again, was a response, and ingrained outlook, that had considerable antiquity amongst the religiously unorthodox. It was notably used against religious regimes that were considered authoritarian, hypocritical, with spurious and needless claims upon the population at large in their demand for religious orthodoxy.³²

³¹ Petition against imprisonment of Stewart and Gott, December 21, 1911, in: H.O.4510665/216120/33.

³² This playful rebelliousness was noted as a characteristic of the behaviour of Antinomian sects in the seventeenth century, but especially of the Ranters. Disdain of earthly authority and its apparent pretensions prompted many of them, upon incarceration, to promise good behaviour and recantation of beliefs deemed to be anti-social. This was followed by a gleeful renunciation of their recantation upon release from captivity, simultaneously pleasing fellow dissidents and undermining authority in a thoroughly public manner. Ranters were imprisoned despite the English Commonwealth's profession of religious freedom. See A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979); Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter*

Childlike cultural views would pervade a range of blasphemous comments about the religious. Foote's cultural revisiting of biblical stories invoked childhood imagination and the mishearings of religious ideas and biblical texts. He also used other approaches to destabilise the Bible's sacred importance by arguing it was simply a literary text.³³ Likewise the literal nature of biblical stories, removed from context, represented isolated episodes of childlike humour. Within such reverie individuals instantly forgot the seriousness of their adult comprehension of the truth of the Bible and Christian doctrine. The subculture of sniggering at the seriousness of adults, and simple childhood iconoclasm against it, was integral to the humour on display in Foote's cartoons. Here, youth represented a state of innocence in comparison to the compromised nature of adulthood where faith had overcome good and rational judgement. This also was a way of attacking the idea of blasphemy itself, since it invoked the childhood innocence of questioning the incomprehensible or irrational. If such apparent falsities were to be protected by law, then the adult concept of truth, allegedly taught to children, was now fundamentally in question. If you were an observer, or concerned member of the bourgeois public, on the receiving end of this, the boldness of a childlike approach also posed questions of undeveloped or diminished responsibility. These questions were dangerous to a mature and civilised society which claimed to have selected and embraced a trusted and successful religious-moral system.

Gott, Pack and Stewart themselves repeated some of these ideas in cartoons of their own which appeared in their sporadically produced (and sometimes recycled) newspaper *The Truthseeker*. These occasionally touched on biblical themes as a source of ridicule, such as the comic portrayal of Jesus walking upon water with snow shoes upon his feet. Violence was likewise also never far from their repertoire with a cartoon entitled 'Faith', which depicted Britain's involvement in the Second South African (Boer) War. This depicted John Bull and Paul Kruger lunging at each other with sword and bayonet amidst a large crucifix emblazoned with the legend 'Faith'. *The Truthseeker* also published a cartoon entitled 'Tools for Making Christians', which portrayed native Africans fleeing from the arrival of the Christian "machinery" of conversion which consisted of torture instruments such as the rack, pillory, the wheel and gallows – all presided over by a grinning skeleton dressed in monastic garb.³⁴ This combina-

Writings: Spiritual Liberty and Sexual Freedom in the English Revolution (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

³³ See Marsh, "'Bibliolatry' and 'Bible-Smashing'," 319–320.

³⁴ *The Truthseeker* (various editions). This echoed hostile continental depictions of the Inquisition. I am grateful to Eveline Bouwers for information on this point.

tion of the humorous, laced with the shockingly macabre, invoked a prehistory of Christianity's penchant for violence.

Occasionally, this childish humour and glee could spill over into courtroom proceedings. Proving purchase of Gott, Pack and Stewart's publications was difficult and resembled something of a farce, enjoyed especially by the defendants who delighted in unmasking the regular bungling of the police, in the same manner that they unmasked the inconsistencies of the allegedly 'adult' seriousness surrounding the Christian doctrine. Likewise, a Christian preacher who appeared on the platform at Leeds immediately before Stewart was described histrionically as a "dirty fellow" for his use of an obscene and apparently tasteless biblical text.³⁵

Within two years, Stewart again came to the attention of the authorities – this time enhancing the elements of childishness, alongside a more uncomfortable appreciation of the acerbic reaction he could expect from those hostile to him within the audience. He was arrested in Wolverhampton and appeared at the Stafford Assizes in November 1913. Again verbatim notes were taken of Stewart's speech which this time seemed more frantic and serving to offend as many sensibilities as possible, in as quick a time as possible. The Crippen, Peace and Dyer story, already mentioned in a previous incident, was repeated in a particularly strident form that now took in the even more widely known figure of 'Jack the Ripper' – the murderer who was never caught and took on a considerably lively and concerning cultural afterlife. This speech also owed some of its construction to quick fire stand-up comedy that would have entertained music hall audiences:

Where is the glory of God? Nobody who is serious knows. [...] Moses never lived: He is quite an imaginary character. [...] I could name you a hundred Christs – all born of virgins. Budda (sic) is the only one I believe was ever here. [...] According to the Catholic priest God is in the sewers, in the cells of the prison at Stafford. He is in my cigarette. I am smoking him. [...] Do you put your faith in God? If you saw two kiddies burning in that top building over there you don't shout 'God help them' you fetch the police man or yell for the fireman. [...] If my children wanted food and I couldn't find the money honestly I should not be particular. If I thought my kiddies needed dinner tomorrow and I hadn't money I would commit highway robbery. There is no crime I would stop at. [...] You cannot depend on God for anything.³⁶

35 Shorthand notes of the trial, December 5, 1911, in: H.O. 45 216120/18. The text in question was Kings 2:18 and 2:27.

36 Extracts from [the] speech delivered by T.W. Stewart in the Market Place, Wolverhampton, on Saturday night September 27, 1913, in: H.O. 45 216120/55.

The tone towards the end of this particular fusillade from Stewart was also of a more secular concern for the authorities who heard it. It seemed to draw a link between the idea of disbelieving in God as potentially encouraging an impetus for lawlessness and immorality. This particular connection was enhanced by messages conveyed in Stewart's lecture of the following evening. These publicised neo-Malthusian themes and drew attention to his own publicity and sale of birth control literature. Again this proved to be simultaneously an assault upon both religion and morals: "I am an honest man but I am not a Christian. [...] Every child is an accident. [...] God doesn't send them. If he does I have beaten him something like 200,000 times (underlined in police verbatim notes) no boy could be born without a father. Immaculate parturation is impossible".³⁷ Violence appeared again in Stewart's latest assault upon the doctrine of forgiveness which to some eyes may well have looked like a form of incitement containing quasi anarchist overtones: "Hate your enemies! 'Forgive them who curse you'. I say, if a man curses me I smack him on the mouth unless he is bigger than myself, if he is bigger I strike him with a hammer. Jesus means humiliation, servitude and misery."³⁸

Stewart's actions and words were meticulously recorded by the police present at the Wolverhampton meetings and hence he had little to effectively offer in defence. Prosecution, conviction and sentence (four months imprisonment) answered the imperative to preserve public order. As a result, it seemed evident that policing and legal frameworks were becoming increasingly confident in the process of assessing the harm and danger lying potentially in extreme religious or anti-religious discourse. This appreciation of danger appeared to reach its apex in the last trial for blasphemy in England that resulted in a custodial sentence for the defendant. In 1922, Stewart's compatriot John William Gott was prosecuted for republishing his compendium of cartoons and anticlerical aphorisms entitled *Rib-Ticklers or Questions for Parsons*. This substantially turned on Gott's representation of Christ's entry into Jerusalem as equivalent to the actions of a circus clown. Gott offered little in his defence and it was scarcely a surprise when he was convicted. The presiding judge (Justice Horace Avory) confirmed the public order narrative and was adamant that it remained the duty of the authorities to prevent possible violence. Not only did he extend the practice of imagining violence caused by verbal blasphemous utterances, but he speculated that it shared this capacity with the printed word. English blasphemy law's status as Common Law also meant that judges were expected to in-

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

interpret the law in ways that they chose to. Indeed it was felt in legal circles that this was a virtue, since their decisions could be reflective of precise contexts and the contemporary atmosphere of public opinion.

Several civil servants had openly expressed that this status was beneficial and enabled the law to be both flexible and capable of responding effectively to any threat, or element, inherent in public opinion. These cases against Stewart increased the preoccupation of government and policing authorities with the idea of blasphemy as a public order problem. In expressing his opinion upon the law, Avory precisely visualised the process of religious criticism and blasphemy turning to active violence as something that needed to be prevented at all costs. Moreover, his words actively imagined the growth of indignation and the desire to strike out against it. There was also an interesting association of the violent will with both the aggressive defence of the individual and forms of muscular Christianity. This was a Christian archetypal image that had been cultivated in the late nineteenth century and that identified masculinity with evangelical zeal as well as heroic deeds on the playing field and potentially the battlefield.³⁹ Avory's words also persuaded policing authorities that being ever watchful about such matters was fundamental to their duty:

You must put it to yourself, supposing you receive by post some abominable libel upon yourself [...] what is your first instinct? Is not the instinct of every man who is worthy of the name of a man – the instinct is to thrash the man or the woman who has written a libel on him? And that is why the law says that it is calculated to provoke a breach of the peace. [...] [Y]ou must ask yourself if a person of strong religious feelings had stopped to read this pamphlet whether his instinct might not have been to go up to the man who was selling it and give him a thrashing, or at all events to use such language to him that a breach of the peace might be likely to be occasioned, because that would be quite sufficient to satisfy this definition.⁴⁰

The verdict and the sentence resulted in Gott serving a nine month prison sentence with hard labour. It became something of a liberal free speech *cause célèbre*, since Gott had to cope with the death of his wife whilst in prison. He himself died very shortly after leaving it, his health broken by his confinement. The apparent inhumanity of the sentence and its consequences became an important impetus for the blasphemy repeal movements of the 1930s.

However, for our purposes what was especially notable about Avory's interpretation of the law was that it considerably increased and heightened the con-

³⁹ For this concept see Donald E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ R v Gott 16 Criminal Appeal Reports 87, 1922.

ception of blasphemy as an offence. Avory implied that even, and perhaps especially, an uncommitted sympathiser with Christianity deserved protection from the law. As such this created a new narrative beyond the Coleridge judgement that had foregrounded the conception of manner ruling civilised debate. This new narrative imagined the potential violence at every turn of religious and atheistical debate, and made engaging in such discourse a far riskier activity than it had previously been.⁴¹ This departure also inspired the lawyer Courtney Kenny to produce the first modern socio-legal analysis of the law of blasphemy in England, hoping to create a state of the art legal commentary for his generation of lawyers.⁴²

Whilst the aforementioned development had highlighted conceptions of the dangerous possibility of religious debate damaging public order, we should also note that such a change further emphasised the potentially neo-sacred nature of public order itself. Justice Avory's words had envisaged both a drawing room and the street as places where the unsuspecting might be ambushed by material they would find merely upsetting, never mind outrageous. Emphasising such contexts was also a subtle shift recognising both the wider diffusion of central Christian belief, but also how this very diffusion might make the ideal of a serene, comfortable untroubled consciousness a right of every citizen who cared even remotely about religion and morals.

If this last comment appears far-fetched it is possible to get glimpses of the popularity of this very conception in letters written to the Home Office about blasphemy over a decade later, in the years that led up to the Second World War. In 1938, the World Congress of Freethinkers planned to hold their regular meeting in London in what was, diplomatically and politically, an especially fraught year. This same Congress had held its earlier meeting several years before unnoticed and untroubled. Upon hearing the announcement of it convening in 1938, the Catholic Bishop of Alberta in Canada (Cardinal Hinsley) commenced a media campaign to protest against its being held in London, alleging that communists and atheists were plotting against the British Empire. This prompted a sustained campaign of letter writing to the government urging immediate action. Many of these letters indicate a belief that England had been providentially spared the disturbances that had occurred on the continent of Europe, both far into the past and in more recent times. Moreover, it is clear that such letter writers perceived a violent threat to a latter-day conception of the Holy Trinity

⁴¹ Leonard Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 502.

⁴² Courtney Kenny, "The Evolution of the Law of Blasphemy," *Cambridge Law Journal* 1 (1922).

of ‘throne, altar, cottage’ that had been a cornerstone of popular conservative thinking throughout the nineteenth century. Many invoked the fear of violent religious threat alongside the machinery that might oppose it and maintain the Christian values that produced an ordered, placid and cohesive society.

Janet Kidd from Glasgow declared that “We pray ours may be a Christian land of which no one need be ashamed, we would be ashamed if the godless element were allowed to interfere in even a very small way.” Mrs. E.S. Wingate from Woking (Surrey) outlined the slumbering nature of Christian commitment which would awaken when threatened: “[c]onvinced Christians are not as a rule very vocal, so the authorities do not realise (though our King’s coronation revealed it) what a large number in the nation still believe in the external verity and blessing of the Christian faith”. She continued: “[o]ur nation owes its unique peace and prosperity hitherto, to its acknowledgement of God & God will judge us nationally if we abandon this position.”⁴³ G.J. Smith from Watford declared “shame on us as a people who owe all they have to that good and gracious God whom those in Moscow were daily blaspheming,” whilst R.V. Berkeley of Worcester argued (with an excess of capital letters): “If we sincerely desire the blessing of God to rest on England, and the deliberations of His Majesty’s Ministers our belief in the Almighty must be proclaimed and maintained at all costs. Gratitude for divine favours, and deep faith in the Almighty Goodness Compel our nation to refuse any countenance to the proposed insult to the divine majesty.”⁴⁴ Finally, Dorothy Holms from Camberley (Surrey) accused the Congress of having an “openly avowed purpose the arousing and fomenting of class hatred, disorder, revolution and civil war”.⁴⁵

Conclusions

As we have seen, blasphemy in England scarcely resulted in cases of active riot or serious physical disturbances. Compared with some continental neighbours, and those further afield, it looks to have been a religiously peaceable society that would claim for itself a special role in trailblazing religious toleration throughout the nineteenth century. But examining such a society gives us an op-

⁴³ Letter of Janet Kidd and Letter of E.M. Wingate, in: H.O. 45 24619/ 217459/92. Phrases like “eternal verity” echo words from the National Covenant of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. For this see The National Covenant, February 37, 1638, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.fpchurch.org.uk/about-us/important-documents/the-national-covenant-1638/>.

⁴⁴ Footnote missing for G.J. Smith and R.V. Berkeley, , in: H.O. 45 24619/ 217459/92.

⁴⁵ Letter of Dorothy Holms, in: H.O. 45 24619/ 217459/92. Emphasis in the original.

portunity to view how those exposed to this tolerant peaceability could nonetheless imagine (and be persuaded to imagine) a fear of violence emanating from blasphemy. Violence imagined was capable of provoking a considerable range of emotions and actions from public complaint or police action, right through to judge-made pronouncements upon the law. Christoph Baumgartner has argued that blasphemy, when constituted as what he terms “psychological violence,” has the capacity to involve a culture clash which renders individuals unable to comprehend or accept forms of free speech and satire, indeed suffering “an unpleasant mental state”.⁴⁶ Although Baumgartner’s examples are modern ones, instances where liberal free speech conflicts with a variety of religious outlooks, his typology is informative in examining early-twentieth century English cases. Such an analysis illuminates the previously unforeseen reach into dormant or protean beliefs, sometimes in the process of actual dissolution. Whilst clear beliefs are challenged, their association with morality and the public peace can rapidly fuse these components together again with some rapidity.

Moreover, those who were in the business of promoting atheistical and free-thinking ideas also had their own conception of the imagined violence inherent in blasphemy. Where they could, and after all they did find ample opportunity, they focused upon how the Christian God had created a fundamentally violent world in his own image. His own words called into being a world where irrational arbitrariness rather than order was a central principle. On occasions it was also possible to portray the Almighty as fundamentally violent himself, and as such He became a being scarcely worthy of attention, never mind praise. His behaviour did not invite or encourage worship and the instinct to build a system of morality around His apparently spurious teachings appeared a foolish idea.

This description of religion in England and its charged encounters with opponents may sound somewhat like a fortunate and sheltered society making a lot out of its limited exposure to blasphemy. This might be especially pertinent when compared to the more obviously raw and barbed anticlericalism evident elsewhere in this book. Yet, rather than developing a ruthless and authoritarian impulse to stamp out opposition to religion with state-sanctioned force or popular violence, a more considered public order approach DID successfully retain the God-fearing peace that society so earnestly craved. But we may also think more deeply about the implications of this. Public order imperatives also had an imperial dimension, even within the religious sphere. The blasphemy provi-

⁴⁶ 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): 50–53.

sions within the Indian Criminal Code of 1860 contained a far-sighted recognition of how public order could police and referee between competing religious groups, whilst preserving the peace and providing adequate protection for all. It is worth speculating just how far England's socio-religious peace over the long-nineteenth century created legal ripples which, emanating from its population's experience as well as many of its legal minds. This produced a principle which exported the concept of public peace to the Indian subcontinent, as well as inspiring legal conceptions of blasphemy in other areas of the English-speaking world.⁴⁷

The concept of public peace and the concern for the injured feelings of others, which is a clear corollary from this idea, has also arguably had a history beyond the early twentieth century. Its foregrounding of religious feelings, and the reactions of those faced with violence towards their personal identity and worldview has been a central conception in the construction of incitement to religious hatred laws. Whilst the legacy of religiously-motivated violence can be seen in the occasional outbreaks that have suddenly transformed our city streets, there is also clearly another legacy to consider. Going beyond the actual physical violence, we need to reflect on the real impact of imagined violence upon the psyche of those manifestly unused to physical violence, precisely because they lived in a relatively peaceable and tolerant society. Moreover cultural sensibilities that valorised this latter phenomenon were also capable of persuading individuals into fear and discourses of suspicion. From this sustained narrative of peace and tolerance we are ultimately persuaded to ask how far did the creation of order, premised upon imagined harm, produce solutions that policed blasphemy more quietly and with some success after the middle of the nineteenth century?

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⁴⁷ See Nash, "Blasphemy through British (Post) Colonial Eyes," 79–80.

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