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## 11 Conclusion

This book has sought to investigate the relationship between the concept of blasphemy against religious belief and the range of violent actions taken in consequence of this. As noted in the introduction, this connection has rarely been made by scholars and this volume hopes that it has at least attempted to address this need. The book has elaborated upon a number of specific case studies covering different periods in different localities. The purpose of this conclusion is to draw together common research questions which will take scholars forward if they seek to research further in this area. Thus, this section aims to see general trends within this volume's chapters and to speculate upon where these might lead if the subject is to build upon what this volume has achieved.

We might first of all think about the obvious centrality of violence as the factor that connects together these chapters. Within this there is coverage of real violence as a form of destruction wielded variously by the state, by highly placed political actors both affirming and challenging the religious *status quo*. We have also seen it appropriated by those steeped in anti-religious sub-cultures of the street and in more obviously literary forms. This suggests that interrogating the nature of violence would aid our exploration of the relationship between blasphemy and violence. Thus we must consider the precise nature of our theories of violence once the concept is considered through the idea of blasphemy as a site where this has occurred. Two approaches, developed by Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault respectively, are of particular interest and value in this context. In *The Civilizing Process* (1939), Elias described a version of modernisation theory which saw violence as something eroded by the increasing sophistication of our lives and interactions. In our sphere of concern this would explain the modern challenges to religious confessionalisation, the ending of heresy laws and the development of the concept of religious toleration. The fit is scarcely exact, though, as the chapter by Christoffer Leber demonstrates – discussing an incident, the Jatho Affair, where toleration and discipline clashed cacophonously and where, as late as 1911, a heresy law was reintroduced to punish dissenting religious behaviour.

The survival of blasphemy is, within Elias' historical paradigm slightly puzzling. If we see the civilising process connected with violence and the requirement for policing, its trajectory actually runs counter to the theory's conception of how the state should react. Elias sees the state increasingly involving itself in the world of policing and regulating crime and violence. The history of blasphemy sees this going in the opposite direction. Laws to regulate blasphemy be-

come problematic for the state in the nineteenth century and enacting them difficult to sustain alongside conceptions of tolerance, pluralism and freedom.

Michel Foucault was considerably less indulgent of liberalism's 'pretensions' to construct a modernised civilisation as outlined by Elias and the other flag wavers for humanitarianism. Foucault saw the dissident created by the state's 'discourse of right' and the Enlightenment's creation of mechanisms of categorisation and control. His thought also had a partisan affection for the powerless. Essentially those who rebelled against control and categorisation were individuals who dissented from the objectifying tendencies of enlightened societies. Those who rebelled were those in search of their own 'subjectivity' and almost all forms of resistance to this were justified in the Foucauldian world. This view also placed the 'blame' for outbreaks of direct action and violence upon the forces of modernisation, civilisation and the Enlightenment, whose urge to control was that self-same society's undoing.

Although there were individual panics about blasphemy in the first half of the twentieth century, the period beyond this saw an overall trend by which states often surrendered the credibility of blasphemy laws, as they fell into abeyance, were rarely used or were removed from the statute book altogether. This places a considerable premium upon concerned members of individual populations who had this power effectively delegated to them. Yet this pattern is not entirely uniform and many of our chapters show evidence of some counter tendencies that should be born in mind. Blasphemy should be perhaps recast as something beyond the idea of an anachronistic tendency that civilised versions of ourselves marginalise from view. It emerges from some of our chapters as a vibrant sub-culture potentially linked beyond this to mainstream culture. Evidence from our chapters on Spain (from Matthew Kerry and Julio de la Cueva) show evidence of blasphemy deeply rooted in street cultures of anticlericalism. This Spanish material describes what looks like a subculture very close to the surface. This means that potentially, the generations old anticlericalism and scepticism of religion's claims proved too stubborn and resisted the range of improving impulses which emanated from the Church, the government, modernisation and other progressive impulses. This begs other questions. Do individuals nurture long term grievances that are ignited by opportunity? Or are blasphemous words and idioms a more credible culture that exists alongside religious devotion? To put the question another way, does its longer term existence linger underneath mainstream culture or is it spontaneously created very quickly from popular culture, anticlericalism and violence – tools that are simply, but conveniently, lying around? The proximity to the surface of people's interactions with religion, and their propensity to act violently towards this, might here perhaps indicate a failure of the civilising process. However, there is the possibility

that the still sharper polarisation of class relations provokes obstinate rebellion against the civilising impulses wielded by elites against populations. These two propositions taken together might conceivably indicate that blasphemy, and the physical violence it generates, is an important weapon in certain hands against the onward march of the civilising process.

We also have something of an unexplained interlude evident from Alain Cabantous' chapter. Enlightenment-inspired revolutionary slogans used blasphemy as a speech act to denounce previously accepted norms and systems of (religious) morality. This could be seen as simultaneously constituting a destabilisation of civilising processes and a potential reinvigoration of them through the creation of new standards and sites of interdependence. This should highlight to us the importance of regime change as an important factor since blasphemy laws, and sometimes accusations, become foregrounded as a method of establishing or signalling a focus upon immediate security concerns and elements of both domestic and foreign policy. This is evident in the Cabantous chapter but is also highlighted in the chapters by De la Cueva and Manfred Sing. However, it is especially evident in the chapter by Marco Omes which shows three different regimes, each responding to the evils and excesses of the last. In doing this each of these confirmed what Omes calls "a remarkable degree of politicisation of religion during and after the French occupations of the Papal States." Both ruling regimes and dissidents, which lay claim to contested public space, have often crowded it with politically and religiously charged symbols to promote religious or republican values. Each of these acts imprints itself over previous opposing displays in what amounted to a combination of blasphemy and violence. Omes also shows us how a range of responses were available, and actively used, by each regime dealing with miscreants from the previous one. Exile and harsher punishments were used, but equally the papacy itself was capable of pragmatic inaction when it was deemed necessary – stepping away from a past that might have demanded actual and symbolic violence.

But we also have to consider the relevance of the material in this volume that uncovers much more considered and pre-meditated blasphemy which emerges from the chapters by David Nash and Marcin Składanowski. The first chapter has highlighted how, even in societies without any deep-seated culture of anti-clericalism, the acts and crime of blasphemy can have a significant impact upon perceptions of morality and the public order mechanisms supposedly charged with defending this. Blasphemy laws appear here as a bulwark against change, proof that they play a profoundly conservative psychological role. In this case what we are looking at is imagined violence and the fear this potentially demonstrates. The Składanowski chapter demonstrates how blasphemy as a crime invited authority and society to imagine and remember past sacred indi-

viduals, objects and events, thereby weaving them into an imagined Russian identity. Such 'imagining' could be useful to any political regime that wanted to foreground one area of the past very much over another. In this area, and in these examples, it may well be hard to find the civilising process at work at all. The communication mechanisms of print and social media which, by all conventional measures, intend to further both understanding and interdependence are, in blasphemy cases, turned to the very opposite purpose. Moreover, the pre-meditation of the blasphemous act within both these media make them profoundly different from the sub-cultural outbreaks we see in the Spanish material in this volume. These might indicate a lingering propensity within modern selves to undertake unsettling forms of communication and psychological violence against the civilised norms of society. This would describe adequately why blasphemous ideas and publications can be so unsettling to societies that consider themselves civilised and protected from disorder by their maintenance of civilised behaviour. Indeed, this paradigm could also explain later twentieth century ideas of seeing blasphemy as a species of hate crime – something that does deliberately transgress what should be the just and rightful treatment of others that citizens now have the right to expect.

Therefore, it would be valuable if we could see further tests of blasphemy as some sort of counter to ideas of cultural progress existing in a teleological movement to a state of apparent civilisation. The civilising process also runs out of explanatory steam (and indeed academic credibility) when faced with some of the much later episodes of blasphemy and violence in this volume. The chapters by Manfred Sing and Laura Thompson really show the western centric bias and preoccupations of Norbert Elias. For the civilising process, the modern West is the pinnacle and summit to which all European societies were aspiring. Its genesis also stems from observations about western history which see the removal of organised martial violence as the work of a specifically urban developing class. Similarly, the growing interdependencies within society, outlined as a prerequisite for the civilising process, push for a lionisation of urban consumer and media intensive lifestyles. These potentially have the ability to introduce increasingly secular trends into societies. From these the Enlightenment, and the individual autonomy it brings with it, spring from the flowing of these natural tributaries.

All of this forgets the rather different historical trajectory of Islamic and post-colonial societies and the concept of blasphemy is especially important here. Urbanisation, a growing secular outlook and democratic processes were not the usual experience for many of these societies. Many experienced the consequences of European colonialism and legal systems imposed upon them from afar. Thompson's chapter shows the dilemma facing both internal imperial relations

and of a colonial power placed in the position of deciding the best political solution to a very thorny local problem. It emphasises how an occupying power can be seen as an unwelcome liberalising tendency, and demonstrates in microcosm the feelings of such societies confronted with urges for clemency and tolerance which can seem like another covert form of colonialism and the exercise of illicit power. Sing's chapter on the Salman Rushdie Affair demonstrates how blasphemy and violence in the late twentieth century effectively became legitimate political tools to address power imbalances, one which periodically took on a transnational complexion.

The more pessimistic Foucauldian model would perhaps see blasphemy as some expression of subjectivity in retaliation for the Enlightenment-inspired surveillance and control of behaviour. If so, it is surprising how little blasphemy and its history has been studied and evaluated by Foucauldians. We might consider how elements of the Cabantous, Kerry, de la Cueva Thompson and Składanowski chapters emphasise revolt against forms of authority that would equate with a search and craving for subjectivity. Foucauldian explanation may well work effectively when used to evaluate the evidence offered by Kerry and De la Cueva. This is largely because the existence of anticlerical and blasphemous tendencies function as a sub-culture ready to be ignited at an opportune moment. This could easily be seen as an organic rebellion of subjectivity against cultures of 'improvement' exercised by the early twentieth century Spanish State. Both of these chapters also offer a chance to appreciate blasphemy as inarticulate noise, again a raw expression beloved of Foucault and his desire to uncover and encounter what 'cannot be spoken'. Mark Jordan here notes how this line of investigation appreciates how "religion tries to regulate how bodies sound. That sound – Foucault wants above all to hear that sound, in the moment when it refuses to become speech."<sup>1</sup> Thompson's work shows indigenous populations seeking to establish their own standards of morality upon fluid situations. The Składanowski chapter could be described as an individual grasping the tools of popular culture to create their own paradigm of subjective resistance to the twin powers of religion and tradition.

However some elements of this volume indicate episodes that potentially do not fit this model. The Enlightenment adoption of blasphemy – if seen as a method of dismantling the power of religion – as a motor of progress could well be perplexing for Foucauldians. They potentially would see the maintenance of traditional religious ideas and idioms as the assertion of subjectivity

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 10 and 199.

against coercion – something of a considerable paradox. Yet this was the explanation offered by Foucault himself for the religiously inspired revolt against the Shah's regime in Iran.<sup>2</sup> This focus upon Islam also reminds us that Foucault saw power relations between religions (as indeed other sources of power) to be almost constantly in flux. If true, our assumptions about the stability of dominant Christian and the subordination of other religious discourses would by no means last for long. Mark Jordan, the foremost writer upon Foucault and religion, argued Foucault's flexible view of religious texts, labelling them as “ceremony, or liturgy, doctrine or dogma, myth or scripture,” meant that he was just as capable of seeing these quasi sacred elements in modern Enlightenment rational sciences, such as his own bugbear psychiatry.

For researchers in the future, prepared to follow this line of reasoning, they might discover that religious impulses and the ‘rebellion’ they constitute against the dogmas of rationalism extend and re-purpose our definition of blasphemy, striking out against what a secular society makes ‘religious’.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, blasphemy might again be repurposed if rationality were considered a chimera and were to be replaced by “the return of old gods”.<sup>4</sup> Such an idea, within Foucault's thought, enables speculation about the sexual potential within such religions, and this might well prove fruitful for those willing to investigate how blasphemy gave voice to liberation, sexual desire and the obscene.<sup>5</sup> Moreover such liberation may also find itself under threat as it potentially takes on the mantle of religion, since it promises a version of re-enchantment of the body away from repression.<sup>6</sup> A deeper investigation of Foucault's exploration of madness and insanity might also provide further insights into attempts to regulate, categorise and control ‘bodily’ speech, noise and inarticulate actions against objects and individuals.<sup>7</sup> Blasphemy might also be a thoroughly useful site at which to undermine this dichotomous relationship, to find madness and sanity deeply engaged in Foucault's longed for discussion and ‘dialogue’ with one another.<sup>8</sup>

We should also bear in mind that this volume has the potential to offer a new direction in the narrower historiography of blasphemy. Some histories

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<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and Other Writings 1977–84*, ed. Lawrence D. Krizman (London: Routledge 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 30–32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

have focussed upon the changing dimensions of blasphemy as a manifestation of law, whilst others have investigated it as a literary or artistic expression. Still more have written about it as a manifestation of speech acts and as a facet of religious discipline. The focus on violence perhaps points to a case for focussing upon the event, perhaps as antidote to an historiography of changing linearity. This opens the way for a case study approach that is potentially prepared to use tools such as thick description to investigate the precise contexts where blasphemy becomes associated with violence. Investigation of official speech against blasphemers would also draw scholars to court cases where Foucault's analysis of 'judicial speech' points to their power to dispense freedom / confinement, embody 'scientific' authority and provoke laughter.<sup>9</sup> The logic of this also suggests that recapturing the totality of experiencing blasphemy would be useful. Scholars are emphatically outsiders to this experience and thus do not appreciate the visceral nature of blasphemy in the moment. Whilst the act is about profaning the sacred this is also the place to reflect, perhaps, on the role of 'purity and pollution' and how insults (as examined by De la Cueva) so frequently turn on references to other emotive taboos such as sex, shit and blood. This awakens us to the need to study the function of 'performative' violence compared to material destruction and assault / bodily harm.

There are also important gender dimensions around both the blasphemer and the blasphemed against. Investigating more episodes would see how this issue would intersect with other identities such as class, race, and lifecycle. This would also potentially disentangle questions about whether the context of specific events is as important, in our analysis of blasphemy, as the precise identities of all protagonists in each of these events.

The concept of blasphemy has not become anachronistic and so it remains in popular culture, even in cultures where the laws against blasphemy have been liberalised out of existence. Blasphemy still exists in some cultural encounters as a clash between individuals that results in a game changing accusation, perhaps functioning in the manner that witchcraft accusations were often inspired by other forms of conflict. Individuals still react to blasphemy and still take spontaneous action against it throughout the world. We can note evidence, from this volume, that blasphemous thoughts and expressions in the contemporary world still help to identify and re-identify the sacred in changing societies. Our example here is the chapter by Składanowski which showed how a church at Yekaterinburg, the very place where leading members of the Romanov family had been executed, became reinvested with the sacred – which was symbolically

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 86–87.

dismantled by the apparently profane culture of Pokémon. The conception of violence done to sacred memory is one that infects history as well as the contemporary changing nature of belief.

We also have ample evidence that individuals, even if they find themselves in the minority, still want action taken against blasphemers. Recent evidence surrounding how defenders of such laws link them to national identity indicates that in certain conservative quarters of the population we still have lingering affection for blasphemy laws. This affection has not been lost on some governments, both past and present, and in future we might seek to investigate how the history of the offence might also be embraced by governments and individuals coercing populist feeling to create past and contemporary ‘Church and King’ loyalist mobs.

Finally, we might also think about how blasphemy laws in the modern world have frequently been ‘replaced’ with laws against incitement to religious hatred. These often contain the essence of some blasphemy laws, whereby forms of utterance are considered to constitute species of hatred and incitement. This new ‘definition’ explicitly links blasphemy with a form of violence whether it be expressed as a physical action, a speech act or a written pronouncement. Governments have also seen that appeals to populist reactions around religious belief, which spill over into violence, have been a valuable tool of political policy. In places such as Indonesia, blasphemy laws have been seen to legitimise new regimes and often stand against both religious minorities and external influences which are considered destructive. Thus, within the contemporary world violence is now more or less a central component of blasphemy’s modern existence so that its presence and the historical context of its relationship can no longer be ignored.

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