

Bokmeldinger

Stensvold, Anne, ed. 2021. *Blasphemies Compared. Transgressive Speech in a Globalized World*. London: Routledge. ISBN 9780367654573 (Hardcover).

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Introduction

The edited volume *Blasphemies Compared* can be situated in the wake of a rising interest in various actions and measures legitimized by perceived religious offense and the consequences this has for debates on religious freedom. The growing attention both scholars and the general public are paying to such issues can be attributed to a number of impactful events—the Rushdie affair (1989), the Danish Cartoon controversy (2005), the Charlie Hebdo terror attack (2015), among others—mentioned throughout the book. These highly mediatized episodes, however, should not lead to the facile conclusion that blasphemy, in the contemporary world, is a matter that exclusively concerns Muslim populations, nor should they obscure complex and contrasting trends. On the one hand, blasphemy laws find increasing application in a number of countries, notably in South Asia and the Middle East; on the other hand, several European countries have recently repealed their legislation punishing blasphemous speech and behavior (Stensvold, *Introduction*, p. 1; ch. 1, pp. 7, 18–19). To analyze these shifts and illuminate blasphemy “both as a sociopolitical and historical phenomenon” (Stensvold, ch. 1, p. 8), the anthology adopts a global and comparative perspective that regards blasphemy as a “transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon that changes over time” (Stensvold, *Introduction*, 1).

The book comprises 17 chapters framed by a short introduction and concluding remarks by the editor, and is divided into two parts. The first (chs. 1–9) focuses on theoretical and historical issues, while the second part (chs. 10–17) features case studies from European and Asian countries. The overall result is a multifaceted,

complex, and compelling picture of ideas and practices dealing with transgressive speech, art, and behavior across space and time. Accordingly, it is virtually impossible to do justice here to the rich content of each contribution. By the same token, however, the reader who focuses on a specific case or topic may well miss the interconnected issues raised by different authors. In fact, the explicitly comparative dimension of the book is largely confined to the *Introduction*, *Concluding remarks*, and occasional cross-references in the chapters. Stensvold notes, for instance, that a comparative reading of the chapters reveals how “blasphemy laws are used as a political instrument, and how blasphemy raises issues of religious authority” (*Introduction*, p. 2). This invites us to ask critical questions about “*who decides* what qualifies as blasphemy” and about the social processes that intervene in framing a transgression as such (*Concluding remarks*, p. 260).

In this review, I would like to offer a modest contribution to the comparative approach championed by the book by calling attention to what may constitute further topics of reflection, dialogue, and research, beyond the individual chapters.

What is blasphemy: defining the object and a mode of comparison

Every comparison requires us to first select the *comparanda*, that is, the objects to be compared. This means that the act of comparing is already premised on a preliminary, often implicit, selection based on what the philosopher Ralph Weber (2014) has called a “*pre-comparative tertium*.” A working definition provides the criteria for this purpose. In the introduction, Stensvold proposes the following definition of blasphemy: a “transgressive expression (words and images) that violates what someone holds sacred” (p. 1). Under this definition, the sacred is conceived generically (broadly following a Durkheimian approach) and is not limited to any specific religious tradition. Stensvold (ch. 1) considers that this definition “is sufficiently broad to allow for comparison of blasphemy across religions”—as well as in relation to “‘ultimate values’ of a secular kind”—and “specific enough to exclude other kinds of speech, such as slander and lies” (pp. 8–9). However, in her *Concluding remarks*, she criticizes this definition as “too broad” to be fruitfully applied to concrete situations, arguing that it obfuscates the “religio-political power structure on the ground” (p. 259). Furthermore, she notes that the book “makes abundantly clear that blasphemy means different things: laws, accusations, or rumours” (p. 259).

In light of these remarks, we can ask ourselves how we should go about defining our research object and, consequently, our *comparanda*. Scholars of religion will,

of course, recognize here one of the key questions of our discipline. Interestingly, the answers offered by the authors in the volume cover most of the approaches with which we are familiar. A few authors favor the option chosen by the editor herself and put forward a stipulative definition of blasphemy. In her theoretical consideration, Jane Skjoldli (ch. 3) combines insights from the cognitive study of religion with a material-religion approach in order to construe blasphemy as a “flexible and comparatively valid operational category for analysis” (p. 35). Drawing on a stipulative definition of religion as a relationship with culturally postulated super-human persons, she takes blasphemy to mean “perceived attacks on religious interaction” (p. 35). As such, blasphemy can result from the destruction of the material means that allow for the relationship, the distortion of the cognitive concepts of super-human persons, or the distraction from “individual and collective religious interaction” (pp. 42–43).

A relational and cognitive perspective is also inherent in the stipulated definition proposed by Gabriel Levy (ch. 4), who concentrates on blasphemy as a form of “speech that transgresses an institutional boundary and thereby exposes the limits of any communicative system” (p. 46). Prophetic speech in the Hebrew Bible is, in this respect, paradigmatic in its challenge to established norms, for better or for worse (p. 49). Levy underscores that transgressive speech requires an institutional order through which the breach is recognized, but also defends the idea that a universal “natural history” of blasphemy may be possible when considering that the very evolution of language entails the emergence of an “*informational* immune system” to protect the communication system of early human groups against “bad language,” that is, a “form of dirty or dangerous communication that emerges from a speaker and can pollute those who hear it” (p. 48).

An anthropological reflection on blasphemy in terms of purity and danger is also advanced by Cecilie Endresen and Carool Kersten (ch. 14) in their analysis of Indonesian blasphemy cases. They note that with the rise to power of conservative Muslim organizations, groups such as the Ahmadiyya are increasingly regarded as “an ambiguous entity that jeopardizes both the Islamic hardliners’ definition of Islam as a distinct, bounded entity and the Indonesian Pancasila ideology which only recognizes six religions” (p. 205). Thus, they conclude that blasphemers “are construed as ‘psychological pollutants’” that challenge the norms and values of the “in-group” (p. 207). The perspectives presented so far share, to different degrees, an attempt to construct “blasphemy” as an analytical category in the metalanguage of the study

of religion. Pursuing this course of action, however, means extending the concept beyond what may be considered its everyday use and decoupling it from its origins.

A different strategy is pursued by authors who seek to apply the concept of blasphemy in a cross-cultural manner, while remaining mindful of the word's Judeo-Christian "baggage." This entails looking for semantic equivalents in the history and languages of other religious traditions. Such an approach, however, is not without its challenges. Examining the case of Sri Lanka, Michael Hertzberg (ch. 15) notes that there is no "Buddhist word for blasphemy" and that researchers have to rely on "neighboring concepts such as denigration, defamation, and disgrace, which rely on an implicit idea of the 'sacred,' and where its violation causes some people to feel indignation and outrage" (p. 216). This move, however, shifts the problem to the search for a definition of the sacred that would fit Buddhist traditions (p. 215), and thus allow us to identify "certain elements of Buddhist tradition that are emphasized as particularly important and deserving of respectful behavior" (p. 220). A similar problem emerges in the study of the sources and interpretations of blasphemy in Islamic traditions. As Christian Moe (ch. 8) notes, the term "was not used in Islamic tradition until recently." Moe adopts a pragmatic approach, noting that despite differences in the Islamic and Christian notions of the sacred, "for practical purposes," these traditions "have fairly similar sets of sanctities that may not be offended" (p. 93), which facilitates the search for equivalent concepts.

Moe also notes that, despite the inherent problems of translation, the understanding of "blasphemy" as encompassing "a range of Islamic terms for prohibited insults to the Prophet Muhammad and other Islamic sanctities, as well as expressions taken to imply denial of orthodox tenets of faith" (p. 106) increasingly suits the use of the term in global discourse. This observation points to a third definitional strategy that focuses on the historical origin, spread, and transformation of the term itself, particularly in national and international legal settings. In this regard, Martha G. Newman (ch. 5) underscores that blasphemy has not always been a topic of public concern as we may experience it today. Her analysis of blasphemy in medieval Europe notes that it was initially a theological means for considering the nature of the divine. It is only after the 13th century that blasphemy emerged as a transgression to be addressed through legal measures administered by the sovereigns to control the "behavior of their populations" (p. 62)—a practice that gained further prominence after the Reformation (see Stensvold, ch. 1, p. 12). Accordingly, Newman reminds

us “not to naturalize or homogenize a concern for blasphemy in the pre-modern past” (p. 63).

From this perspective, the international spread of legislative frameworks dealing with blasphemy can be regarded as a product of the (post-)colonial age (see Stensvold, ch. 1, p. 13). However, once established, legislation outside of Europe becomes part of a global discourse. David Nash (ch. 6) provides a telling example of these entanglements in his discussion of the blasphemy articles in the Indian Penal Code and their impact on British blasphemy legislation. The blasphemy provisions introduced in British India in 1860 were intended in a spirit of equity—and condescension—to protect all religions, not merely the dominant one, in contrast to the situation in the United Kingdom. From the 1880s until the early 2000s, repeated attempts at reforming the British blasphemy laws looked to the “abstract freedom of the Indian Penal Code” for inspiration (p. 79). However, such attempts revealed the difficulty of including measures against blasphemy in a secular legal framework, such as the problem of defining religion and determining offenders’ intentions. This leads me to another cross-cutting topic that emerges in different contributions and that deserves to be briefly addressed in a separate section: the relationship of religious offense with religion’s other, the secular.

The other of religion: the secular

How does an offense against the sacred fit in a secular world—or, at least, in a secular legal system? Framed in this way, the question assumes that the line between the religious and the secular is a fixed and natural one. Such a conception has been increasingly challenged in recent years (see Asad 2003), and several contributions highlight how debates over blasphemy reveal negotiations around the borders of each domain. This is evidenced, for example, in Dirk Johannsen’s analysis (ch. 12) of blasphemy cases prompted by the literary work of Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough authors at the turn of the 20th century. Through their texts and the scandals they provoked, these freethinkers “turned courtrooms into arenas where the fabric of modernity was up for debate” (p. 159). Johannsen demonstrates how their use of arguments from critical biblical scholars and folklorists, among others, allowed them to problematize the very concept of religion in a way that “made the notion of specific laws protecting religion appear increasingly absurd” among the general public (p. 171).

In a globalized world, however, such a conclusion is far from being uncontroversial. As a telling counterexample, Clemens Cavallin (ch. 11) discusses the charges of blasphemy brought by conservative Hindu actors against the American scholar of religion Wendy Doniger, who was accused of providing a distorted and oversexualized picture of Hindu gods and myths in her publications. The core of the controversy, however, revolved around “the correct hermeneutical principles” required to describe and evaluate Hinduism. By claiming “ownership” of this interpretation, the Hindu actors took to court a fundamental principle in the study of religion, “namely, that of methodological naturalism or agnosticism” (p. 149). From this point of view, as Stensvold notes in her concluding remarks, “the very idea of secularism is blasphemous in its own right” (p. 266).

The case of the trial of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot, discussed by Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl (ch. 17), highlights how the manipulation of the religious-secular divide depends on specific perspectives and serves different interests. Uzlaner and Stoeckl show how the initial religious framing of the 2012 “punk-prayer” as a way to revive a subversive tradition within Russian Orthodoxy was replaced by a secular frame that focused on its artistic and political dimensions. This secular frame was promoted by both pro-establishment and Western commentators. While the former sought to push a narrative condemning the performance as “the business of unreligious and un-patriotic souls,” the latter aimed to present it as a “struggle between freedom of opinion and artistic expression versus religious conservatism and political autocracy” (p. 250). Relying on arguments laid out by Saba Mahmood (2008), Uzlaner and Stoeckl interpret the Western attitude as a sign of a bias according to which “only secular reasons can be valid reasons in political argument” (p. 250). Ironically, this framing reinforced the Russian rhetoric opposing (Orthodox) Russians to militant Western secularists and facilitated the countering of the right to free speech with an unprecedented “‘right’ to freedom from moral harm” (p. 252).

A newfound emphasis on the role of individual and collective feelings in blasphemy cases can also be regarded as a consequence of the negotiation of the border between religion and the secular. Olivier Roy (ch. 2) wonders “what could be qualified as blasphemy in a secular society” (p. 25), if blasphemy, in the final instance, is a religious matter. His answer emphasizes a series of shifts in the object considered under attack in blasphemy cases—a series of “translations” that reframe “attacks on religious beliefs into secular categories” (p. 26). This means that the “specificity” of

the believer's anger does not figure in the argumentation. "God" is no longer regarded as the offended party in secular courts of law and is "replaced by an immanent community of human beings" (p. 27). According to Roy, what remains of the "sacred" are the believer's feelings: "Emotions are a mirror of the sacred and thus are erected as a new sacred that could be defined in secular legal terms" (p. 30).

Secularization, as Roy suggests, does not necessarily mean the end of blasphemy cases, but does entail their profound discursive reshaping. This is reflected in the language of blasphemy regulation advocates on a global stage, who have to reformulate their message in line with the dominant framework in international law. Heini í Skorini (ch. 9) illustrates this development through the example of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an intergovernmental organization active in the UN and counting 57 member states. According to í Skorini, the fight against the "defamation of Islam" has become an increasingly important goal of the OIC, which profiles itself as a "political counter-force against (Western) secularism" (p. 114). The pursuit of this goal, however, required abandoning a discourse based on "theology, Islamic doctrine, and cultural particularism" (p. 117) in favor of one premised on the language of human rights, such as freedom of religion and the fight against hate speech (p. 113). In the end, however, í Skorini underscores how such maneuvers still aim at fostering censorship and curbing free speech, amounting to an attempt to use human rights language to justify the violation of human rights in practice (p. 118).

Religion *is* political, and so is blasphemy

Strategies such as the one deployed by the OIC reveal how provisions against blasphemy constitute powerful means through which (inter-)governmental actors can pursue political agendas geared towards consolidating their power on the national and international scenes. Jeffrey Haynes (ch. 7) notes, for example, that countries such as Pakistan and Egypt "use blasphemy laws as a form of anti-minority oppression" (p. 83). Europe is not an exception in this regard, as countries where such laws are still in effect use them almost "solely to protect the majority religion's position as part of the state's pact with such religions to increase the latter's support for the government of the day" (p. 91). The fact that the Danish blasphemy provisions did not enter the debate on the controversial publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad is, in his view, revelatory of such dynamics.

It might be tempting to analyze such practices as institutional machinations in which religion is manipulated for other goals. However, I find it more interesting to take a cue from Talal Asad (1983) and question a clear-cut distinction between religion and politics in favor of a relational approach that regards these two dimensions as mutually constitutive. From this point of view, it is not surprising to find, in many contributions, particular attention to the role of the government in constructing the image of a “pure” religion to be defended and of an orthodoxy to be policed through the courts of law.

Monika Lindbekk and Bassam Bahgat (ch. 10) provide illuminating examples in their investigation of how Egyptian courtrooms have become, after 2011, the place of “increasingly bitter contest between different actors and institutions contending over the authority to define Islam” (p. 129). The dynamic towards defining blasphemy as a crime against social peace rather than religion “per se” is also visible in this country (p. 130). Nevertheless, blasphemy laws are wielded as a “tool of orthodoxy” (p. 134) by judges who, despite lacking any training in traditional religious jurisprudence, “view themselves as authoritative interpreters of Islam” (p. 141). A similar picture emerges from Endresen and Kersten’s discussion of the Indonesian case (ch. 14). In a context where postcolonial nation-building is faced with new global challenges, blasphemy cases contribute to a trend towards the standardization of Islam “by reinforcing orthodoxy and detecting ‘illegitimate innovations’” (p. 192). On a more general level, what is at stake is the power to define who has the right to represent Islam and what counts as a legitimate offense. Ingvild Flaskerud (ch. 16) illuminates this issue by calling attention to the disagreement among Islamic traditions about the religiously lawful production of images. As she observes, the “notion of what counts as acts of blasphemy among Muslims is [...] not fixed” (p. 227), and recurrent disputes about iconicity and aniconism are used by Muslim actors in the global arena to draw borders “between right and wrong Islamic cultural practice” (p. 228).

Of course, the political dimension of blasphemy is not limited to the determination of abstract criteria. On a practical level, it manifests itself in the selection of the topics and cases that are actually prosecuted. As Hertzberg (ch. 15) puts it, the question is to understand why some transgressions “go unnoticed, while others are subjected to massive indignation” (pp. 221–222). In this regard, Mubashar Hasan and Arild Engelsen Ruud (ch. 13) discuss the processes involved in the “creation and development of ‘the blasphemer’” (p. 176) and argue that “outrage against blas-

phemers is an orchestrated event” (p. 178). Focusing on Bangladesh, Hasan and Ruud call particular attention to the role of government agents in staging forms of mobilization conducive to mass outrage against blasphemy as means to “reinforce the legitimacy of the political authority of the ruling dispensation in a Muslim-majority state” (p. 187). In a similar way, Endresen and Kersten (ch. 14) underscore the capacity of the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars to foster mass mobilization against politically profiled individuals accused of blasphemy (pp. 201–202).

These examples invite us to regard the blasphemy accusation through the lens of the sociology of public problems (Schetsche 1996), which underscores the role of “moral entrepreneurs” in the construction of deviance (Becker 1963). From this perspective, Uzlaner and Stoeckl (ch. 17) note how the construction of the blasphemers goes hand in hand with the construction of the offended group. In the Pussy Riot case, the latter group was addressed via the shorthand “Orthodox believers.” However, this group did not preexist the court trial, but rather came into being as the imagined ensemble of people who “felt offended by the ‘punk prayer’” (p. 249). In this way, different views on the case among Russian Orthodox adherents were leveled out and replaced by a “homogenous, distinct, authentic” group of people “speaking with a single voice, all driven by a single understanding of their faith” (p. 252).

A constructivist approach of this kind raises the question of the infrastructure supporting the communication processes that underlie the social emergence of outrage and blasphemy accusations. Several contributions underscore the role of media platforms, from newspapers, websites, and satellite television in Bangladesh (p. 178) to a new application for smartphones in Indonesia that allows “people to report blasphemy and other unlawful acts” (p. 208). The rise of social media in particular appears impactful in the development of social dynamics connected to blasphemy accusations. Focusing on post-2011 Egypt, Lindbekk and Bahgat (ch. 10) note how prosecution has expanded from scholars and theological dissidents to ordinary citizens charged on the grounds of “statements on Facebook and other social media” (p. 142). However, these trends should not lead us to adopt a one-sided appreciation of the role of media in the construction of blasphemy cases. For example, in the case of the literary movement analyzed by Johannsen (ch. 12), the media proved decisive in challenging blasphemy provisions. Not only did they allow young radical free-thinkers to “put problems up to debate” by scandalizing the general public (p. 164), but by publishing contrasting reactions to the trials, they also contributed to making

blasphemy laws obsolete, “as these laws could no longer be enforced without producing contradictory and massively publicized reactions” (p. 167).

Conclusion

The volume *Blasphemies Compared* impresses with its broad scope and the depth of analysis provided by the twenty contributing authors. In its pages, readers can find insights into the status of blasphemy in numerous countries around the world and across a wide array of religious traditions, with particular attention to the internal differences within individual traditions. In this review, I have strived to highlight questions, topics, and approaches that emerge through the various chapters and that may serve as entry points for further reflection. What the reading of the book makes abundantly clear is that the topic of blasphemy allows scholars of religion to address larger issues hinging on the construction of our conceptual toolbox, the methodological approach to social reality, and the negotiation of the place of religion in a globalized world.

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