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REVIEW ARTICLE

BLASPHEMY IN THE CHRISTIAN IDIOM, c. 1500 – c. 2000*

Blasphemy in the Christian world: a history. By David Nash. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv+269. ISBN 9780199255160. £47·00.

The blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead: boundaries of belief on the eve of the Enlightenment. By Michael F. Graham. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. Pp. xi+180. ISBN 9780748634262. £60·00.

Dealings with God: from blasphemers in early modern Zurich to a cultural history of religiousness. By Francisca Loetz and translated by Rosemary Selle. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. Pp. viii+326. ISBN 9780754668831. £70·00.

Dangerous speech: a social history of blasphemy in colonial Mexico. By Javier Villa-Flores. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2006. Pp. xii+242. ISBN 9780816525560. $50.00.

Blasphemy in Britain and America, 1800–1930. Edited by David Nash. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010. 4 vols. ISBN 9781851969968 (set). £350·00.

Recent scholarship on the history of blasphemy in the Christian idiom has been driven mainly by two preoccupations. One, the battles between heterodoxy and magistracy for jurisdiction to prescribe the socio-legal standing of beliefs and non-beliefs; and two, the nature and significance of religiously offensive utterances. The books under review here tackle these inter-related matters via varied methodologies and historical foci. The range of approaches, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each study, are symptomatic of the difficulties of conceptualizing and contextualizing historical blasphemies; an endeavour made all the more complicated by recent controversies.

I

David Nash's monograph focuses on the praxis of blasphemy, defined as 'the attacking, wounding, and damaging of religious belief' (p. 1), and its effect on the relationship between community and criminal law. An emphasis on the ways in which blasphemers were pitched against the will of the state seeks to highlight the changing legal responses to blasphemy in Christian countries from the

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sixteenth century to the present. Chapter 1 provides a survey of the most recent blasphemy controversies, within and without Christianity. The next two chapters present a chronological survey of blasphemy in words and pictures from 1500 to 2000. Four chapters follow concerning the identity of blasphemers, controlling the profane, responses to blasphemy, and blasphemy in film.

It is argued that many early modern Christian societies had little need to contest the function of blasphemy because religious and secular institutions of the day had a mutual interest in trying to maintain religious uniformity. A host of criminal convictions in various jurisdictions across Europe paid testament to the historical reality that 'theologians and lawyers were increasingly convinced that the crime [of blasphemy] harmed the community at large' (p. 53). Victims would, therefore, 'remain "passive" in the knowledge that religious or secular authority would take action to restore order and tranquillity' (p. 49). 'Blasphemers were not punished because they offended God and order, but instead, so that God and order be not offended' (p. 109). The politics of community cohesion meant that blasphemers were rarely distinguishable from archetypes of wayward people: either young, disadvantaged males who railed against the world, or calculating religious radicals that espoused anticlerical heresies. Such views reflected a contemporary conviction in the interconnectedness of moral, religious, and political deviance. A 'partnership between community and authority' helped ensure that 'shame and contrition loomed large in the punishments exacted [for blasphemy] throughout the early modern world' (p. 153). Many jurisdictions maintained substantial, often physical, punishments for blasphemy well into the eighteenth century, and legal responses to blasphemy continued to be 'part of the deeper debate about the link between church and state' (p. 193).

The French Revolution marked something of a turning point. Thereafter, a more secular, tolerant society increasingly put an onus on the supposed victim of blasphemy to argue a case for censure. With a greater willingness to distinguish between the manner and the matter of religious offence, those who felt aggrieved now had to be 'active' in prosecuting what they believed to be blasphemy (p. 82). Yet, the potential for blasphemy to be seen as an act of sedition meant that anti-blasphemy legislation could also be 'a tool of regimes seeking to re-establish credibility' (p. 75). In Britain, the trial of William Hone 'indicated how arbitrary the decision to prosecute could be in practice' (p. 169). The influential case of G. W. Foote forced a legal acceptance that 'Christianity could no longer be considered "part and parcel" of the law of the land' and, instead, an intention to offend should be the principal criterion of blasphemy (pp. 172–3). The issues involved in these two cases went on to be formative in the development of blasphemy law in North America and Australia. In the twentieth century, film and television helped popularize the idea that Christ might have been a mere mortal, challenging society to secularize its history, its morals, and its sensibilities (pp. 209–10). Moreover, late twentieth-century artistic expression demonstrated that author intention was both less

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definable and less significant than first thought: 'those who sought offence could always find it' (p. 237). Subsequently, the legal credibility of blasphemy waned: 'even Italy, with a more thriving culture of blasphemy law, dismissed objections to [Martin] Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* because no evidence existed of malicious intent in making or releasing the film' (p. 181). An increasingly contested sense of blasphemy emerged between secular liberals and those of conservative faith: the former viewed blasphemy as 'anachronistic, oppressive, and inhumane' and the latter asserted that 'human-rights agendas were themselves not actually neutral but actively hostile and secular' (p. 105). Recourse to the historic relationship between church and state appeared to provide the offended with hope of legal succour (p. 207) and, whilst not obliging such peoples through direct legislation, modern law sought new ways to 'mobilize the community to provide inclusive comfort to the temporarily oppressed' (p. 183).

Given that this book is an addition to *Blasphemy in modern Britain: 1789 to the present* (1999), the results are disappointing. The distinction between 'passive' and 'active' responses to blasphemy provides an interesting way of approaching issues of paradigmatic-cum-cultural orthodoxy and heterodoxy; but it may be suggested that a rather undiscerning transnational survey of legal cases over some 500 years is not necessarily the most effective way of investigating such matters. The exposition of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century cases and the analysis of blasphemy in film are clear strengths. It would appear, however, that the book's aim, to set forth a historical context to current blasphemy controversies (p. 41), is somewhat at odds with producing a methodologically sound and intellectually rigorous study of blasphemy over the *longue durée*. The notion of the past invading the present (p. 12) is melodramatic and risks overlooking complex processes of historical continuity and change. There is surely a distinction between attacks on belief and attacks on state-sponsored dogmatic religion; the latter, not the former, appears to be the dominant topic of this study. Vague references to the Foucauldian 'gaze' (passim) appear without clear methodological grounding and, as such, seem largely unhelpful. By not adequately setting out and justifying the scope and method of his study, Nash opens his book to a range of further criticisms.

The title is not an accurate reflection of the contents which, almost exclusively, concern the Western experience in socio-legal settings from the sixteenth century onwards. Even the image on the dust-jacket, 'The Devil as an angel of light' (from the *Truthseeker*, c. 1900), offers false hope; for whilst St Paul likened false apostles to 'Satan himself transformed into an angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:13–14), inaugurating a common trope in Christian polemical theology, this issue is not addressed in the book. Despite an emphasis on the criminal aspect of blasphemy, there is not an adequate discussion of either Mosaic Law or medieval Canon Law, both of which are crucial to understanding how secular authorities came to have jurisdiction over

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blasphemy cases.[1] Most of the book is based on secondary sources and it would seem as if preparatory reading, especially with regards to the early modern period, was dangerously thin. The coverage of seventeenth-century England, which is quite substantial relative to the length of the book, overlooks more than half a dozen seminal works.[2] Also, more could have been done to delineate properly the historical coming together of seditious, blasphemous, and obscene libel.[3] Beyond English cases, much is made of the trial and execution of the Dutchman Robert Adriaansz. Van Hoorn in 1728 (pp. 12–3), but the detail comes via a two-page excerpt from just one secondary source published in 1935. An 1811 protestation by one American that Jesus Christ was 'a bastard and his mother ... a whore' (p. 78) is discussed with little appreciation that this claim was an anti-Christian trope with a history dating back at least as far as Celsus (fl. 175–80).[4] Much of the book covers too many cases in too little detail; and, the cumulative effect of relatively weak contextualization and regular over-simplification is to undermine the credibility of this history of blasphemy. Moreover, the suggestion that a 'conception of community organized for its own defence against its clearly identified enemies' was an intrinsically pre-modern view (pp. 207, 183), is not particularly convincing as it panders to rather clichéd historiographical presuppositions about the history of community and the individual.[5] As a result, one of the central arguments of the book, that we are apparently witnessing a return to 'passive' responses to blasphemy (p. 247), stands on shaky ground.

[1] For details, see Richard Helmholz, *The spirit of classical canon law* (Athens, OH, 1996), pp. 257–83.

[2] These include Christopher Hill, *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1975); Richard Helmholz and Thomas A. Green, eds., *Juries, libel, and justice: the role of English juries in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trials for libel and slander* (Los Angeles, CA, 1984); J. C. Davis, *Fear, myth and history: the Ranters and the historians* (Cambridge, 1986); Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992); Roger D. Lund, ed., *The margins of orthodoxy: heterodox writing and cultural response, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1995); John Redwood, *Reason, ridicule, and religion: the age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (2nd edn, London, 1996); Anne Hughes, *Gangraena and the struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004); Kate Peters, *Print culture and the early Quakers* (Cambridge, 2005); and David Loewenstein and John Marshall, eds., *Heresy, literature and politics in early modern English culture* (Cambridge, 2006).

[3] Important studies include J. R. Spencer, 'Criminal libel – a skeleton in the cupboard', *Criminal Law Review*, 24 (1977), pp. 383–94, 465–74; Philip Hamburger, 'The development of the law of seditious libel and the control of the press', *Stanford Law Review*, 37 (1985), pp. 661–765; and Philip Harling, 'The law of libel and the limits of repression, 1790–1832', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 107–34. The articles by Spencer and Hamburger are not cited by Nash.

[4] Celsus, *On the true doctrine: a discourse against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York, NY, 1987), p. 57.

[5] For challenges to the clichéd view, see Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the self: histories from the Renaissance to the present* (London, 1997); Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington, eds., *Communities in early modern England: networks, place, rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000); and John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance individualism* (Basingstoke, 2004).

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The copy-editing is of a standard not befitting Oxford University Press. The 2008 Research Assessment Exercise may have forced a rushed publication, but the quality of final typescript is poor. Thomas Woolston died in 1733, not 1731 (p. 64); Robert Darnton's surname appears as 'Daunton' (p. 68); there is no consistency in the spelling of James Nayler's surname (p. 122); the first name of the third earl of Shaftsbury is printed as 'Authony' (p. 125), and his surname appears as 'Ashley-Copper' (p. 261); William Laud was archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Charles I, not James I (p. 157); Bulstrode Whitelocke (1605–75) has been confused with Whitelocke Bulstrode (1652–1724), the latter was the true author of *The charge to the grand jury* (1718), not the former (pp. 158–9); the surname of Thomas Aikenhead erroneously appears as 'Aitkenhead' (pp. 164, 165, 261); references to 'the Dark Ages' (p. 42) and 'the Age of Reason' (p. 191) risk giving credence to a distinctly outmoded historiography; and there are enough anomalies in capitalization to note. It is regrettable that these errors were not corrected in the paperback edition (2010), especially since an addendum to the introduction was inserted to draw attention to new developments such as the abolition of the common law crime of blasphemy in England and Wales.[6] Discerning readers will probably find this book thought provoking; but, it should not be considered, as some reviewers have suggested, a definitive study.

II

Michael Graham's 'micro-history' of the life of Thomas Aikenhead, the Edinburgh student executed for blasphemy in 1697, aims to illuminate the 'historical relationship between "sin" and "crime"' (p. 5). The legal apparatus of state is examined at close quarters, particularly with respect to the social, political, and religious machinations of high office in the Scottish capital. Here, one guiding methodological principle follows Cynthia Herrup's suggestion that '"law is a cultural dialect" and its enforcement "a form of cultural interaction"' (p. 82).[7] The chief objective of the book, however, is to consider the socio-political context of the Aikenhead case, which Graham claims has been somewhat neglected in the seminal essay of Michael Hunter, '"Aikenhead the atheist": the context and consequences of articulate irreligion in the late seventeenth century' (p. 4).[8] The book is divided into six chapters: the first two consider the politics of religion in the 1690s and the Scottish legislation against atheism, blasphemy, and profaneness; the third highlights the wider sense of

[6] *The criminal justice and immigration act,* 2008, ch. 4, part v, § 79: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/4 (accessed 20 Sept. 2011).

[7] Cynthia Herrup, *A house in gross disorder: sex, law, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven* (Oxford, 1999), p. 6.

[8] Michael Hunter, '"Aikenhead the atheist": the context and consequences of articulate irreligion in the late seventeenth century', in Hunter and Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, pp. 221–54.

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crisis in 1696, the year Aikenhead was charged; the fourth investigates 'the making of a blasphemer'; the fifth focuses on the trial and execution; and the last looks at the aftermath of the whole affair. The main theme, however, is the 'drama' of Aikenhead's tragedy (p. 5).

The main points of the 'drama' are relatively straightforward. The politico-religious anxieties of zealous Presbyterians in the 1690s formed a backdrop to a heightened desire to legislate against speculative sin. The General Assembly of the Kirk enacted three distinct laws against profaneness (1694), blasphemy (1695), and atheism (1696). The key blasphemy law received little scrutiny, due to the more pressing matter of formulating a response to the Glencoe Massacre, and was principally a reaffirmation of the 1661 statute which retained capital punishment from the earlier 1649 Ordinance.[9] With its wider, vaguer remit and recourse to execution, the Blasphemy Acts of 1661 and 1695 spearheaded a campaign against radical heterodoxy. With strong-minded and politically astute Presbyterians at the heart of government, there was also the political will to prosecute. This point was demonstrated when a merchant's book-keeper by the name of John Fraser was charged with blasphemy in October 1696 (pp. 60–5). Fraser, who was a relatively wealthy and well-connected individual, openly avowed to have read the work of heterodox writers such as Charles Blount. Nonetheless, he was able to craft a coherent defence that not only emphasized his otherwise unblemished character but also engaged with the nepotism of the social elites who sat in judgement over him. Fraser escaped with a sentence of public penitence. The contrast with Aikenhead's case was stark. Aikenhead had read heterodox works at college and, under the tutelage of Alexander Cunningham, he became 'something of an eclectic visionary with grandiose ideas that hovered on the frontier between natural philosophy and Renaissance magic, tipping into fevered imagination' (p. 94). Unlike Fraser, Aikenhead was ill-equipped to stave off the negative consequences of his idiosyncratic heterodoxy and was unwittingly primed to be a scapegoat. Aikenhead was ill-disciplined, impressionable, stubborn, financially indebted, and lacked the right social connections (pp. 83–7, 96). Having made enemies of pious students such as Mungo Craig, he cut an isolated figure. When Aikenhead was charged on multiple related counts of cursing, railing, and unbelief, the haphazard nature of his defence, coupled with the willingness of his enemies to testify against him, and the lack of sympathy from social elites sealed his fate. The trial and execution was a performative act which affirmed the power of the state. The whole affair later became notorious as an example of unnecessary brutality, incommensurate with the growing appeal of religious toleration.

[9] It is rarely acknowledged that, on 29 Jan. 1678 and 14 Dec. 1680, the House of Lords considered a Bill for the 'punishing of Atheism and Blasphemy' which attempted to reinstate the death penalty for those who denied or reproached God, or any of the persons of the Trinity. See the parliamentary archives HL/ PO/ JO/ 10/1/464, HL/ PO/JO/10/1/397/343.

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The portrayal of the socio-political ferment in Edinburgh during the 1690s enriches our understanding of the Aikenhead case and Graham is to be commended for engaging with the very human reality of living and dying in heterodoxy. This book is arguably at heart biographical: Aikenhead the man stands centre stage. Considering the relationship between the cases of Fraser and Aikenhead highlights the particularities and peculiarities of the latter, and this too is most welcome. Yet, the suggestion that this study constitutes a micro-history that sheds new light on the historical relationship between sin and crime is somewhat unconvincing. There is little sense of a forensic examination of the trivial and mundane in order to open up an inner world of hitherto unacknowledged contemporary presuppositions and beliefs. Consideration of Aikenhead's reading habits, for example, remain frustratingly vague and speculative. Also, the notion that an investigation of an extraordinary event can somehow inform a historical understanding of a complex, yet quite ordinary, relationship between sin and crime lacks robust exposition. It has surely been acknowledged for some time that the ways in which divine law were perceived, codified, and implemented were dependent upon criteria such as human agency and historical contingency; and so Graham's interpretation does not really offer anything particularly new here. The appeal to micro-history also seems implicitly to excuse thicker historiographical contextualization on important topics such as Scottish politics, radical heterodoxy, scapegoating, and performative justice. Nevertheless, Graham's offering, which is well produced with few noticeable errors, is a lively and informative read.

III

The abridged, revised, and translated edition of Francisca Loetz's *Mit Gott handeln* (2002) retains the historiographical focus on the legal aspect of blasphemy; but, by using speech action theory to investigate deviant religious utterances, Loetz sets out to establish 'what made those who cursed God "blasphemers" and how their norm transgression was dealt with in early modern Zurich society' (p. 27). Legal cases form the basis of a fascinating reconstruction of the 'intersubjective interpretations of reality' that produced cultural 'meaning[s]' of blasphemy (pp. 43, 35). Here, the work of Carolyn Conley, rather than Cynthia Herrup, shapes Loetz's critical awareness of the nexus between law and culture (p. 26).[10] Much is made of the interplay between the non-authoritarian, social ('horizontal') forces and the politico-legal ('vertical') forces that formed the contingencies which affected the nature and significance of criminal blasphemy. Valuable theoretical discussions provide initial thrust, but from then on the study is fuelled by an impressive empirical investigation of 'some 900 blasphemers' gleaned from thousands of pages of primary documents (p. 50). The book is divided into four parts: the first tackles

[10] Carolyn A. Conley, *The unwritten law: criminal justice in Victorian Kent* (New York, NY, 1991).

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historiography and methodology; the second considers the offence of blasphemy with respect to judicial 'sanctioning', 'social action', and '(un) belief'; the third addresses 'historical change and confessional comparison'; and the last offers comments on the 'cultural history of religiousness'.

It is posited that early modern contemporaries understood blasphemy primarily as a particular 'historical categorisation' of the 'speech actions of cursing, swearing, or abusing God, in accordance with early modern theological-juridical criteria' (p. 5). The central argument of the second and largest section of the book (which covers 188 pages) is that contemporary uses of and responses to blasphemy were part of a complex and largely secular honour system that dominated society in city-states like Zurich. Blasphemy was both an ordinary and extraordinary aspect of an 'honour economy' that experienced conflict and cohesion through honour-based relationships. The identification and punishment of blasphemy was informed by a three-way relationship between council, church, and citizen. Consequently, a relatively integrated, albeit contingent, process brought diverse inflexions to bear upon a relatively standard anti-blasphemy lexicon which had its roots in medieval ecclesiastic discourse.

Whereas the 'secular authorities did not need the help of the church in removing blasphemers from society', the church 'had an important role in the reintegration of blasphemers' (p. 98). Penitential punishments combined with more secular 'loss-of-honour' sanctions to ensure that blasphemy was treated by formal and informal restorative justice. Citizens who were informants and witnesses, as well as those who were affected by either the articulation of, or response to, blasphemies were also crucial to establishing cultural meanings of blasphemy. 'At the normative level, blasphemy was a grave offence and demanded severe punishment. In practice, however, the reactions of witnesses ranged from exemplary horror and legal action to passive and active toleration of blasphemies' (p. 120). The blasphemous component of swearing and cursing was often seen as banal and excusable set against secular concerns relating to honour conflict and social discord; here some parallels may be drawn with Shelly Burtt's reading of the English Societies for the Reformation of Manners in the 1690s.[11] The blasphemous beggar, for example, was harangued not primarily because of their insults against God, but because dissolute people were seen as a social nuisance (p. 162). A key criterion of serious blasphemy was whether witnesses perceived the utterance to be different from standard grumblings, jests, and profane outbursts. 'Blasphemy committed in an emotional state was tolerated … within limits' (p. 171); but, 'those who provoked God deliberately and possibly with "original" expressions committed a far graver offence' because 'divine retribution was to be feared' (p. 172). Brazen rebellion against God was rare and typified by supposed

[11] Shelley Burtt, 'The societies for the reformation of manners: between John Locke and the Devil in Augustan England', in Lund, ed., *The margins of orthodoxy*, pp. 149–69.

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speech actions of disobedience, criticism, and mockery, and extended to forms of 'pre-modern atheism' (p. 228). Blasphemers moved by doctrinal impulses were treated with a degree of tolerance given the context of wider discussions about the inherent 'paradoxes of Christianity' (p. 218). Judicial activity against blasphemy in Zurich was concentrated in the years 1560–1610 and 1650–90 (p. 245) and was not significantly affected by the Reformations or other notable crises. A quick comparison with Catholic Lucerne emphasizes the extent to which 'horizontal social control [in Protestant Zurich] showed more intensive effects than authoritarian repression' (p. 270).

The scale of Loetz's research is formidable and the nuance of the historical interpretation that emerges is often distinct and insightful: 'blasphemers came from all groups in society' (p. 185), but they tended to be perceived as outsiders. 'Not every act of blasphemy was prosecuted as such ... [for] society was capable of permitting religious taboo-breaking' (p. 120); 'false accusations [of blasphemy] were exceptional, but denunciations could be used to settle a score with someone' (p. 122); 'examples from Zurich contradict the idea that blasphemy can be understood as a sublimated form of violence and thus as part of the civilisation process' (p. 151); 'the Zurich Council's sentencing provides no evidence of progress towards a more "modern" or "humane" judicial policy' (p. 108), although 'the image of an intolerant early modern era that waged relentless war on unorthodox words and deeds is too undifferentiated' (p. 173). The balance between effective use of theory and empirical investigation is well struck and the wider implications of Loetz's results, whilst over-stated in places, are of great value. When it came to religion, 'early modern society had far greater space for thought and action than the authorities allowed, and ... this is not merely attributable to a power vacuum ... [for] Council, church and social environment all exercised certain tolerance'; and yet, 'the fight against blasphemy relied on popular support' (pp. 281, 282). Here, Loetz's study clearly complements Alexandra Walsham's magisterial *Charitable hatred* (2006).[12]

Nevertheless, some of Loetz's claims are open to challenge. The distinction between the religious and secular consequences of apparently blasphemous utterances might at times be too simplistic because of the way in which social interactions were understood *through* a Christian paradigm. The legal evidence perhaps over-emphasizes secular, social discord. Moreover, if the majority of blasphemous utterances were not actually really that blasphemous then why continue with the terminology of blasphemy? Loetz does not seem to have an answer to this conundrum and this is possibly because her study does not effectively consider the relationship between popular religious discourse, in general, and discrete legal cases in particular; notwithstanding a brief acknowledgement of the interplay between real and fictional depictions of blasphemous

[12] Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable hatred: tolerance and intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, 2006).

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incidents (p. 254). Indeed, some of Loetz's interpretations might appear less secure once read through the more general insights of Ann Hughes's peerless *Gangraena* (2004).[13] There are also occasions when Loetz's grasp of contemporary polemical theology may be questioned. For example, a 1543 utterance communicating a belief in a fully mortal Jesus is presented as a 'blasphemous' speech action which rendered God an 'ordinary mortal' (p. 239). This seems subtly misleading: surely the rejection of the Christ-centric, Trinitarian orthodoxy was the crucial issue here? Finally, Loetz's concluding appeals to embrace historical ambivalences, surpass historiographical models associated with the popular–elite dichotomy, and move towards a cultural history of religiousness all appear rather trite given the historiographical developments of the last twenty years.

There are some more minor quibbles too. A near constant recourse to taxonomy as an analytical tool gets a touch wearing and it can sometimes be difficult to judge the relative legitimacy and value of the numerous categories presented. Contextualization is, at times, a bit thin with the result that opportunities are sometimes missed to offer sharper, richer analysis. To highlight just two areas here: more explicit consideration of the 'Magisterial Reformation' would have helped the reader understand the dynamics that shaped social cohesion and religious conformity in Zurich; and, reference to obstinate blasphemy (p. 117) and blasphemy as unbelief (pp. 228–36) would have benefited from a greater awareness of the ideas and rhetorical strategies at play within contemporary polemical theology. One cannot help but feel that intellectual contexts are under-played.[14] The quality of the prose is admirable for a translated work; but, some analytical comments do contain idiosyncratic shifts between past and present tenses.

Overall, however, Loetz is to be congratulated for a deeply engaging and sensitive study, which surely constitutes the most significant work on early modern blasphemy from a Protestant, legal-cum-cultural perspective. The translator and the commissioning editor of the St Andrews Studies in Reformation History series should be applauded for bringing such an important work to a new readership.

IV

At about the same time that early evangelicals were grappling with blasphemers in Zurich, Hernán Cortés and the Inquisition were battling against sins of the tongue in New Spain. In considering the latter context, Javier Villa-Flores's work

[13] Hughes, *Gangraena and the struggle for the English Revolution*.

[14] Surprising omissions include Michael Hunter, 'The problem of "atheism" in early modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 35 (1985), pp. 135–57; Maureen Flynn, 'Blasphemy and the play of anger in sixteenth-century Spain', *Past and Present*, 149 (1995), pp. 29–56; and John Spurr, 'A profane history of early modern oaths', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 11 (2001), pp. 37–63.

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also draws upon speech action theory. The premise of the study is that blasphemous speech was 'a kind of deprecatory language that was not only aimed *at* the deities of the Catholic pantheon but also staged *for* an audience' (p. 8). A wealth of sources from Inquisition cases (approximately 489 for blasphemy between 1522 and 1700) are used in conjunction with confessional manuals, sermons, and religious treatises to advance an investigation of 'the instrumental uses of blasphemy in the interface of class, gender, and race relations in New Spain' (p. 8). The driving argument is that the articulation of blasphemy constituted a resistance strategy which gave agents an opportunity to assert some level of control in an otherwise unfavourable social climate. A brief introduction is followed by chapters on imperialism, masculinity, gambling, women, and slaves.

This 'social history of blasphemy' complements the work of Alain Cabantous by serving up novel interpretations of some familiar topics.[15] Soldiers, sailors, muleteers, and other men who lived hard lives (that is to say those who can so easily suffer from both contemporary and historiographical cliché) are considered with respect to gender. Blasphemy, it is argued, was 'a cultural tool of gender self-fashioning and masculine assertiveness' (p. 39). More specifically, blasphemy was part of 'a cultural script of male risk taking' and 'could be used both as a language of male bonding and as a resource to manifest social detachment' (p. 75). So, for example, 'military men boasted of their bravery through blasphemous remarks' in an effort to ward against being labelled as fearful or cowardly (p. 69). Moralists responded by describing blasphemers as 'animalistic, satanic, and effeminate' in an effort to 'counteract the idea that blasphemy asserted "manliness"' (p. 40). Due to the spiritual and temporal threat to the imperial mission, offenders in the armed forces faced harsh punishments that ranged from fine and penance to corporal punishment and banishment. With respect to blasphemies arising from the male preserve of gambling, responses were more ambivalent. Given a scenario with multiple potential outcomes, one could legitimately appeal to divine providence for favourable selection. Whilst gambling was viewed as an illegitimate and pernicious cause in this regard, the crown held a monopoly over the sale of playing cards and the sheer prevalence of gambling meant that it was all but impossible to act as some high-minded moralists would have liked. Losing a gamble could spark blasphemous utterances that attacked God for His apparent lack of favour; paradoxically, this was an act premised on belief in the Almighty.

With regards to women, Villa-Flores invokes Robin Lakoff's *Language and woman's place* (1976) to assert that, 'when being defamed or unjustly confined, women resorted to blasphemy in order to make forceful statements to fight back'; but 'by subverting the gendered moral expectations that demanded that pious women demonstrate verbal restraint, they compromised their status as

[15] Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: impious speech in the West from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York, NY, 2002).

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Christian women' (pp. 125–6). 'Female blasphemers often felt compelled to use, and thus confirm, the misogynist stereotypes that depicted them as weak human beings, incapable of controlling their tongues and passions' (p. 126). Finally, 'black slaves, the victims of cruelty and mistreatment, renounced God to provoke the intervention of the Inquisition as a strategy to gain at least temporary freedom from the brutal working conditions they endured' (p. 128). Part of this rhetorical ploy was to create a scenario whereby the cause of blasphemy could be assessed: had the slave master's actions induced blasphemy? Some contemporaries certainly thought so (challenging the notion that intention was a more modern criterion of blasphemy). Hence, 'Afro-Mexican's blaspheming was both a rejection of the Christian moral order that legitimized slavery and an attempt to claim a Christian identity in order to survive a violent regime' (p. 129). In summary, the book demonstrates that repressed or maltreated social groups were sometimes 'conscious performers of a verbal art associated with discourses of danger, sin, and salvation' whereby blasphemy was used less to attack God and more for its social force, given the contemporary relationship between religion, politics, and society.

Villa-Flores packs a good punch in this slim volume (the main body of text is just 155 pages): the gender arguments work particularly well to enrich the historiography and, more generally, a range of good examples build up a convincing picture of how bellicose, irreverent language was used by various groups in society to resist hostile forces and self-fashion a degree of control. The interplay between secular and sacred concerns is not lost and the nature of blasphemy as a sign of belief is worth exploring further. Indeed, there are times when the study would have benefited from richer contextualization and deeper analysis. For example, the chapter on gambling lacks a discussion of how ideas of fate could be perceived as atheistical. On a separate matter, a decision to standardize biblical quotations via the New International Version lacks a certain amount of historical sensitivity. Of greater concern, however, is an apparent lack of conceptual consistency vis-à-vis blasphemy itself. Having acknowledged that, 'in a strict sense, it was not in the mouth of the utterer that blasphemy "originated" but on the lips of the denouncer' (p. 15), it is problematic to fashion an argument that stresses the immediate function of the utterance as blasphemy because this is, by definition, a conceptual impossibility. Furthermore, at some point one needs to pronounce a conceptual distinction between irreverent language in general and blasphemous language in particular, and Villa-Flores does not seem to do this successfully. Villa-Flores's use of theory appears sound, but in both preparing the ground and analysing the sources a slightly fuller discussion would have no doubt helped secure the central arguments. Nevertheless, this remains an exciting investigation which will be of significance to scholars of both blasphemy and colonial Christianity.

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V

David Nash's four-volume edited collection of primary sources is a worthy addition to his previous monographs on blasphemy and is clearly at home in the Pickering & Chatto stable. Whilst not explicitly stated, this work continues the main thematic, chronological, and geographical emphasis of *Blasphemy in the Christian world*, namely the socio-legal sphere in nineteenth-century Britain and America. The short first volume, titled *The blasphemous enlightenment to 1810*, sets the scene by dipping into the anti-blasphemy literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The second, much more substantial volume, *The early nineteenth century*, focuses on various sources relating to the blasphemy trials of Richard Carlile and his associates, Abner Kneeland, and Thomas Paterson. The equally sized third instalment, *The late nineteenth century*, presents some significant texts by radicals such as George Jacob Holyoake, Charles Bradlaugh, and George William Foote. The final volume, *The Edwardian period and early twentieth century*, includes censured works of John William Gott and Ernest Pack; various articles from the *Truthseeker*; and ends with a deputation sent to the British home secretary from the Society for the Abolition of the Blasphemy Laws (1924). The first volume starts with a general introduction and the last includes a helpful index. The sources appear in a new typeset and some longer texts have been abridged. All sources benefit from editorial headnotes and endnotes.

This collection reinforces the notion that past discussions of blasphemy were dominated by legal discourse, and it will surely be viewed as a useful resource by specialist scholars who are able to make the most of the primary sources on offer. Some of the choicest offerings are as follows. The inclusion of work by Benjamin Hobhouse is refreshing and challenging (I, pp. 29–80). A source detailing the books sold by Richard Carlile in his shop on Fleet Street and another providing a report on the trial of his sister, both offer insights which thicken our understanding of Carlile's networks (II, pp. 70–2, 97–115). The ability to compare and contrast Carlile's case with that of Abner Kneeland in Massachusetts is most helpful (II, pp. 227–308). Consideration of Robert Ingersoll's lecture, 'real blasphemy' (1885), forces a timely reassessment of the freethinking maxim, 'in a world of lies, truth is blasphemy' (III, pp. 345–55). A list, produced by the *Truthseeker*, of those prosecuted for blasphemy in Britain during the nineteenth century will facilitate further scholarly enquiry (IV, pp. 71–3).

The general introduction offers a brisk historical overview from ancient to modern times, but strangely omits to discuss the editorial rationale for the collection. The implicit case that the sources help us to understand the ways individuals and states negotiated blasphemy and associated rights and responsibilities has distinct value. Nevertheless, readers will probably need to be aware of Nash's other work to gain an appreciation of why nineteenth-century Anglo-American blasphemy cases are deemed to be of such historical

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significance. Bibliographic notes for the general introduction tend to be outmoded: a discussion of early English Quakerism, for example, fails to refer to any work published after 1970 (I, p. xxxiv n. 14). It may be posited that the authority of Nash's commentary is undermined by a decision to overlook relevant recent literature. Headnotes tend towards summary and often shy away from offering important historical and historiographical context. This is particularly noticeable in the first volume. A sermon entitled *The second Spira* (1807) is introduced without reference to the Spira legend (I, pp. 113–14).[16] Hobhouse's *Treatise on heresy* (1792) is considered without reference to either the author's Anglican background or his flirtation with Unitarianism. *Socinian blasphemy exposed* (2nd edn, 1791) is presented as an anonymous text (I, pp. 11–28); but a small amount of detection work reveals that the author was probably the evangelical convert and religious controversialist Sir Richard Hill (1733–1808).[17] More generally, there is limited engagement with the recent historiography of nineteenth-century radicalism.[18] Endnotes tend to be used for points of clarification and as such opportunities are missed to offer details on further reading. The extent to which the issue of source selection is avoided is also a concern. The guiding interest here would seem to be the agency of radical individuals and their quest to have their opinions not only heard but also tolerated by the legal establishment. If this is the case, then a question mark hangs over the degree to which this collection actually helps us to understand contemporary perceptions of and responses to blasphemy on their own terms.[19] More editorial care and candour would have gone a long way to making this a very good collection.

[16] The invocation of the demise of Francis Spira (d. 1548) forms part of a complex phenomenon in the history of Christianity. The tale was popularized by, amongst others, Richard Sault (d. 1702), whose pamphlet *The second Spira* was printed in London, England, and Boston, Massachusetts, well into the late eighteenth century. For further details, see: Michael MacDonald, '*The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*: narrative, identity, and emotion in early modern England', *Journal of British History*, 31 (1992), pp. 32–61; and M. A. Overell, 'Recantation and retribution: "remembering Francis Spira", 1548–1638', *Studies in Church History*, 40 (2004), pp. 159–68.

[17] The ESTC cites Hill as author of an anonymous pamphlet entitled *An important case argued* (6th edn, 1790), which (in Nash, I, p. 28) is stated as being written by the same author as *Socinian blasphemy exposed* (2nd edn, 1791).

[18] For an introduction, see William Stafford, 'Shall we take the linguistic turn? British radicalism in the era of the French Revolution' (a review article), *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), pp. 583–94.

[19] A précis of the collection on the publisher's website states that the 'sources are arranged to represent both sides of the debate, giving voice to the accused and the accusor [sic]'. See www.pickeringchatto.com/major_works/blasphemy_in_britain_and_america_1800_1930 (accessed 1 Aug. 2011).

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VI

The historical investigation of blasphemy is particularly taxing and yet the studies under review here show what can be achieved.[20] There is much that links the books together; not least the largely consensual view on the secular, social import of blasphemous utterances and the extent to which blasphemy legal cases offer a unique perspective on the relationship between authority and community. Scholars may be close to exhausting the main caches of blasphemy legal cases and the methodological limitations of legal approaches are now more apparent. Whilst not wishing to suggest that further investigations in this area of blasphemy studies are unprofitable, for more could be done to investigate the relationship between sin and crime, scholars should be encouraged to think harder about how to understand the historical meanings of blasphemy, both within theological polemic and at the interface between competing conceptions of the nature and significance of the sacred sphere. An appreciation of theological discourse through the philosophy of language, and in particular a consideration of so-called 'thick' ethical concepts, may advance an understanding of how the reception of wayward speech informed meanings of blasphemy. A focus on the ethical dimensions of community may also further other cultural considerations, as would a greater appreciation of the relationship between the printed and the oral word. Indeed, the complexities of understanding past blasphemies should inspire historians to be more innovative in their investigations of belief, language, and theologico-moral culture.

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[20] Further important studies hitherto unmentioned include Jane Kamensky, *Governing the tongue: the politics of speech in early New England* (Oxford, 1997); Joss Marsh, *Word crimes: blasphemy, culture, and literature in nineteenth-century England* (Chicago, IL, 1998); Elizabeth Horodowich, *Language and statecraft in early modern Venice* (Cambridge, 2008); and my own 'Blasphemy in England, c. 1660–1730' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 2009).

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