
On Blasphemy

Ondřej Havelka

The author of the monograph, Yvonne Sherwood, has been working at prestigious British universities for three decades and has written several very successful books, with the most recent one, published in the popular Oxford edition of *A Very Short Introduction*, dealing with – as the title reveals – blasphemy. In an increasingly secularised world, the author believes that blasphemy should essentially be obsolete and might seem to have lost its provocative sparkle. Despite this, she claims that blasphemy is on the rise and not a month goes by without the global media reporting on some sort of blasphemy with a significant impact on society. One of the most notorious examples was the 2015 massacre of the editors of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* when blasphemy against the prophet Muhammad provoked an unexpectedly extreme reaction that turned into the murder of editors and random passers-by.

In six chapters, the book offers a global analysis of blasphemy across various religions and cultural contexts. Sherwood opens the subject with the meaning of the very word blasphemy, which is “offensive/hurtful/slandering speech” from the Greek βλασφημία, originally concerning the gods. The concept was then spread to the world by Christianity. However, how to recognize what is not yet blasphemy and what undoubtedly is in today’s world? Furthermore, if it is, how can we approach it from the position of law, ethics, and religious ethics? The author uses the example of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The Romans not only ended the life of the condemned or inconvenient by crucifixion but also deliberately ridiculed them by various positions, accessories, revealing their genitals, etc. Jesus of Nazareth – or Christ for Christians – was ridiculed by the crown of thorns and the inscription “King of the Jews”. This was meant not only to end his life but also to ridicule and destroy his reputation and potential following. In the subsequent history, however, the depiction of the crucifixion of Christ has been used by believers, non-believers, artists, and politicians alike both in a Christian sense and as deliberate blasphemy, and it has often been unclear which side the work represents. The author lists some well-known and (in our region) lesser-known cases.

What society considers blasphemy has changed dramatically over time. Some works, now seen as inoffensive, were extremely blasphemous a few decades ago, and conversely, what was once considered normal now causes outbursts of anger and violence. It is here, in my opinion, that the contribution and extraordinary power of the monograph are fully revealed. The fact that what people were condemned for

decades ago and executed for centuries ago is quite common nowadays is relatively well established. However, things that one could write or say just ten years ago, for example, in relation to religious, ethnic, sexual or other minorities, are now often blasphemy and may be enough for condemnation in another decade. Blasphemy changes over time and is strongly dependent on the social and legal context and events.

As one of the earliest accounts of severe punishment for blasphemy against God or the leader of the people, the author quotes the Old Testament texts of Exodus (22:27) and Leviticus (24:14), where a person is sentenced to be stoned for blasphemy. She mentions Socrates, who was convicted of blasphemy against the gods, and Jesus of Nazareth, also convicted of blasphemy. At this point, she includes Plato and his famous dialogue Euthyphro into the composition of her book for a deeper insight. She then takes the reader into the present and shows concrete examples of people who are still being imprisoned and executed for blasphemy nowadays. Often, it is not only blasphemy against God in very rigorously religious countries, but contemporary blasphemy, often targeting a leading politician, as in the case of the conviction of three members of the protest group Pussy Riot in Russia.

In the following sections of this very readable monograph, the author discusses some well-known blasphemy cases in contemporary society and tries to look at them from different sides and stimulating points of view. The chapter entitled “Blasphemy and Religion” is a kind of the book’s heart. In this chapter, Sherwood asks whether blasphemy is possible in relation to non-theistic religions since the standard British dictionary definition of the word states that blasphemy is blasphemy against God. Can one talk about blasphemy with a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a believer in a traditional African religion such as Vodun or Bwiti? Is the concept of blasphemy typically Christian, built on the foundations of Greek philosophy? Can it even be transferred to other religions, or is it something so foreign that it makes no sense in religions and cultures outside of Christianity? These are the questions to which Ivonne Sherwood seeks and brings her thoughtful answers in the central chapter of her monograph. Blasphemy relates, among other things, to the primordial basis of world ethics, namely the Jewish decalogue written in the Torah. The following chapters open up the issue of blasphemy and the law, as well as blasphemy and the media.

The monograph *Blasphemy: A Very Short Introduction* by Ivonne Sherwood deals with an interesting topic in an original way, which can shed light not only on the issue as such but also on the history and reality of various world religions with a new perspective. It will be of great use not only to religious scholars but also to theologians and sociologists and will offer an intriguing read for readers across the humanities.

REFERENCES:

YVONNE SHERWOOD, *Blasphemy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, 145 p.