

DRAFT
for The Christian Century

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Blasphemy: Verbal Offenses Against the Sacred from Moses to Salman
Rushdie
By Leonard W. Levy
Alfred A. Knopf, 688 pp., \$35

In more than a dozen volumes, this Pulitzer Prize-winning historian has brightly illuminated the genesis and exodus of our most cherished freedoms of religion, speech, and press. This volume spotlights what Levy regards as a perennial enemy of all these freedoms -- the crime of blasphemy, of "speaking evil of sacred matters." This is another vintage Levy production, well-crafted, carefully culled from the sources, and unabashedly liberal in perspective.

For more than three millennia, Levy argues, the crime of blasphemy has served to protect religious orthodoxy and to police individual liberty. Judaic, Christian and Islamic communities alike have levelled blasphemy charges against "abusers of liberty," those who have defied or denied God, or who have offended, through word, art, or conduct, the religious sensibilities of the community. The crime of blasphemy was repeatedly "transmuted" in the process and was often coupled or conflated with heresy, idolatry, treason, sedition, and other moral crimes. Until the later eighteenth century, convicted blasphemers were punished by death, banishments, or whippings. Since then, blasphemers have been more scorned than scourged, meeting with fines, injunctions, or public reprimands. Though today blasphemy has become largely a dead letter of Western law, it is still punished in certain Muslim communities. Just ask Salman Rushdie.

Much of Levy's book is an engrossing, encyclopaedic account of the plight of "blasphemy victims." "Thousands" have been charged with blasphemy over the centuries, including Socrates, Christ, Becket, Wycliff, Servetus, Galileo, Bruno, Penn, Paine, and Moxon. Levy provides largely conventional accounts of these "famous martyrs." He is much more interested in the fate of lesser known "blasphemers" -- Arminians, Quakers, Anabaptists, Ranters, Antinomians, Unitarians, atheists, and iconoclasts. Two-thirds of his volume dwells on the plight of these groups in England and America since the early seventeenth century, and the voices who rose in their defense. It is here where specialists, even those who have read Levy's earlier books on the subject, will find tantalizing new offerings from the archives.

Levy's sympathies lie clearly on the side of the "victims" of blasphemy prosecution. For Levy these persons were rarely "irreverent scoffers casting verbal opprobrium against God." They were bold voices who chose to challenge the religious status quo, to experiment with novel ideas and institutions, to extend the pale of legitimate religious discourse and action. Levy does not valorize these "victims" as he sometimes did in his earlier writings on blasphemy. He presents them warts and all, and shows how their plights were sometimes quite self-inflicted. He also shows that many contemporary "blasphemers" are inspired by "anti-religious" rather than "new" religious sentiments. Levy has little

patience, however, with the authorities that chose to punish blasphemy. He describes them repeatedly as "grim," "belligerent," "caustic," and "manipulative," driven largely by the desire to retain their power and position. He gives very little impression of the rich theological and jurisprudential apologies for blasphemy crimes that all three religions of the Book have offered.

Though Levy loves liberty of speech, expression, and religion, he is keenly aware of the social costs of removing traditional restraints like blasphemy crimes. "We are not only a free society," he writes. "We are also a numb society. We are beyond outrage." I suspect God isn't!