



Victimized voices

Blasphemy: Verbal Offenses Against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie.

By Leonard W. Levy. Knopf, 688
pp., \$35.00.

IN MORE than a dozen books, 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—making a crime of blasphemy, the “speaking evil of sacred matters.” This is another vintage Levy production, well crafted, carefully documented and unabashedly liberal in perspective.

For more than three millennia, Levy argues, criminalizing blasphemy has served to protect 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 18th century, convicted blasphemers were punished by death, banishment or whipping. 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 in Western law, it is still punished in certain Muslim communities. Just ask Salman Rushdie.

Much of Levy’s book is an engrossing, encyclopedic account of the plight of “blasphemy victims.” Thousands have been charged with blasphemy over the centuries, including Socrates, Christ, Becket, Wycliffe, Servetus, Galileo, Bruno, Penn, Paine and Moxon. Levy provides largely conventional accounts of the

Reviewed by John Witte Jr., director of the Law and Religion Program at Emory University in Atlanta.

“famous martyrs.” He is much more interested in the fate of less-known “blasphemers”—Arminians, Quakers, Anabaptists, Ranters, Antinomians, Unitarians, atheists and iconoclasts. Two-thirds of his book dwells on the plight of these groups in England and America since the early 17th

century, and the voices that rose in their defense. Here specialists, even those who have read Levy’s earlier books on the subject, will find tantalizing new information.

Levy’s sympathies clearly lie with the “victims” of blasphemy prosecution. For him 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 and to extend the pale of legitimate religious discourse and action.

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Levy does not valorize these “victims” as he sometimes did in his earlier writings. He presents them warts and all, and shows how their plights were sometimes self-inflicted. He also makes clear that many contemporary “blasphemers” are inspired by “antireligious” rather than “new” religious sentiments. But Levy has little patience with the authorities who would 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 considering blasphemy a crime 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.

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"We are not only a free society," he writes. "We are also a numb society. We are beyond outrage." I suspect God isn't.

The Evolution Controversy in America.

By George E. Webb. University Press of Kentucky, 312 pp., \$34.95.

AS ITS TITLE suggests, this book is chiefly a historical survey of the American controversy over evolution, an idea that has polarized the people of this country. George E. Webb, professor of history at Tennessee Technological University, wrote the book in response to a creationist stu-

dent's reactions to a history-of-science lecture.

The book takes us through all the facets of the American response to evolution, from its earliest history through the antievolutionary preaching of Billy Sunday, the fundamentalist perspectives of William Jennings Bryan, and the less narrow approach of people like Billy Graham, to the numerous attempts in the South to pass laws prohibiting

the teaching of evolution or at least mandating that creationism as well as evolution be taught. The history of evolution as a scientific concept is stressed.

Webb concludes that "creation science" explanations are scientifically weak and represent a specific religious view; that a literal interpretation of Genesis is untenable; that decades of scientific research have confirmed and expanded Darwin's

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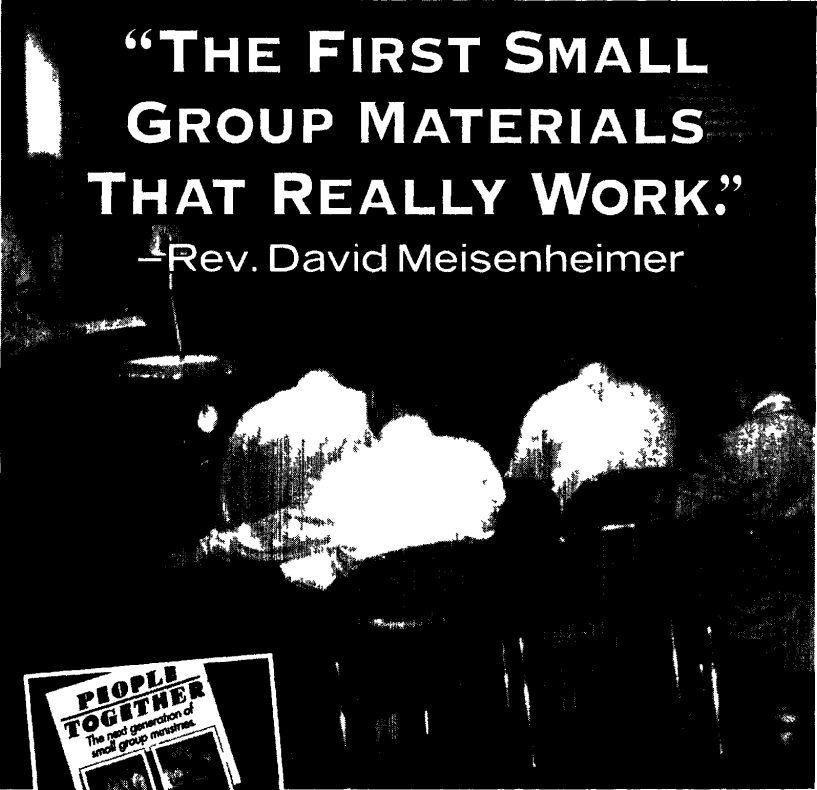
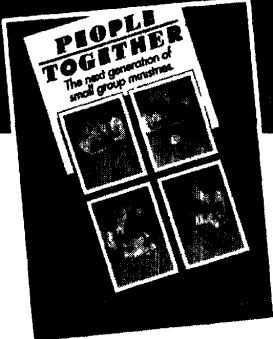
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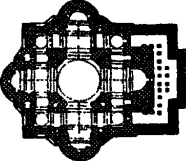



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