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Gerd Schwerhoff. *Zungen wie Schwerter: Blasphemie in alteuropäischen Gesellschaften 1200-1650.* Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz - UVK, 2005. 361 S. EUR 34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89669-716-5.

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Zounds of Impiety?

In 1507, the civic authorities of Rothenburg ob der Tauber condemned a man named Max Behr for blasphemy. In punishment for his crime, Behr was pilloried, his tongue was cut out, and his forehead was branded with glowing-hot irons. As a final indignity, Behr was banished forever beyond the city walls, a sentence which, in combination with the stigma that attached to his physical mutilations, was tantamount to death. His gruesome ordeal shows that penal sanctions against blasphemy were no "paper tiger" and sometimes matched the ferocity of condemnations pronounced by theologians (pp. 142-143). Behr, moreover, escaped the worst: as Susanna Burghartz, Francisca Loetz, and others have shown, civic authorities were not above imposing the ultimate penalty on blasphemers.[1] Gerd Schwerhoff reminds us that spectacular punishments such as Behr's must not obscure the more complex, everyday realities of penal practice with regard to blasphemy. Far more common than execution or mutilation were milder punishments, such as money fines or temporary exile that corresponded to lesser forms of the crime. Punishments also varied greatly from one place to the next: the eighty-four people executed for blasphemy in ZÃ¼rich between 1501 and 1747, made up fully 27 percent of all capital punishments, but during the same period, Nuremberg only executed four people for blasphemy, all of them before 1560. Moreover, blasphemy cases made up only a miniscule proportion of all prosecutions–even in relatively bloodthirsty Zurich, no more than 2-3 percent. In most places, blasphemy attracted only a tiny fraction of the official energies that were devoted to the prosecution of crimes against person and property.[2]

These contrasts speak to the long-running discrepancy between the theological status of blasphemy and its utter ubiquity in everyday speech, an incongruity at the core of Schwerhoff's monumental new study. From the moment of its entry into theological discourse with Alexander of Hales's *Summa Theologica* (1245), blasphemy was defined as an assault against the honor of God and classified with the worst of all sins (p. 44). But if the aim had been to discipline tongues, it was to little avail. Despite all the threats and fulminations, a gap between the norm and social practice remained constant, more or less, for half a millennium. For Schwerhoff this is a crucial point: blasphemy is not the product of modernity, as many still argue. Its persistence in the face of theological and legal censure should be regarded as a fundamental structure of pre-modern European religious culture, a phenomenon *sui generis* seated deep in Latin Christianity's heart (p. 300). Schwerhoff thus aligns himself with Lucien Febvre and Johan Huizinga, who regarded blasphemy not as a sign of true impiety but rather as the expression of a mentality so thoroughly "permeated by religion ... that the distance between the earthly and the spiritual was in danger of being obliterated at any moment," and maintains a cautious distance from the likes of Keith Thomas and Jean Delumeau, whose accounts of blasphemy were embedded in macro-narratives of conflict and acculturation that disposed them to hear in these "sins of the tongue" the echoes of religious skepticism,

perhaps sympathy with heretics, and maybe even atheism.[3] But these intellectual debts do not result in a static image of blasphemy's history. Schwerhoff is determined to situate blasphemy in the shifting patterns of everyday sociability and so lay the foundations for "a history of religion" that accommodates both "fervent prayer" and "everyday profanity."

Part 1, "The History of a Stigma," exposes the evolution of blasphemy as an item of theological discourse, as an instrument of stigmatization, and as an object of legislation and criminal prosecution. Insofar as accusations of blasphemy were used to stigmatize heretics and Jews, Schwerhoff's account reinforces R. I. Moore's theses about the "formation of a persecuting society" in late medieval Europe, a connection also made by Corinne Leveleux in her recent study of blasphemy in late medieval France.[4] But Schwerhoff is also keen to expose the conceptual and practical ambiguities that marked every aspect of blasphemy's treatment. No condemnation of blasphemy stood without qualification: with their representations of blasphemy as a latter-day verbal crucifixion, late medieval *exempla* reinforced Alexander of Hales's shrill denunciations. Such dramatizations were also tempered by considerations of motive, offered by Thomas Aquinas and others, which had the effect of minimizing the sin when the blasphemer intended no injury to God's honor.

This mixture of "resolute condemnation" and trivialization left theological discourse open to a surprisingly broad array of punishments and remedies. Similar ambiguities characterized the treatment of heretics and especially Jews. Accusations of blasphemy against them long predated charges of ritual murder and, if anything, intensified during the century of Reformation. But this persecution did not prevent sixteenth-century moralists, including Martin Luther, from contrasting pious Jews and Muslims favorably with foul-mouthed Christians. Protestant reforms of public morality entailed an intensified attack against blasphemous speech, but this change too was quantitative, not qualitative. Schwerhoff's story is therefore one of strong continuities between late medieval and early modern constructions of blasphemy: except for the addition of "papists" to the roster of targets for stigmatization, the Reformation brought few significant changes.

Schwerhoff's chapters on the prosecution of blasphemy likewise tell a story of strong continuities. The sentence that Behr suffered in 1507 reproduced some of the punishments recommended in 1231 by Emperor Frederick II in the Constitutions of Melfi. In making a crime of blasphemy, however, late medieval urban governments assumed a "pioneering role" by developing a multi-tiered system of punishments (p. 181), finely calibrated to the status of the offender and the severity of the offense. Here Schwerhoff focuses on German evidence, but recent work on Italian cities indicates this "urban offensive" extended beyond the Empire's frontiers.[5] This argument adds another important qualification to Moore's thesis that late medieval stigmatization practices were bound up with the consolidation of papal and royal power: in Schwerhoff's retelling, kings and princes were both late to follow the cities' initiative and inconsistent when they did so prior to 1550.

Schwerhoff's account of this "urban offensive" also debunks the argument that it entailed a hostile takeover of ecclesiastical jurisdictions and shows instead that most canonists greeted the campaign as a welcome intervention by authorities better equipped to combat the crime. The cities' hierarchy of penalties for blasphemy also reproduced in law the wide range of punishments prefigured in theological discourse. In this connection, too, the Reformation functioned as a catalyst for the intensification of prosecution, but was not a source of major changes in law or prosecutorial practice. Behind all this activity, Schwerhoff argues, was an anxious perception that blasphemy compromised the integrity of oaths and, by extension, impugned the legitimacy of civic authority, which resulted in the tendency of royal jurists to draw analogies between blasphemy and *lÃ¨se majestÃ©* and the expectation, shared by all Christian magistrates, regardless of rank or confession, that God would avenge himself against any community that failed to defend his honor. The reluctance of ordinary subjects to denounce blasphemy only heightened these fears.

If part 1 examines "sins of the tongue" from the standpoint of those who would abolish them, part 2, "The Meanings of a Speech Act," is devoted to blasphemy as social practice. Here Schwerhoff argues that blasphemy is best understood as a form of "self-fashioning" that enabled males to assert their autonomy through words of defiant disrespect. These chapters focus on the lesser, "conventional" forms of blasphemy, such as the colorful lexicon of spontaneous profanations that filled the air of inns and taverns. Schwerhoff's analysis of blasphemy prosecutions reveals, to no great surprise, that the overwhelming majority of the accused were male and that socially marginal or itinerant groups (such as carters, boatmen, soldiers, day-laborers, executioners, and other "dishonorable" people) supplied a disproportionate number

of the culprits. Nor is it surprising that swearing occurred most often in settings pregnant with male aggression–drinking and, especially, games of chance, that "classic social site of swearing" (p. 306).

The most original contribution of part 2 is Schwerhoff's analysis of blasphemy as a speech act. In its typical, agonistic context, blasphemous swearing was often a prelude to physical violence. But that hardly exhausted the full range of its potential meanings. Schwerhoff argues that blasphemy should also be regarded as a "code of manliness" that simultaneously reproduced social distinctions *and* promoted homosocial integration across the boundaries of social rank or citizenship. In agonistic situations, blasphemy functioned as a "flexible communicative code" that enabled males both to assert their autonomy and lay claim to the common bonds of manliness. This may explain why women were rarely among the defendants in blasphemy prosecutions and the prominence among blasphemers of males who lacked access to more established sources of masculine honor, such as a secure position among a community's household heads. At all times, the context of blasphemy was decisive: an otherwise legitimate oath, if uttered over cards or in an alehouse, could count among the rankest blasphemies.

What then of blasphemy's place in the history of religion? Two of Schwerhoff's arguments are pertinent here. The first has to do with the terminology of lesser curses. Schwerhoff's content analysis reveals a multitude of oaths *per membra dei*– head, limbs, hair, sweat, internal organs–a seemingly endless list of parts and effluvia (pp. 196-221). From the mid-sixteenth century on, this roster seems to have contracted to a shorter list of oaths on the sacraments and the Passion–the corpse, wounds, suffering of Christ, and so on. Theologians condemned all these utterances in predictable terms: oaths *per membra dei* constituted an impermissible appropriation of the body of Christ. But Schwerhoff warns against reading into these condemnations a growing conflict between high culture and low. Swearing *per membra dei*, in his view, reflected the preoccupation of late medieval Christians with the corporality of Christ. Oaths on the body and wounds of Christ derived force from the fact of their ubiquity in the imagery of late medieval religiosity. In a second argument, Schwerhoff revisits the question of whether blasphemy could indicate unbelief (pp. 289-299). To be sure, a "small minority of virtuoso blasphemers" rejected Christian religion as such (p. 307); more striking, though, is the degree to which blasphemy remained within a Christian frame of reference. Schwerhoff's answer thus reinforces his argument against interpreting blasphemy as evidence of the Bakhtinian "two-cultures" model.

The sprawling breadth of Schwerhoff's research spares him errors of interpretation that have marred more focused studies–such as the argument that a perceived need to impose linguistic uniformity on civic communities adequately explains the urban offensive against blasphemy. One hesitates to suggest that he might have gone further, and yet, given Schwerhoff's emphasis on blasphemy as speech act, one wonders why these pages does not include more discussion in these terms of how theologians conceptualized blasphemy. How, one wonders, did scholastics manage to trivialize impulsive blasphemies if they also believed that the very *spontaneity* of speech exposed a person's most "intimate relationship to the sacred order of things"?[6] A larger criticism has to do with the difference between "social disciplining" and confessionalization. On nearly every point, Schwerhoff's analysis shows that blasphemy was largely impervious to the effects of the Reformation, Catholic Reform, and the formation of confessional religious identities and that despite confessional differences, sixteenth-century authorities rarely deviated from a well-established, common approach to the problem. Nor do confessionally-specific styles of blasphemy seem to have emerged. If indeed blasphemy was a phenomenon of the *longue durÃ©e*, then Schwerhoff's account offers powerful evidence for the resilience of popular religious sensibilities to the conformist pressures of confessionalization. In that case, too, there might be more to the "two cultures" model than Schwerhoff allows.

Notes

[1]. Susanna Burghartz, *Leib, Ehre und Gut: Delinquenz in ZÃ¼rich Ende des 14. Jahrhunderts* (ZÃ¼rich: Chronos, 1990); and Francisca Loetz, *Mit Gott handeln: Von den ZÃ¼rcher GotteslÃ¤sterern der FrÃ¼hen Neuzeit zu einer Kulturgeschichte des ReligiÃ¶sen* (GÃ¶ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

[2]. For Zurich see, Francisca Loetz, *Mit Gott handeln*, 181; for Nuremberg see, Richard van DÃ¼lmen, *Theatre of Horror: Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 142.

[3]. Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 179.

[4]. R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (New

York: Blackwell, 1987); and Corinne Leveleux, *La parole interdite: Le blasphÃ¨me dans la France mÃ©diÃ©vale (XVIIIe-XVIe siÃ¨cles): Du pÃ©chÃ© au crime* (Paris: De Boccard, 2001).

[5]. Elizabeth Horodowich, "Civic Identity and the Control of Blasphemy in Sixteenth-Century Venice," *Past and Present* 181 (2003): 3-34.

[6]. Maureen Flynn, "Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Past & Present* 149 (1995): 29-56.