

TREASON AGAINST GOD: A HISTORY OF THE OFFENSE OF BLASPHEMY

Leonard W. Levy / Schocken Books / \$24.95

Philip F. Lawler

Is Christianity a threat to the First Amendment? In this idiosyncratic history, Leonard Levy seems to be implying that it is. The offense of blasphemy, Levy argues, was very narrowly construed under ancient Judaic laws, so that an offender could be found guilty only under the most strictly defined circumstances. But the birth of Christendom brought a new definition of the crime, so that heresy and blasphemy trials became both common and gruesome.

Surely the history of religious persecution under ostensibly Christian regimes is a great scandal against the faith. But Levy almost implies that the persecutions were planned: that Christianity was set up largely in order to make persecution possible. Thus, in describing the development of early Church doctrine, he mentions: "Still another step, however, had to be taken to elevate the Christian religion to such sacrosanctity that criticism of it could be thought of as blasphemy." Now really. Is *that* why the early Church sought to glorify the religion?

In exhaustive, scholarly detail, Levy recounts the heresy and blasphemy trials of history, concentrating especially on Christian recurrences. The book teems with interesting anecdotes (such as how John Calvin became so incensed with Michael Servetus that he turned him over to their mutual enemies in the Inquisition), and gory depictions of torture and execution. But Levy's argument is too polemical to be truly scholarly; he selects his facts heavy-handedly, and neglects to mention opposing opinions. In the pivotal case—the trial of Jesus—Levy not only shucks off the Gospel versions of that event, but raises the bizarre interpretation that perhaps Jesus and Barabbas were one and the same man!

Levy is similarly subjective in selecting the cases he wants to explore. Until the Reformation, Christian authorities regarded heresy and blasphemy as inextricably linked.

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As Thomas Aquinas explained, "Heretics blaspheme against God by following a false faith." Levy rejects that argument implicitly, without ever explaining where it is internally inconsistent. Nonetheless, he himself treats the two offenses as identical when it serves his expository purpose. So he has the best of both worlds: He criticizes Christians incessantly for failing to distinguish between the two sins, and yet he cites all prosecutions—for either offense—as evidence that blasphemy was suppressed repeatedly.

For all its weaknesses, and despite its dry academic tone, this book does raise interesting questions of two sorts. First, when revealed religion is concerned, how does society judge competing claims to truth? And second, to what extent does the public order require the protection of religious beliefs?

On the first question, Levy adheres strictly to the claims of the secular order, as exemplified today by the First Amendment. Fair enough. But if Revelation is true, are its claims not prior? Not surprisingly, Levy espouses the cause of Giordano Bruno, who "found all denominations mean and narrow. . . . His business was to get at the truth of the cosmos." But what if that truth is accessible only through faith—as indeed Christianity claims? What if, in a word, Bruno was wrong? The secular argument has no response to that possibility. Whereas religious leaders can (and, thank God, now do) plead for freedom of conscience out of respect for the dignity of the individual and the need for free acts of worship, the secular advocate can see his argument unravel if the defendant he supports is in error.

But Levy, who by trade is a constitutional scholar, is presumably more interested in the second sort of question. "Blasphemy," he points out, "is a litmus test of the standards a society feels it must enforce to preserve its unity, its peace, its morality, and above all its salvation." Merely

from the point of view of civic order, society must prevent some expressions of belief. George Fox, the Quaker founder, was prosecuted (rightly, Levy implies) for disrupting the religious ceremonies of competing denominations. Would such prosecution be possible in America today? Are there any limits to the extent to which unbelievers can revile religion?

A case in point: In his execrable *Mass*, Leonard Bernstein used the most sacred of all Catholic rites as an instrument to ridicule orthodox Catholic beliefs. Is that blasphemy? Does anyone care? □

EDITORIAL

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to everybody—promises to save the cities, promises to take care of the sick, the old, the universities. By 1980 we had promised ourselves almost to the point of national bankruptcy."

Today a reviving Tip O'Neill believes Mr. White spoke too soon.

He thinks the American people are going to return to his politics of fairy godmotherism this fall. Well, I respectfully counsel caution. It is always difficult to beat something with nothing; and, if I have judged aright the vaporous policies averred by the Democrats, even at their mid-term conference, they now stand for nothing plus tax increases.

The Democrats are going to have to come out and enunciate a substantial policy alternative to Reaganomics besides a tax increase, which, truth to tell, is not as popular with taxpayers as the Democrats seem to think. If they do not, I predict they will lose, and the humanist in me rebels at the thought of my Democratic friends being again denied their rightful place at the public trough. Thus I have scrutinized recent Democratic policies and come up with a list guaranteed to set men's hearts aflame.

To begin with, I urge my Demo-

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cratic friends to come out swinging for socialized medicine. This has been on their minds since the late 1940s. I say thunder out for it now. Put a uniform on every doctor in the land. Admittedly with Medicare and Medicaid we are already close to socialized medicine. But until we completely socialize American medicine our government will not fully realize its potential for fouling up American medicine, making it still more expensive, time-consuming, and idiotic.

The Democratic party takes pride in the fact that it has goaded us a long way toward socialized medicine, but until all doctors and nurses have been turned into bureaucrats the great work remains unfinished. Socialized medicine could cost as much as \$30 billion annually, but a country that can spend \$5.5 billion annually on sending men into outer space can surely spend \$30 billion to send fat people to hospital or at least to a waiting line out in front.

Another policy sure to set the Reaganites on their heels is the guaranteed annual income. In the 1970s this was one of the Democrats' favorite sacks of catnip. In 1972 their presidential candidate, the sainted George McGovern of South Dakota, suggested that the government give every American \$1,000 annually. Others have insisted that no American family receive less than half the

median wage. I suggest the Democrats demand income supplements that will bring every family to the median income. What a boost that would give to consumer spending. Any nation that can send a man to the moon can bring everyone up to the median income no matter how reckless or stupid it sounds.

Also let us move forward with one of Speaker O'Neill's own favored policies, a well-financed public works program; but give us jobs with

dignity, for instance in aerospace and medical research—WPA astronauts and brain surgeons, it has a ring to it. And while on the subject of jobs I urge the Democrats to come out for a truly tough affirmative action policy plus more government regulation. These are the Democratic policies that have bestirred the Republic.

Finally, to deal with high interest rates let the Democrats call for government-allocated credit and that old favorite, wage and price controls

—spike inflation before it begins. Any country that can patrol a 55 mph limit can patrol the wages and prices of every man, woman, and child. The Albanians do it. Why not us?

So there you are. If the Democrats will not come forward with their alternative to Reaganomics, I will. Coyne gets one nowhere in modern American politics. Fellow Democrats, charge! □

C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

Diplomatic Dissent

Though I was flattered to see "Rustam," the reviewer of my book *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (TAS, July 1982), refer to me as one of "two top American diplomats in Iran" (I was not), the review is disappointingly shallow and reads like a hastily-done graduate school book report. For example, the reviewer cites an alleged memorandum of mine published recently by the Khomeini government as clues to my thoughts, when there is better, clearer evidence easily available in the final chapters of the book.

Even more misleading is the reviewer's failure to distinguish between American diplomats and American politicians. Most of his

criticism of the U.S. might more properly be aimed at decision-makers than at America's diplomats in the field. While the latter did participate in the decision-making process, my own broader point is that the most important issues became what choices were made and how, not how much was known (a great deal, as the review itself suggests).

The reviewer's understanding of both Iranian and American options in the later stages of the revolution is also one-dimensional. He is critical of Ambassador Sullivan's recommendations to strike an accord between the military and the moderate opposition, believing that the religious groups were already too strong to be restrained or diverted. Yet, he does not

seem to realize how truly fluid the Iranian situation was from September to December 1978—perhaps because he was not there?

Since the revolution, Iranians have focused on American deficiencies, but there were more fundamental and drastic choices to make and opportunities missed for Iranians—after all, it is their country. Wouldn't it be interesting to hear from a knowledgeable Iranian about what his countrymen perceive their choices to have been? Then interested Americans would have a better basis for assessing the results of their own decisions

—John D. Stempel
Bethesda, Maryland

Rustam replies:

Mr. Stempel makes four points in his letter. Regarding the first, I have reread his final chapters and am still at a loss as to his thoughts, and note that he does not deny the cited memorandum. Second, as the books reviewed were written by American diplomats, I concentrated on their role and comments rather than on those of American politicians who obviously bear overall responsibility. Third, my criticism of the Sullivan solution rests not on the strength of the clergy but on my perceptions of the weaknesses of both the Iranian military and the moderate opposition, not to mention the very lateness of the whole idea. Fourth, as I said at the end of my review, the American role in Iran was only *part* of the story, and the onus for the revolution, at least in my mind, lies squarely with Iranians. (But surely Mr. Stempel appreciated the interests of the U.S. while stationed in Iran, and so I am puzzled why he now conveniently washes his hands of America's "debacle" by his remark, "After all, it is their country.")

As for the tone of Mr. Stempel's letter, I can in reply only quote Iran's great thirteenth-century poet Sadi,

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