
With verve and a dry sense of humor (helped not a little by a skillful translation), Alain Cabantous provides a thorough and a careful history of the crime of blasphemy and of the “mentalities” behind it. He focuses on France, but touches on blasphemy in Spain, Italy, the German-speaking states, and England as well. (The West of the title is western Europe—America is not part of his purview). Though concerned mainly with the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, Cabantous does look back briefly to the Biblical origins of the sin (Leviticus 24:16: “He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death”) and forward to incarnations of blasphemy in contemporary western culture—in today’s secularized society, he suggests, it is possible to blaspheme against such hallowed ideals as “human rights” (205). He also includes much useful information on blasphemy during the religious upheavals of the Reformation, drawn largely from the work of Olivier Christin and David Lawton. Previous studies of blasphemy have, for the most part, been of two kinds. They were either magisterial, like those of Lawton and Leonard Levy, traversing the history of the subject from the Bible up to now, in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, or very localized, examining, for example, prosecutions for impious language in Paris from 1610 to 1671. Cabantous (along with Joss Marsh in *Word Crimes*, her excellent account of blasphemy trials in Victorian England) strikes a balance between these two approaches—his study is both wide-ranging enough to draw interesting conclusions about how and why the meanings and practitioners of blasphemy changed over his chosen time period, and focused enough to give him room to support these conclusions with ample and convincing evidence.
Blasphemy is “the act of ‘refusing that which belonged or amounted to God Himself or attributing to God that which was not of Him’” (11). Cabantous works most frequently with this definition, crystallized by Scholastic theologians in the twelfth century. The category is broad, encompassing anything from oaths sworn unthinkingly in anger (“By God’s blood!”) to the most intentional acts of sacrilege, such as Sir Charles Sedley’s 1663 “mining [of] sodomitical postures” (88) while abusing Scripture, naked. The specifics of the charge “vary according to the actors who passed judgment” (6)–blasphemy, as Cabantous sees it, is a crime defined by its jurisdiction. In spite, or perhaps because, of its variability, it is an allegation with great power. Cabantous spends the first half of the book describing the institutions that competed for the authority to define and punish it, including the Church, both Protestant and Catholic, the King, municipal governments, down to fadernes, societies of pious people that banded together to stamp out blasphemous speech in their parishes. Blasphemy had to be punished not just to maintain doctrinal purity but also to preserve social stability. It was “as much a civic as a religious concern” (65), partly because it could call down the wrath of God on communities that did not root it out, and partly because blasphemers were often also thieves, drunkards, gamblers, or otherwise socially-disruptive figures. One of Cabantous’s most interesting arguments links increasing monarchical control of blasphemy trials to the consolidation of royal power across Europe in the late sixteenth century—what was once a transgression against God becomes primarily a transgression against the King, God’s representative on earth.

Befitting a crime so difficult to pin down, blasphemers come from a wide variety of social levels and occupations. Theological tracts and legal statutes identify sailors, soldiers, aristocrats, and gamblers as the archetypal users of impious language, and Cabantous provides convincing explanations for why each of these groups was singled out as a target. Blasphemy on ship, for example, was particularly dangerous because it might prompt
God to sink the vessel; its role as disorderly speech often accompanied by insults and physical violence meant that it had to be strictly controlled on ships in which men lived at close quarters for long periods of time. When (French) records of trials for blasphemy are consulted, however, a different picture of the typical blasphemer emerges. Although people from all walks of life were denounced, those actually charged with the crime most frequently came from the bourgeoisie. Cabantous attributes this to tensions within the bourgeois sphere of life, the result of “a profoundly and visibly unequal society, [in which] the risks of contention were quite real and strong—between neighbor and neighbor, owners and renters, masters and journeymen” (108). Blasphemy was a handy accusation with which to damage an enemy’s reputation, a tool useful in the process of resolving property or other disputes. On opposite extremes of the social scale, aristocrats and vagabonds would have had little reason or opportunity to involve themselves in such quarrels and thus, for the most part, were not prosecuted. What all blasphemers, emblematic and actual, have in common is a propensity for risk-taking and a striking ability to “avoid . . . the control of religious authorities and, in consequence, social control (so interconnected were the two)” (94). For Cabantous, the blasphemer is a heroic figure.

The second half of the book follows a more chronological organization and focuses more directly on France. After 1750, cases of blasphemy declined greatly, though there were still occasional trials, like that of the chevalier de La Barre, that resulted in the execution of the accused. The French Revolution radically redefined blasphemy, while giving renewed vigor to the charge. According to Cabantous, the Revolution rejected Christianity and institutionalized new sites of the sacred: “the State, the Republic, the Revolution” (158). Anything that denigrated or endangered these ideals, then, was stigmatized as blasphemy. In Restoration France, the Church reasserted control over the sin, designating the failed Revolution and its formerly sacred ideals as the primary loci of the blasphemous. At this
point, however, the Church's jurisdiction was moral and spiritual only; blasphemy was dropped permanently from the statute books in 1791 as an "imaginary" crime.

Cabantous's take on blasphemy as a crime defined by the institutions that condemn or prosecute it is, for the most part, a productive one, but it tends to make the charge itself seem endlessly elastic. He ends up glossing over some real differences in the kinds of offenses committed by his 'blasphemers,' particularly between oath-swearing and other, more intentionally impious, language and actions. Swearing "by God's death" in anger during a quarrel and stripping naked to urinate on a crucifix are very different activities, and would spring, one imagines, from very different mentalities. He sometimes gestures towards a distinction between oath-swearing and other kinds of profane practices, but more often considers them equivalent, quoting, for example, theological tracts that reprove the sin of swearing as if they address 'blasphemy' more broadly. Such impreciseness, though, may simply be a function of the book's scope. It marshals a large number of sources from diverse countries and time periods into a generally cogent history of a slippery concept.


John T. Young has written a book with an admittedly narrow focus. It deals with the life and work of an obscure German born alchemist and religious thinker Johann Moriaen (c.1591-c.1658) who "initiated no new ideas, but played an essential role in broadcasting new ideas and stimulating discussion and reassessment of them." He was "not a producer of 'ingenuity and knowledge' but he was a major trader in it" (247). Moriaen was decidedly a minor figure in the intellectual world