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‘The devil’s centres of operation’:¹ English theatre and the charge of blasphemy, 1698-1708

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The dominant notion of blasphemy in Britain today is built upon a perception of what is offensive to the Christian religion. Derived from common law and fashioned by the dynamics of public opinion, this view has been employed to powerful effect in the *Gay News* trial of 1977 and, most recently, in charges against the BBC broadcast of *Jerry Springer the Opera* in 2005.² It would appear that the exclusively religious conception of blasphemy as a sin against God, punishable by God or His intermediaries, has been displaced by a more secular, politicised view which focuses on the relationship between human agents. The paradigm created by a broadly secular western democracy invariably places artistic representations of the sacred within a polarised debate between religious sensibilities and freedom of expression. In such a context, the need to negotiate the sacred becomes imperative to maintaining a *modus vivendi*. Practically, a model of upholding individual rights without risking a breach of the peace is one to be defended. However, if our intellectual discussions of the sacred become limited by such a framework, then we restrict our understanding of beliefs that are not similar to our own. It should be clarified that there are other, more profoundly religious, perceptions of blasphemy, and to conflate them with the notion dominant in Britain threatens the potential for us to negotiate the sacred successfully. By using an historical case study, this chapter will explore an exclusively religious context to blasphemy and, in so doing, reveal what might cause a devotedly religious individual to make the charge of blasphemy. Here, the application of history becomes particularly useful, because we can escape immediate bias that the charge of blasphemy is only made by cranks or fanatics, as well as preconceptions concerning the right of freedom of expression.³ Let us, then, consider the reaction of pious Christians to the activities of the theatre, within the context of a devoutly Christian society.

Blasphemous theatres and plays

The only legislation ever passed with Royal Assent against blasphemy in England was the *Blasphemy Act* of 1698.⁴ Political wrangling had limited the scope of

the Act to a denunciation of anti-trinitarian conceptions of God; however, it was sold to the public as a realisation of King William III's personal commitment to 'discourage profaneness and immorality'.⁵ The necessity of this presentation was borne out of a belief among growing numbers of Protestants that England was plagued by immorality and vice on a scale that risked divine punishment. At this time, England was a devoutly Christian society, and a belief in God's providence was virtually universal. Indeed, all major events were interpreted providentially and nationwide fasts were often instigated by the regime to appease the Almighty in times of perceived crisis. Furthermore, the most pious individuals believed that God shaped the very nature of human happiness and misery.⁶ Those seized by the belief that vice plagued the nation had to look no further than the earthquake of 1692 for confirmation: God was angry. For zealous reformers, one of the most public and institutionalised centres of vice was the playhouse; for it had a 'natural and unavoidable tendency to that which [was] sinful and unlawful'.⁷ Unlike the tavern or the whore-house, the theatre stimulated the mind as well as the body. It could promote many different vices to a diverse audience, who shared the experience together in place and time.⁸ The playhouse was not simply a venue where vice was represented and then imitated by vulnerable members of the audience;⁹ it was a place where playwright, player and audience met to collude in sin. Given that the state had seemingly failed to provide adequate direction on the matter, it was therefore timely that the pious clergyman Jeremy Collier published *A short view of the immorality and profaneness of the English stage* in 1698.¹⁰

Collier's work proved popular as most upstanding Christians would have probably acknowledged that some stages, particularly those at the annual Bartholomew Fair, attracted disreputable characters and promoted vices such as profane swearing, mocking of religion, lewdness and drunkenness.¹¹ As well as attacking these vices, however, Collier posited a much more unpalatable argument that the theatre as an institution was fundamentally evil. Within the pages of his substantial book he exposed specific plays as immoral, profane, and blasphemous; furthermore, he lambasted audience appreciation of these plays as tantamount to worshipping the Devil.¹² The ensuing controversy, which has become known to literary scholars as 'the stage debate', questioned the very existence of the playhouse in a godly society, and served as a searing indictment of past and contemporary regimes for their failure to define and condemn blasphemy in all its forms.

In 1698, there were two professional, permanent theatres in London, one in Drury Lane and the other in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and they were attended by a wide cross-section of society.¹³ The Drury Lane theatre was known as the 'Royal', being patronised by the monarch, and its actors assumed the title of 'His Majesties Servants'. The idea that these playhouses could harbour evil was

seen by many contemporaries as preposterous. While there was general support for Collier's call to reform the stage, few reformers endorsed his specific charges of profanity and blasphemy. By 1699 it became clear that parliament would not sanction any reform of the theatre, and support for the cause gradually waned. Indeed, most contemporaries would have probably forgotten all about Collier's charges of blasphemy had it not been for another providential act of God, and an astonishing historical accident.

On the evening of 26 November 1703, a great storm hit England which caused widespread damage and thousands of deaths.¹⁴ The event was universally acknowledged by the nation's Protestants as a sign of God's wrath. To mark the severity of the situation, Queen Anne declared that a general fast be observed as public penance on 19 January 1704. Amidst the national distress, it was reported that a group of actors had only days after the storm performed a version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.¹⁵ The failure of the playhouse to cancel this production in the aftermath of the storm caused pious campaigners once again to take up the pen and attack the stage, this time with a clear mandate from the Almighty. Collier quickly published a short, cheap summation of *A short view* which, along with a number of other zealous anti-stage publications, were bought and distributed in significant numbers as part of a massive propaganda campaign by the newly formed Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK). In the following months, two prominent journalists, John Tutchin and Daniel Defoe, joined the fray by attacking the stage in their respective publications: *The Observer* and *A Review*. Two years later, the zealous clergyman Arthur Bedford capitalised on the momentum of the renewed campaign and published *The evil and danger of stage-plays* which claimed to list approximately 1400 examples of 'swearing, cursing and blasphemy' in plays of the previous two years alone.¹⁶ Despite the ideological differences that would have existed between them, Collier, Bedford, Tutchin, and Defoe shared a common bond by stressing the profanity and blasphemy of the theatres, re-igniting the belief that playhouses were the 'Devil's centres of operation'.¹⁷ The rest of this chapter will investigate why these men considered certain plays to be blasphemous. It will be shown that, far from a one-dimensional notion of offensiveness, the charge of blasphemy articulated complex and deeply held theological anxieties.

A religious critique of dramatic language

The interpretations that our anti-stage writers placed on dramatic texts might well appear facile or even absurd to modern readers and so, before turning to the evidence, we need to understand the way in which they would have approached play scripts. In proving specific plays guilty of blasphemy, it would appear that to men such as Collier, textual and/or dramatic context was a complete irrelevance. To explain why intelligent men could neglect the fundamental significance of context, most literary scholars have concurred with Aubrey

Williams that the clash between Collier and the playwrights was principally the result of opposing philosophical theories concerning the separation between life and art. This explanation cast Collier as a staunch defender of the Platonic notion that representation is a copy of reality, while placing the playwrights in an opposing Aristotelian camp which stressed that representation is merely a symbol of mental states that has no direct connection with reality. A number of playwrights did construct replies to Collier from an Aristotelian perspective;¹⁸ however, I would argue that this evidence has guided scholars to make certain assumptions about Collier's position without considering the fact that he was a devout clergyman. Indeed, it would be almost inconceivable that Collier's method was not religiously inspired.

Before *A short view* was published, John Tillotson, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, delivered a sermon against the stage based upon Ephesians 4:29: 'Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers'.¹⁹ In preaching that 'corrupt communication was evidence of a corrupt and impure heart',²⁰ Tillotson affirmed the decree of scripture to be absolute and he seemingly drew upon Augustinian theology to connect evil deeds to an evil will.²¹ The implications for the stage were clear: in discerning between good and evil acts, context was an irrelevance. The significance of this judgment was fully acknowledged by Collier in the pages of *A short view* and in similar fashion Bedford stated that, 'whatever is a sin when spoken in another place is as much a sin when spoken in the play-house'.²² Thus, any word or words could be legitimately censured, no matter what the context, if the accuser could convincingly argue that they were wicked. It seems evident, therefore, that it was an acute religious sensitivity to the word of God, rather than crude literalism or Platonic theory that formed the central component of our anti-stage writers' concerns. To appreciate their position fully, all intellectual preconceptions regarding the legitimacy of context and the separation between life and art need to be set aside. With this interpretative framework established we can now consider what caused our anti-stage writers to charge plays with blasphemy.

Both Collier and Bedford were often explicit about identifying certain words in play scripts as blasphemous; but the words were also understood within the wider category of profanity. For example, in *A short view*, Collier devoted a chapter to 'the profaneness of the stage', which was subdivided into two sections: 'cursing and swearing' and 'abuse of religion'. The former was acknowledged as being the most prevalent, while the latter, though less common, was perceived as the more dangerous, principally because sometimes it did not 'stop short of blasphemy'.²³ Profane swearing, such as 'e Gad' or 'Lard',²⁴ was quickly covered to give prominence to offences that were deemed blasphemous. It should, therefore, be stressed that swearing against God or any form of general

irreverence towards God or Christianity, while contemptible and profane, was not actually viewed as blasphemy. Upon reading the anti-stage writings of the period, it can be shown that evidence used to prove plays guilty of blasphemy clustered around two central themes: corrupting the idea of God's providence and the use of demonic language.

The perceived attack upon God's providence

Shortly after the storm, Collier wrote that during the notorious production of *The Tempest* the 'audience were pleased to clap at an unusual length of pleasure and approbation' at the mention of chimneys being blown down.²⁵ The accuracy of this claim is suspect,²⁶ yet it demonstrates how the providential judgement of the storm had increased religious sensitivity to matters of timing and position vis-à-vis both action and reaction. In this instance, the subject matter of the play was broadly irrelevant, for it was completely superseded by the failure of the playhouse, the actors and the audience to act appropriately in the wake of God's divine judgement. The production of the play in question would most likely have been unrecognisable to audiences today. The play was probably one of two radical adaptations of Shakespeare's original work, which included significant alterations to the script and a good dose of devilish foolery and bawdiness.²⁷ Nevertheless, it would appear that it was the mere fact that a 'mock tempest'²⁸ had been played soon after the real, divinely sanctioned tempest that caused charges of profanity and blasphemy. Indeed, when the day of national penance arrived, the Bishop of Oxford told the Lords gathered at Westminster Abbey that the playing of *The Tempest* shortly after the storm was an 'unprecedented piece of Profaneness' that was an 'affront to God, unparalleled by any civilized nation'.²⁹ The reaction to the playing of *The Tempest* was certainly exceptional but for our anti-stage writers it was just one example among many that demonstrated not just a disregard for God's providence, but a fundamental corruption of it. As Collier put it, the players and playwrights had 'attempted as it were to scale the sky, and attack the seat of omnipotence: they have blasphemed the attributes of God, ridiculed his providence'.³⁰ To ignore the providential acts of the Almighty was represented by anti-stage critics as a terrible attack upon God, mocking His powers as if He did not exist.

In Sir John Vanbrugh's play, *The Relapse*, the character Young Fashion schemes to seduce his brother's fiancée in order to secure her substantial dowry. Upon devising a workable ploy with his accomplice, Fashion declares, 'providence thou see'st at last, takes care of men of merit'.³¹ Collier was so incensed by these words that he singled them out as 'plain blasphemy' and 'an eruption of hell with a witness'.³² The charge of blasphemy was acknowledged and taken seriously, for it was one that playwrights did much to discredit. In defending his work, Vanbrugh stated: 'every body knows the word providence in common discourse goes for fortune and yet no one ever thought it blasphemy

to say, fortune's blind, or fortune favours fools'.³³ Michael Cordner has suggested that Collier's allegation of blasphemy was predominantly levelled in reaction to a playwright's failure to construct pious sentences from a common religious vocabulary.³⁴ This interpretation of literary literalism seems rather one-dimensional. It should be noted that acts of providence were believed to be instances of God's omnipresent governance, which were designed to protect the good and give warning and punishment to the wicked.³⁵ The slightest suggestion that God could smile upon wicked men would have been seen by Collier as impossible, and not only an affront to the providential workings of God, but a sign of devilish pride.

In another example, Collier denounced the following words from Thomas D'Urfey's version of *Don Quixote* as 'directly blaspheming the Creation, and a Satyr upon God Almighty':³⁶

Providence that form'd the Fair
In such a charm Skin,
Their Outside made his only Care,
And never look'd within.³⁷

In this passage, the last two lines communicate the blasphemy because they were seen as giving rise to the suggestion that God's providence was only concerned with the outward and superficial. The idea that God did not care for a person's soul would clearly render much of the Christian faith meaningless. The seemingly innocuous passage from *Don Quixote*, to the hyper-sensitive reader, was tantamount to an open denial of the truth of God's working in the world. It would appear that the charge of blasphemy allowed Collier to bypass lengthy explanation and communicate the true wickedness of the passage to less astute persons or those believing the words to be harmless. Blasphemy was a highly evocative term; contemporary readers would have been well aware of God's terrible punishment of blasphemies related in the Bible.³⁸ While it seemed unbelievable that such a passage could be wicked, the fact that a clergyman labelled them as blasphemous would have meant that they could not be assumed harmless with a clear conscience.

In his newspaper, *The Observer*, Tutchin attacked an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which had also been performed shortly after the Storm.³⁹ Contrary to the reaction against *The Tempest*, Tutchin's grievance lay squarely on the content of the play. He believed that the occult, evil forces prevalent in the text of the play were presented as indistinguishable from God's providential powers, perverting the unique and infinitely good character of God.⁴⁰ As it has been shown, the fictional status of the characters was no excuse; real people were still saying the words in the script and those words existed in print. God alone was providential and so, according to Tutchin, the play was proof that the actors were 'impious and blasphemous wretches' who had 'ridiculed God's

Amazing and Stupendous Judgment' of the Great Storm. The severity with which Tutchin viewed this transgression against God's providence was made clear when he concluded that, 'this is a sad omen of our [the nation's] hasty destruction'.⁴¹ It is, therefore, evident that the charge of blasphemy communicated a very grave sin indeed.

Invoking devils

Many anti-stage writers expressed a belief that the playhouse was the Devil's domain. The origin of this belief dated back to the writings of the influential second-century Christian Tertullian, who reported on an instance where a woman attended a Roman theatre and became possessed by a devil.⁴² I have yet to come across any reports of early eighteenth-century audiences being overcome by such forces and even actors who directly invoked the Devil were not explicitly described as being possessed, though their words were often denounced as blasphemous. Indeed, the evidence used to censure plays as blasphemous appears to have relied heavily on quotations that explicitly referred to devils and damnation. Such language was not uncommon in plays of the period, being used metaphorically and more readily as alternative modes of expression to taking God's name in vain. The plays in question, however, rarely contained anti-religious themes, and most contemporaries would have deemed the language fairly innocuous once set in context. Nevertheless, phrases which, for example, appeared to represent acts of swearing by 'death and the Devil'⁴³ were plucked out of scripts by men such as Bedford and denounced with vitriol as instances of 'unparalleled blasphemy'.⁴⁴ For anti-stage critics, to mention demons in swearing, cursing, or just an exclamation was evidence of actually calling upon the forces of darkness. Before turning to the evidence, it would be useful to establish the conceptual relationship between words that invoked devils, the charge of blasphemy, and the notion that the theatre was demonic.

In *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, Bedford stated in no uncertain terms that blasphemy was 'a sin of that heinous nature, which the damned in Hell are guilty of, and which makes them incapable of recovery'.⁴⁵ At first glance, this belief seems to be forged from an inaccurate reading of Matthew 12:31: 'All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto me: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men',⁴⁶ whereby Bedford gives no consideration to the scriptural differentiation between pardonable and unpardonable blasphemy. It transpires, however, that Bedford's perception of blasphemy shows remarkable similarities to the doctrine put forward by St. Thomas Aquinas: to speak any sort blasphemy was a mortal sin which rendered the utterer damned and those that were damned also blasphemed, to show their hatred of the punishments inflicted upon them.⁴⁷ Invoking devils was, therefore, an example of the latter case (for who but the damned could possibly utter such words). Put plainly, it was believed that only the damned could call upon devils

and such an act was blasphemous because it demonstrated that the sinner, even in the grip of God's divinely sanctioned punishment, continued to defy the Almighty. Collier similarly concluded that the profanity of the stage was 'the language of the damned'⁴⁸ and that to pay to watch such sin was to 'make a contribution for blasphemy, and raise a tax for the government below?'⁴⁹ In demonological theory, the damned were understood to be controlled by devils.⁵⁰ Therefore, actors who revealed themselves to be damned by their blasphemies, could be construed as the devil's agents and consequently to attend the theatre was, as Tutchin put it, to 'buy vice at the Devil's shop'.⁵¹

In *A short view*, Collier attacked John Dryden's version of *Amphitryon*⁵² for furnishing Jupiter with the omnipotence of God. To Collier, this was 'blasphemy on the top of the letter, without any trouble of inference, or construction'.⁵³ The representation of heathen gods on stage could have been seen as idolatrous and a violation of God's first commandment. Yet, in stating that the 'cover of an idol is too thin a pretence to screen the blasphemy',⁵⁴ Collier hinted that the sin of blasphemy was of an even greater magnitude. In this case, it would appear that the notion of blasphemy went well beyond blurring the *mythos* of the ancient gods with the *ethos* of the one true (Christian) God. Early Christian Fathers such as Tertullian had claimed that Roman gods were in fact devils and for men such as Collier, who were knowledgeable of and believed in such early Christian writings, this view continued to hold credibility.⁵⁵ Implicit in Collier's treatment, Jupiter was neither simply a representation of a mythical figure nor a potential religious idol, but a devil. In light of Collier's belief in the conceptual relationship between blasphemy and the demonic, it would appear that the charge of blasphemy articulated a belief that Dryden had sought to award omnipotent powers to a devil, thus subverting the differentiation between good and evil and laying waste to God's truth.

In giving examples of the 'blasphemous' expressions of the stage, Tutchin turned to the words of Vanbrugh's *Provok'd Wife*: 'Satan and his equipage; woman tempted me, lust weakened me, and so the Devil overcame me, as fell Adam, so fell I'.⁵⁶ It would appear that the words that evoked the charge of blasphemy were 'the Devil overcame me', as they could have been construed as an open admission of a compact with the Devil. Such a view is confirmed when Tutchin later went on to censure the phrase 'hail powers beneath!' from John Corny's version of *Metamorphosis*.⁵⁷ Bedford denounced similar passages from other plays that displayed a relationship between human and devil, such as the invocation 'to the Devil, so she bring no children', from the anonymous play *The roving husband reclaim'd*.⁵⁸ On occasion, Bedford perused this interpretation with a zeal that seems positively ludicrous to the modern reader. For example, he condemned the phrase as 'a devil a wit' from the play *The northern lass*, which he annotated 'i.e. no wit'.⁵⁹ For Bedford, these words constituted praise to the

devil, which he believed was the 'highest blasphemy that mortals can invent'.⁶⁰ It seems clear that the meticulousness and fervour of Bedford's interpretation was but a genuine reflection of his fear of God's wrath and an attempt to implement what he believed to be God's wishes as directed by Scripture, earlier Christian writings and above all else God's unmitigated providential warning.

It has been shown that our anti-stage writers genuinely believed that the blasphemies of the theatre denigrated the truth of God's workings in the world and advanced the position of devils. In both method and substance, this view was supported by a combination of Scripture, early Christian writings and the work of eminent Christian theologians. Significantly, Tutchin, Bedford and Collier were not considered cranks and their views held significant credibility in the period of heightened theological anxiety after the storm of 1703. To these men, the godly reformation required to stave off further divine punishment simply could not be completed unless the theatre was drastically reformed. In the final section of this chapter I want to return to the issue of negotiating the sacred and reflect upon how our anti-stage writers sought to apply their examples of blasphemy to affect actual reform.

The plight of God-fearing Christians

First of all, it must be stressed that, for pious English Protestants, the notion of the sacred extended well beyond a collection of discrete beliefs, words, actions or objects.⁶¹ In general terms the sanctity of God's truth was universally accepted and so playwrights, audiences and anti-stage writers all worked within, and agreed upon, the same religious paradigm. This chapter has shown that the act of negotiating the sacred in the stage debate was not complicated by questions concerning the nature of the sacred or how it should be accommodated, but rather how sensitively providence should be interpreted and how vigorously God's truth should be maintained and protected. It has already been noted that our anti-stage campaigners sought more forceful and comprehensive reform than did the governing regime, and yet God's providential intervention of 1703 made it impossible for the administration wholly to dismiss the claims of our writers. Consequently, it would appear that in a state that held the sanctity of God's truth as its governing paradigm, the correct interpretation of God's will rested exclusively on His perceived intermediaries (i.e. the Monarch and her Bishops). Yet, in times of crisis, the paradigm also allowed for a circumvention of the authority of the Church and the law because God was ultimately the arbiter.⁶²

The main strategy employed by reformers against immorality and lower-level profanity was to appeal to magistrates to be more effective in the punishment of the wicked.⁶³ Yet, it is notable that this approach was not adopted by Collier, Tutchin and Bedford. The main reason for this was probably pragmatic: it would have been futile to appeal for state intervention against words that the state did

not recognise as sinful.⁶⁴ However, I would suggest that the unique way in which our anti-stage writers conceived of the theatre as the devil's domain also significantly influenced their approach. Their consistent reference to the theatre as the 'Devil's chapel', or the 'Devil's engine', or the 'Devil's shop'⁶⁵ took the literal observations of the early Christian Fathers and re-interpreted them afresh for the eighteenth century by playing upon contemporary fears about the prevalence of evil and socio-religious concerns among reformers that the theatre had become anti-church. Importantly, the labels of theatre as the Devil's 'chapel', 'engine' or 'shop' also indicate how our anti-stage writers believed that the sins of the theatre were perpetuated. When the writings of our anti-stage writers are taken in the round, it becomes clear that the main target of the campaign was not the sinful playwrights and actors, but rather potential theatre goers and people of influence. It was believed that the effectual reform of the playhouse lay with the source of the problem — the audience. Collier's view that the audience were complicit has already been noted above, and Defoe was under no illusion that the 'Errors of the Stage, lie all in the Auditory' for the actors were but their 'Humble Servants'.⁶⁶ Indeed, it was the audience's attendance, money and applause that supplied the Devil with his congregation and ensured that God's truth continued to be denied. The outrage created by such evil 'competition' and the extent to which the charge of blasphemy exposed fundamental and dangerous untruths is evident in a satirical poem by Daniel Defoe, which was published on occasion of a new theatre being built at the Haymarket in 1705. An extract of the poem reads as follows:

View but our Stately Pile, the columns stand,
Like some Great Council Chamber of the Land:
When Strangers view the Beauty and the State,
As they pass by, they ask what Church is that?
Thinking a Nation, so Devout as we,
Ne'r build such Domes, but to some Deity;
But when the Salt Assembly once they View,
What Gods they Worship, how Blaspheme the True;
How Vice's Champions, Uncontrol'd within,
Roul in the very Excrements of Sin:
The Horrid Emblems so Exact appear,
That Hell's an Ass, to what's Transacted here.⁶⁷

The primary approach of our anti-stage writers was, therefore, to appeal to the Christian conscience of the potential theatre goer, thus bypassing the worldly restrictions of politics and law and asking each individual to scrutinise their actions more closely.

The polemical claims of Collier, Tutchin and Bedford formed a desperate attempt to expose the wickedness of the stage. Citing play passages as

blasphemous was crucial to the argument that the words in particular were indeed fundamentally evil. Inflammatory passages attacking God's providence and invoking Devils were of little significance in isolation; but if they were proved blasphemous, then anti-stage writers hoped that audiences would be forced to accept that plays were evil and risked provoking God's wrath. With no earthly, objective judge, such issues were intractable and, for the victimised playwrights and no doubt many humble audience members, it was actually men such as Collier who were guilty of blasphemy by seeing wickedness where there was none. As one eminent playwright put it: 'where the expression is unblameable in its own clear and genuine signification, he [Collier] enters into himself like the evil spirit, he possesses the innocent phrase, and makes it bellow forth his own blasphemies'.⁶⁸ After His intervention in 1703, God did not venture to give any further clarification on the matter and with His apparent acquiescence, the heat of the stage debate subsided. The SPCK propaganda campaign wound down in 1708 drawing to a close any serious chance of theatre reform on the basis of its profanity and blasphemy.

Acknowledging modern providentialism

In conclusion, it has been shown that for pious English Christians of but three centuries ago, the charge of blasphemy was a very grave one indeed. Conceptually, blasphemy was conceived as a form of profanity that ranged from cursing through to an inversion of God and the Devil. Extreme blasphemies sought to subvert some of the most fundamental Christian truths, and were denounced as irredeemable sins. Practically, it has been demonstrated how a belief in a providential God, coupled with relatively conventional theology, rendered seemingly innocuous plays and facile passages blasphemous and thus a tangible threat to the whole nation.

This chapter has shown how the meaning of art can be construed from an exclusively religious point of view. As a result, we should perhaps be more ready to acknowledge that for those who believe in a providential God and active devils, philosophical theories of representation and/or political rights of freedom of expression pale into insignificance. A strong belief in providentialism is certainly in evidence in many countries throughout the world and we need only look to the Evangelical Christian lobby in the USA or the Islamic regime under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran to see the vitality and influence of such beliefs. To assume that all charges of blasphemy against art are limited to notions of offensiveness between human agents, even within the West, significantly limits our understanding of how profoundly religious individuals and societies conceive of the world they live in. To devout believers defending the sacred is a matter of life and death.

Endnotes

¹ T.C. Curtis and W.A. Speck, 1976, 'The Societies for the Reformation of Manners: a case study in the theory and practice of moral reform', *Literature and History*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 45-64, at p. 49. I would like to thank my supervisor, Mark Goldie, for his comments and advice throughout the writing of this paper. I am also grateful for the travel grants given to me by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Clare College, University of Cambridge, which enabled me to attend the 'Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts' conference.

² For a valuable introduction to the development of this form of blasphemy see: David Nash, 1999, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain 1789 to the Present*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

³ I would suggest that the Salman Rushdie affair, for example, has introduced significant challenges to a constructive debate of blasphemy.

⁴ 9 & 10 Guill. III. c. 32.

⁵ *Journal of the House of Lords*, vol. XVI, p. 175: opening of the ninth session of Parliament, December 3, 1697.

⁶ John Spurr, 'Virtue, Religion and Government': the Anglican Uses of Providence' in Tim Harris; Paul Seaward and Mark Goldie (eds) 1990, *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 29-47.

⁷ John Edwards, 1705, *The preacher discourse shewing what are the particular offices and employments of those of that character in the Church*, (part 1), London. p. 100.

⁸ I would suggest that fundamental similarities between the mechanisms employed by the theatre and church provide a significant sub-plot to the whole controversy which has yet to be acknowledged by scholars. For an introduction to some of the main themes from another period, see Bryan Crockett, 1995, *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁹ This view is implicit in another contemporary argument that the theatre glorified vice and downplayed virtue. See John Dunton, *The Athenian Mercury*, vol. 6, no. 17 (22 March 1692); vol. 8, no. 25 (22 Nov. 1692); vol. 12, no. 7 (14 Nov. 1693).

¹⁰ For an excellent and seemingly ignored study of Collier's life and work see E.A. Ewan, 1961, 'A Study of the Works of Jeremy Collier' (D.Phil thesis, Oxford University). A short view went through four editions in the first eighteen months and evoked about twenty replies in the same period, see Robert D. Hume, 1999, 'Jeremy Collier and the Future of the London Theatre in 1698', *Studies in Philology*, vol. 96, no. 4, pp. 480-511, p. 495.

¹¹ Sybil Rosenfeld, 1960, *The theatre of the London fairs in the 18th century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Jeremy Collier, *A short view* (London, 1698), unpaginated preface and contents pages.

¹³ Richard Burridge, *A scourge for the play-houses: or the character of the English-stage* (London, 1702); Harold Love, 1980, 'Who were the Restoration Audience?', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 21-44.

¹⁴ Daniel Defoe, *The storm: or a collection of the most remarkable casualties and disasters which happen'd in the late dreadful tempest both by sea and land* (London, 1704).

¹⁵ *The Tempest* was played on 1 December at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre, see: Emmett L. Avery (ed.) 1960, *The London Stage 1660-1800*, vol. 2, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, pp. 49-50.

¹⁶ Arthur Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays* (Bristol, 1706), p. 81.

¹⁷ Curtis and Speck, 'The Societies for the Reformation of Manners', p. 49.

¹⁸ For example William Congreve, see Aubrey Williams, 1975, 'No Cloistered Virtue: Or, Playwright versus Priest in 1698', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, vol. 90, no. 2, pp. 234-246.

¹⁹ John Tillotson, *Fifteen sermons on several subjects*, (London, 1702), pp. 289-323.

²⁰ Tillotson, *Fifteen Sermons on several subjects*, p. 301.

²¹ For Augustine, 'an evil will is the efficient cause of an evil deed', and so it may be suggested that an evil deed is evidence of an evil will. See Augustine, *The City of God*, XII, Ch. 6, translated by Philip Levine (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 25.

²² Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage plays*, p. 188.

²³ Collier, *A short view*, p. 60.

- 24 The switching of vowels in words such as 'God' was a technique used by playwrights to avoid infringement of the 1605 Act 'for the preventing and avoiding of the great abuse of the holy name of God, in stage-plays' (3 Jac. I c. 21). It is curious to note that a similar technique is still employed today to circumvent censure, for example in the British television sitcom *Father Ted*, the word 'fuck' is replaced with 'feck' to allow for a pre-watershed broadcast.
- 25 [Jeremy Collier], Mr. Collier's dissuasive from the play-house; in a letter to a person of quality, occasion'd by the late calamity of the tempest (London, 1704), p. 16. For the offending passage in the play, see Sir William D'Avenant, *Macbeth a tragedy with all the alterations, amendments, additions and new songs* (London, 1695), p. 20.
- 26 Due to his religious convictions Collier never actually attended a theatre.
- 27 John Dryden and Sir William D'Avenant, *The Tempest, or the enchanted Island* (London, 1670); Thomas Duffett, *The Mock-Tempest: or the enchanted castle* (London, 1675). For further details on the content and significance of these adaptations see Montague Summers, 1922, *Shakespeare adaptations: the tempest, the mock tempest, and King Lear*, London: J. Cape, Introduction; Christine Dymkowski (ed.) 2000, *The Tempest*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sandra Clark (ed.) 1997, *Shakespeare made fit*, London: Dent, pp. xli-lxxviii;
- 28 William [Talbot], *A Sermon preach'd before the Lords spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, in the Abbey-Church of Westminster, on Wednesday, Jan. 19. 1703/4.* (London, 1704), p. 17.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 [Collier], Mr Collier's dissuasive, op. cit., p. 6.
- 31 John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse* (1697), p. 19; cited in Collier, *Short view*, op. cit., p. 84.
- 32 Collier, op. cit., p. 84.
- 33 [John Vanbrugh], *A short vindication of the relapse and the provok'd wife, from immorality and prophaneness* (London, 1698), p. 25.
- 34 Michael Cordner, 2000, 'Playwright versus priest: profanity and the wit of Restoration comedy', in Deborah Payne Fisk (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 215.
- 35 William Sherlock, *A practical discourse concerning a future judgement* (2nd edn. London, 1692), pp. 14-65.
- 36 Collier, op. cit., pp. 196-197.
- 37 Thomas D'Urfey, *The comical history of Don Quixote*, (London, 1694), part 1, p. 20; cited in, Collier, op. cit., pp. 196-197.
- 38 2 Samuel 12:14 and Ezekiel 35:12-15.
- 39 Sir William D'Avenant, *Macbeth, a tragedy. With alterations, additions, and new songs* (London, 1674).
- 40 G.R. Elliott, 1958, *Dramatic providence in Macbeth: a study of Shakespeare's tragic theme of humanity and grace*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 41 Tutchin, *The Observer*, vol. 2, no. 77 (29 Dec/1 Jan 1704).
- 42 Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, XXVI; T.R. Glover (trans.) 1966, London: Heinemann, p. 291.
- 43 Vanbrugh, *The confederacy* (1706), p. 29; cited in, Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, p. 40.
- 44 Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 46 Also see, Mark 3:28-30 & Luke 12:10.
- 47 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2ae XIII.
- 48 Collier, *A short view*, op. cit., p. 96.
- 49 [Collier], *Mr Collier's dissuasive*, op. cit., p. 15.
- 50 Philip C. Almond, 1994, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 86-87.
- 51 Tutchin, *The Observer*, vol. 2, no. 31 (21-24 July 1703).
- 52 John Dryden, *Amphitryon: or the two Sosia's* (London, 1690). For details of the play and Dryden's adaptation in particular, see Örjan Lindberger, 1956, *The Transformations of Amphitryon*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, pp. 90-120.
- 53 Collier, *A short view*, op. cit., p. 183.
- 54 *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, X, cited in Collier, *A short view* (1698), p. 255. Also see William Bisset at St. Mary-le-Bow, 27 March 1704, p. 57.

⁵⁶ Vanbrugh, *The Provok'd wife* (1697), p. 77; cited in, Tutchin, *The Observer*, vol. 2, no. 78 (1-5 January 1704).

⁵⁷ John Corny, *The metamorphosis: or, the old lover out-witted* (London, 1704), p. 14; cited in, Tutchin, *The Observer*, vol. 4, no. 46 (5-8 September 1705).

⁵⁸ [Anon.], *Roving husband reclaim'd* (London, 1706), p. 8; cited in, Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, p. 41.

⁵⁹ Richard Brome, *The northern lass* (1684), p. 5; cited in, Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, p. 41.

⁶⁰ Bedford, *The evil and danger of stage-plays*, p. 41.

⁶¹ Justin Champion, 1992, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken: the Church of England and its enemies, 1660-1730*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 6-7.

⁶² I have endeavoured to sketch only the most basic outline of the contemporary debate necessary to sustain my argument.

⁶³ Tina Beth Isaacs, 1979, 'Moral crime, moral reform, and the state in early eighteenth century England: a study of piety and politics', PhD thesis, University of Rochester, NY.

⁶⁴ There is no evidence to suggest that the theatres, playwrights or actors suffered legal censure for blasphemy. However, there were a few instances where actors were prosecuted for lower level profanity and licentious behaviour. For an authoritative account of these cases, see: Joseph Wood Krutch, 1924, *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 167-178.

⁶⁵ For 'Devil's chapel' see: Tutchin, *The Observer*, vol. 2, no. 77 (December 29-January 1, 1704); for 'Devil's Engine' see, Defoe, *A Review*, vol. 3, no. 95 (8 Aug. 1706); for 'Devil's shop' see, endnote 53.

⁶⁶ Daniel Defoe, *A Review*, vol. 2, no. 26 (May 3, 1705).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ William Congreve, *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (London, 1698), pp. 4-5.