BRILL

Blasphemy As Violence: Trying to Understand the Kind of Injury That Can Be Inflicted by Acts and Artefacts That Are Construed As Blasphemy

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Abstract

This article suggests an understanding of blasphemy as violence that enables us to identify various kinds of injury that can be inflicted by blasphemous acts and artefacts. Understanding blasphemy as violence can take three forms: physical violence, indirect intersubjective violence, and psychological violence. The conditions that allow for an understanding of blasphemy as physical violence depend on very specific religious assumptions. This is different in the case of indirect intersubjective violence that can take effect in social circumstances where certain forms of blasphemy reinforce existing negative stereotypes of believers. The analysis of blasphemy as psychological violence reveals that interpretations according to which believers who take offense to blasphemy are 'backward' and 'unenlightened' do not suffice to explain the conditions of the insult that is felt by some believers. The article shows that these conditions can be explained by means of Harry Frankfurt's philosophical theory of caring.

Keywords

anti-religious racism; blasphemy; caring; offense; violence

1. Introduction

In recent years, acts and artefacts that were perceived as blasphemous by numerous believers received much attention in public debate as well as in scholarly literature. This concerns the various aspects and interests which motivated public statements and demonstrations for or against such acts

and artefacts. It also applies to normative questions such as whether or not blasphemous acts are unjust or disrespectful, whether they should be placed outside the protection of freedom of expression, or—rather the opposite—whether they are praiseworthy from a moral, political, or a religious point of view.[1] Less attention has been paid to the kind of injury that believers felt and still feel in view of blasphemous acts and artefacts and to the conditions that make such injury possible. This article focuses on this problem. More specifically, I will suggest an understanding of blasphemy as violence that allows us to improve our understanding of the kinds of injury which believers experience in view of blasphemous acts.[2] Furthermore, I explore the conditions that make certain instances of blasphemy take effect as specific forms of violence.

My analysis includes research from disciplines such as cultural anthropology, history, law, political theory, and religious studies. The approach of this article, however, and its main interest, is philosophical. The clarification

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[1] See e.g. Elisabeth Burns Coleman, "The Offenses of Blasphemy: Messages in and through Art," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 45 (2011), 67–84; Austin Dacey, *The Future of Blasphemy: Speaking of the Sacred in an Age of Human Rights* (London & New York: Continuum, 2012); Anthony Fisher & Hayden Ramsay, "Of Art and Blasphemy," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3.2 (2000), 137–167; Sune Laegaard, "The Cartoon Controversy: Offence, Identity, Oppression?," *Political Studies* 55.3 (2007), 481–498; and Robert Post, "Religion and Freedom of Speech: Portraits of Muhammad," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14.1 (2007), 72–90. For legal blasphemy provisions in Europe see Renáta Uitz, *Freedom of Religion in European Constitutional and International Case Law* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007) and Venice Commission, *Blasphemy, Insult and Hatred: Finding Answers in a Democratic Society* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2010). The latter book includes a report by the Venice Commission (an advisory board of the Council of Europe), entitled "On the Relationship Between Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Religion: The Issue of Regulation and Prosecution of Blasphemy, Religious Insult and Incitement to Religious Hatred." A critical analysis of the European Court of Human Rights' jurisprudence on blasphemy, religious insult, and religious hatred is provided by Ian Leigh, "Damned if They Do, Damned if They Don't: The European Court of Human Rights and the Protection of Religion from Attack," *Res Publica* 17 (2011), 55–73. Since I am not primarily interested in formal regulations concerning blasphemy, but in an understanding and explanation of certain experiences of believers in view of blasphemy and the conditions that make these experiences possible, I will not go into details of legal provisions and jurisprudence here.

[2] The word 'blasphemous' can refer to oral and written statements (including curses), artefacts (e.g. art works), and acts (e.g. the publication or exhibition of a drawing). To simplify matters, I will mostly use 'blasphemy' and 'blasphemous acts' in this article, without always explicitly saying that this is meant to include oral and written statements and artefacts as well.

of the philosophical issues involved in controversies about blasphemous acts enables us to adequately theorise social and political problems, but also historical developments concerning the notion of blasphemy. The concrete social context to which the considerations of this article apply are European societies and controversies about blasphemous acts and artefacts that emanated from Europe, such as Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, the exhibition of Andres Serrano's art piece *Piss Christ*, and the publication of the so-called Muhammad cartoons.

I will start with the notion of violence by providing a working definition and distinguishing different types of violence. In this section I will confine myself to three types that are important in the analysis of blasphemy as violence. In the second part, I will dwell on the notion of blasphemy and consider the question of who and what can be the object or victim of blasphemy. Again, I will distinguish three types, or models, of blasphemy. Finally, I shall then show how and to what extent blasphemy can be construed as violence and what the conditions are which make certain instances of blasphemy qualify as specific forms of violence and what kinds of injuries are related to them.

2. Violence

Violence is clearly a very complex phenomenon that includes various dimensions and relations. However, in the context of my analysis it will suffice to proceed with a working definition that takes violence as inflicting injury on a person by an agent who knows or ought reasonably to have known that his or her act would bring about the injury in question.[3] Although broad, this definition is nevertheless sufficiently specific to encompass the various elements that are necessary in the present analysis

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[3] This definition follows to a large extent John Harris, *Violence and Responsibility* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 19. Moreover, my considerations on violence are inspired by amongst others C. A. J. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969), 167–191; Peter Imbusch, "The Concept of Violence," in: Wilhelm Heitmeyer & John Hagan (eds.), *International Handbook of Violence Research* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 13–39; and Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, "Überlegungen zum Gewaltbegriff," in: Wilhelm Heitmeyer & Hans-Georg Soeffner (eds.), *Gewalt: Entwicklungen, Strukturen, Analyseprobleme* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), 21–61.

of blasphemy. One of the elements of this definition says that violence is something that is *done* by an *agent*, the subject of violence.[4] This limits the scope of the notion of violence to what Johan Galtung calls personal violence or "violence where there is an actor that commits the violence."[5] However, his notion of 'structural violence,' as built into social institutions and other formal and informal structures, and of 'cultural violence' that includes those aspects of a culture that can be used to justify or legitimise personal or structural violence are excluded from the definition.[6] The reason for not including here what Galtung calls structural and cultural violence in the notion of violence is related to another element of the definition above, namely that the subject of violence knows or can reasonably be expected to know that he is inflicting injury upon a person. This does not apply to social institutions; a health care system that reserves medical services for some, for instance rich people only, cannot be said to *know* that it brings about injury. Persons, however, who design and maintain such a system can know that their decisions inflict injury, for example upon poor people by effectively barring them access to certain medical services. Accordingly they can be subjects of violence whereas social structures cannot. However, that the agent knows or can know that he inflicts injury must not be confused with intentionality *strictu sensu*. The phrase "who knows or ought reasonably to have known" indicates a certain foreseeability of the fact that injury is inflicted upon somebody (a recipient of violence) by a violent deed, but it prevents counting only those acts by which a person deliberately and intentionally inflicts injury as violence. Acts with unintended, but reasonably foreseeable effects that harm other persons can constitute violence as well.

   In line with these considerations on the subject of violence (an agent), on intentionality (that is not necessarily required), and foreseeability (that is a necessary element) it can be said that violence is something for which one is responsible and hence it is morally relevant. However, the question whether or not violence can be legitimate and morally justifiable cannot be

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[4] It may be possible to speak of 'violence without a subject,' e.g. with reference to 'violent forces of nature' (storms, earthquakes, etc.), but I will not go into this here, since it is irrelevant for the topic of my inquiry. The same applies to the question whether violence can be exercised by means of omissions.

[5] Galtung, "Violence," 170.

[6] For the concept of structural violence see Galtung, "Violence," for cultural violence see Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27.3 (1990), 291–305.

settled by definitions alone. Discussions about certain forms of legal punishment or about military interventions that aim at putting an end to genocide or other crimes against humanity indicate that in certain cases violence is considered legitimate and morally right. This is important for the claim that blasphemy can be understood as violence, which has to be distinguished from any moral evaluation of blasphemy or reactions to blasphemous acts that I do not attempt to provide here.

This brings me to the final element that is at the core of the definition of violence: inflicting injury. I distinguish three different types of violence here that will be important in the analysis of various instances of blasphemy as specific forms of violence in the fourth section.

Acts such as knife attacks or punches inflict physical injury upon a person; human beings are hurt somatically; here, to the point of killing.[7] This type of violence is referred to as physical violence. Psychological violence can be distinguished from the former type, as it consists in inflicting mental injury such as fear, embarrassment, or shame. Examples of this type of violence are verbal insults, non-physical forms of bullying, and mobbing at the workplace or at school, or the Ku Klux Klan's racist practice of cross burning near homes of Afro-American citizens. Unlike in the case of physical violence, such acts do not directly violate the bodily integrity of a person, but the injury that is inflicted consists in mental distress or unpleasant emotions. However, a close look at the examples mentioned reveals that mental injury can shade into physical harm quite seamlessly. An employee who is bullied by his colleagues in non-physical forms can not only be annoyed, but he can get somatically sick and lose his job because of the mental distress he has to undergo.[8] Nevertheless it is useful to distinguish physical from psychological violence, amongst others because of the role of the recipient of violence in the process of bringing about the different types

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[7] Galtung, "Violence," 169.

[8] The impossibility to always separate physical and psychological violence from each other in the case of racism is vividly demonstrated in Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail: "[…] when you suddenly find your tong twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to coloured children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people […]." See Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 292–293.

of injury.[9] Typical forms of physical violence can be done monologically, that is by the subject of violence alone; cooperation of the recipient is not required for an act of physical violence to succeed. This is different in the case of psychological violence, especially if it is exercised by speech or non-verbal acts of expression.[10] Such violence can only occur *as violence* if the recipient of the act cooperates in a specific manner. Take the example of a person who abstains from alcohol, let us call him Peter. One of Peter's colleagues knows about this and during a jovial evening with others, he calls him a milksop because of Peter's—in the former's view—strange abstinence. It is conceivable that Peter feels embarrassed and experiences the colleague's statement as a verbal insult and hence as psychological violence. However, it does not go without saying that this is the case. Peter could for instance deny the speaker the authority to say anything about him that matters. In that case he simply does not mind what his colleague thinks of his decision to abstain from alcohol, for example because he dislikes him anyway. Another possibility to, as it were, let the insult fail is to deny the relevance or truth of the propositional or evaluative content of the state-ment for Peter's self-understanding. The colleague who calls him a milksop may be somebody Peter holds in high esteem, but Peter considers it essen-tial not to drink alcohol and is sure about this. He can even consider it virtu-ous to abstain from alcohol, for example for religious reasons, no matter what others think or say about it.

This example shows that an attempt to exercise verbal psychological violence can fail if the person who is the intended recipient of violence does not cooperate properly. In that sense a speaker cannot perform the speech act of insulting without cooperation of the hearer. In this regard acts of expression that are potential instances of psychological violence are sometimes compared to the speech act of convincing. Just as one cannot reasonably say, "I convinced you, but you didn't believe me" it does not

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[9] For the following see Steffen Kitty Herrmann & Hannes Kuch, "Verletzende Worte. Eine Einleitung," in: Steffen K. Herrmann, Sybille Krämer, & Hannes Kuch (eds.), *Verletzende Worte: Die Grammatik sprachlicher Missachtung* (Bielefeldt: transcript Verlag, 2007), 7–30 and Nunner-Winkler, "Überlegungen."

[10] With the term 'act of expression' I refer to acts that are intended by the agent "to com-municate to one or more persons some proposition or attitude." See Thomas Scanlon, *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 8). This includes speech and writing, but also the exhibition of works of art, the publication of drawings, the display or destruction of symbols, etc. For the sake of brevity I will mostly use 'act' instead of 'act of expression' in the following.

make sense to say, "I insulted you, but you didn't feel hurt."[11] If Peter's colleague intends to insult Peter, and utters words that are in his view appropriate for this purpose, but Peter is not mentally injured, the colleague's attempt to perform an act of verbal psychological violence does not succeed. Against this background one can understand the children's chant "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It seems that one could be able to prevent one's being injured by words or other acts of expression. The necessary cooperation of the intended recipient of violence in the case of psychological violence could also be taken to suggest that in certain cases the responsibility for experiencing a statement as violence is ascribed to the alleged victim—'You are quick to take offence!' I will return to this later and show that this is an important issue in the discussion about blasphemy as violence.[12]

In addition to physical and psychological violence there is a third type of violence that is important in the analysis of blasphemy as violence. I refer to this type of violence as indirect intersubjective violence because it is not directly related to the physical or psychological well-being of a person. Rather, the injury that is brought about by this type of violence consists in a lowering of the social status of the affected person *in the eyes of others*, for example his fellow citizens. Take the example of somebody who makes a personal website about somebody else, using real information and photos, but also providing false and compromising information concerning (for instance) character traits, skills, or the private life of the person in question. Here it is possible that violence is done to somebody without the person experiencing some kind of injury. Even if the person affected does not even know that the website exists, her reputation could possibly be damaged as soon as potential employers become aware of the page.

To sum up, I distinguish three types of violence that share (among other things) the common feature that an agent inflicts some kind of injury on somebody else. In the case of both physical and psychological violence, this injury is usually experienced by the recipient of violence. However, the case

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[11] See Nunner-Winkler, "Überlegungen," 39–42.
[12] By emphasising the infliction of injury as characterising feature of violence I take the victim as decisive reference point. By doing so and at the same time allowing psychological injury to be included in the notion of violence I am forced to say that there *is* violence as soon as a person *subjectively feels* that she is injured. I am willing to say this, because otherwise it is virtually impossible to speak of violence in a sense that does not only include the infliction of physical harm, which in my view is unacceptable.

of indirect intersubjective violence shows that it is not a necessary feature of violence that somebody actually feels or experiences the injury or harm that is inflicted by a violent act.

3. Blasphemy

As in the case of violence, there is a broad range of meanings that is given to the notion of blasphemy in specific historical contexts and in different religions. In the following I work within a theoretical framework that is primarily influenced by the Western Christian tradition. Essential elements of this framework, however, fit well with notions of blasphemy in Judaism and Islam and with related experiences of followers of these religions.[13]

In a very broad sense blasphemy is concerned with insults to god(s) and the sacred; more specifically it constitutes "the use or abuse of language, or behavioural acts, that scorn the existence, nature or power of sacred beings, items, or texts."[14] Accordingly, not only god(s), but also other sacred beings and things can be the object of blasphemy, for example the Virgin Mary or

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[13] See Leonard W. Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship, and "The Satanic Verses"* (Southwold: Orwell Press, 1990); and Jean-Pierre Wils, *Gotteslästerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007).

[14] David Nash, "Analyzing the History of Religious Crime: Models of 'Passive' and 'Active' Blasphemy since the Medieval Period," *Journal of Social History* 41.1 (2007), 5–29, here 6. David Nash's work concerns primarily, but not exclusively, blasphemy in the context of what he calls "the Christian world," especially Europe. Concerning Judaism, Daniel J. Lasker points out that "[t]here is no one standard Hebrew term for blasphemy, indicating that blasphemy [...] is not recognised as a distinct, prohibited category of speech in traditional Judaism." See Daniel J. Lasker, "Blasphemy: Jewish Concept," in: Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2., 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2005), 968–971, here 968. He identifies, however, acts that the Jewish tradition considers a type of blasphemy in the sense of a definition like David Nash's: "(1) cursing God and God's name; (2) using God's name in vain, pronouncing it illicitly, or destroying its written form; (3) saying inappropriate things about God; and (4) acting in a manner that would bring disrepute upon the God of Israel (and, therefore, upon the people of Israel)." (Lasker, "Blasphemy," 968). In Islamic tradition, insult to (*sabb*) and vilification of (*shatm*) God, the prophet Muhammad or to venerated persons are considered as crimes "fully comparable to blasphemy." See Carl W. Ernst, "Blasphemy: Islamic Concept," in: Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2005), 974–977, here 975. Blasphemy was introduced in Islamic law in chapters on apostasy (*riddah*). See Lutz Wiederhold, "Blasphemy

the prophet Muhammad, a crucifix, or Holy Scriptures. A further question that needs to be addressed in order to get a sufficiently clear understanding of blasphemy that can be used for the analysis of blasphemy as violence concerns the question who can be injured by and hence be the victim of blasphemy, which is not the same as being an object of blasphemy. This is quite clear in the case of inanimate things such as crucifixes or icons (they cannot be injured since they do not have interests of their own), but even if a god is scorned, it does not go without saying that he is considered a victim in a sense that is relevant for the analysis of blasphemy as violence.[15]

Those who are construed as being injured by blasphemy can be identified by means of David Nash's distinction between passive blasphemy, that was dominant in medieval Europe, and active blasphemy, which

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Against the Prophet Muhammad and His Companions (*Sabb Al-Rasul, Sabb Al-Sahabah*): The Introduction of the Topic into Shafi'i Legal Literature and its Relevance for Legal Practice Under Mamluk Rule," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 42.1 (1997), 39–70, here 69. In the context of theology, it often overlaps with the deliberate rejection of God and revelation; infidelity (*kufr*) (Ernst, "Blasphemy"). As Talal Asad points out, however, the dominant terms that were used by Arabic speakers in the controversy about the Muhammad cartoons were different still. The World Union of Muslim Scholars, for instance, used the word is*ā'ah* which "has a range of meanings, including 'insult, harm, and offense', that are applied in secular contexts" (Talal Asad, "Reflections on Blasphemy and Secular Criticism," in: Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 580–609, here 590). A note concerning the spelling of 'god(s)' and 'God' respectively in this article: in contexts where particular religious views (e.g. of a God who punishes blasphemy) are relevant, I spell 'God' with a capital 'G' whereas I speak of 'god' with a lower-case 'g' if the reference is to a deity in general.

[15] According to Thomas Aquinas blasphemy is "a sin committed directly against God" and therefore "more grave than murder, which is a sin against one's neighbour." Nevertheless, Aquinas says that blasphemy can do no harm to God (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II.II., Q. 13, A. 3). The seeming inconsistency between the view that blasphemy is a sin committed directly against God and the view that blasphemy cannot harm God is solved by Aquinas's view that the blasphemer *intends* to harm God's honour and that "the gravity of a sin depends on the intention of the evil will rather than on the effect of the deed" (*S.Th.* II.II. Q. 13, A. 3.). For the view that (according to Christian theology) God cannot be harmed whereas his glory and his name can be dishonoured, see Fisher & Ramsey, "Art," 150. In medieval Europe, Christian preachers complained that blasphemers crucified Jesus Christ again with their tongues and compared them "to butchers who mutilated the body of Christ." See Gerd Schwerhoff, "Horror Crime or Bad Habit? Blasphemy in Premodern Europe, 1200–1650," *Journal of Religious History* 32.4 (2008), 398–408, 402. In that sense, God or Jesus Christ could be considered possible victims of blasphemy in the imagination of medieval Christianity. Since the interest of my analysis, however, lies in the injury that believers undergo if they are confronted with blasphemous acts, I will not dwell on this aspect in the following.

replaced the passive model in modernity, especially in the legal discourse in European countries.[16]

In the model of passive blasphemy, blasphemy endangers the community, which can occur in two different ways. Firstly, it was assumed that blasphemy provoked the wrath of God who would punish a community that tolerates blasphemy. This belief is illustrated by medieval provisions on blasphemy according to which disasters such as famine, earthquake, or plague occurred because God was provoked by a failure to punish blasphemy.[17] A second threat to the community results from the corrosive power that blasphemy exercised on religion, and therefore—albeit indirectly—on the moral foundations of society and social cohesion that were provided and sustained by religion.[18] In both cases, blasphemy is not only a religious or theological problem, but also an affront to order and the social community, and hence a social and political problem. In the model of passive blasphemy people need not actually encounter a blasphemous act in order to be affected by it, rather, the mere existence of blasphemy threatens peace and social order. Because of this, the medieval European state actively searched for and prosecuted blasphemers, much like modern states do for example with murderers, whereas believers "could remain 'passive' in the knowledge that religious or secular authority would take action in order to restore order and tranquillity."[19]

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[16] For the distinction between passive and active blasphemy see Nash, "Analyzing" and David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

[17] See Levy, *Blasphemy*, 50 who refers to the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* that was issued by Emperor Justinian I from 529 to 534. Gerd Schwerhoff points out that emperor Maximilian passed a law against blasphemy in 1497 "expressly because of the fear of epidemics, hunger, and natural disasters" which where understood as divine punishment of (the toleration of) blasphemy (Schwerhoff, "Horror Crime," 403). See also Wils, *Gotteslästerung*, 86–91.

[18] Wils, *Gotteslästerung*, 152. Richard Webster relates the idea that blasphemy might threaten the moral and political foundations of society to the 'floodgate theory' according to which a toleration of a single instance of blasphemy would lead to a rapid spread of impiety and, subsequently, immorality and loss of governmental control. This floodgate theory was frequently invoked, as Webster points out, in order to establish and safeguard laws against freedom of expression (see Webster, *Brief History*, 23). This view, however, needs to be qualified in the light of Gerd Schwerhoff's research into blasphemy in pre-modern Europe, which shows that in the Old-European world blasphemy had been a common element of everyday conflict behaviour and a sign of strong religious bonds rather than an expression of loss of religion (see Schwerhoff, "Horror Crime").

[19] Nash, *Blasphemy*, 49.

This is different in the model of active blasphemy where blasphemy is understood as an offense to religious sensibilities of individual believers. According to this model, the problem with for instance submerging a crucifix in urine and exhibiting the photograph with the title *Piss Christ* in a public museum is not that the society at large is harmed in one way or the other. Rather, the problem is that some Christians experience such an act as a defilement and mockery of what they hold sacred, and that the religious feelings of individual believers are hurt. This emphasis on personal offense can be seen as result of a process of a "secularization of blasphemy";[20] a development from a notion of blasphemy that depends on specific religious beliefs (e.g. concerning certain properties of God)[21] to an understanding where what counts as blasphemy is determined by the question whether religious sensibilities of believers are offended and hence by mental states of human beings. This shift to a 'secular' concept of blasphemy was marked in a famous ruling of Lord Chief Justice Coleridge in a lawsuit against the British secular humanist magazine *The Freethinker* and its founder G. W. Foote in 1883. Coleridge concluded that it is decisive in blasphemy cases to distinguish between the matter of a statement on the one side and the manner in which it is made on the other. As long as the decencies of controversy are observed, a statement or act does not constitute blasphemy in a legal sense; if a statement is couched in decent and temperate language, "even the fundamentals of religion may be attacked without the writer being guilty of blasphemy."[22] This emphasis on personal

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[20] Dacey, *Future*, 10–11; 130.

[21] An exemplary definition of blasphemy that is clearly dependent on a particular notion of God is provided by the medieval Christian theologian Alexander of Hales. He defines blasphemy as a phenomenon that involves attributing to God a characteristic that he does not have, or denying that he has a quality that he does possess, or attributing to a creature a characteristic that is unique to God (see Wils, *Gotteslästerung*, 92).

[22] Levy, *Blasphemy*, 487. For the Freethinker case and the matter vs. manner distinction see also Nash, *Blasphemy*, 171–173 and Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 198–203. The manner-matter distinction has become enormously influential since then, and is used as standard tool for the legal treatment of blasphemy in various European countries. See Peter Jones, "Blasphemy, Offensiveness, and Law," *British Journal of Political Science* 10.2 (1980), 129–148, 141–144 and David A. Richards, *Free Speech and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 214–224. It must be noticed, however, that it is not without controversy; according to Peter Jones the distinction fails to decide whether an act of expression constitutes blasphemy (in the legal sense) because it (wrongly) "supposes that statements

offense corresponds to the (legal) requirement that those who claim they were offended by blasphemy become *active*—they are obliged to demonstrate that a certain act actually offended their religious sensibilities, and to what extent.[23] However, in the model of active blasphemy, blasphemy is no longer expected to be a danger for social and political cohesion and the community at large.

These considerations can help to further investigate how blasphemy can be construed and experienced as a specific form of violence and what the conditions are that make certain blasphemous acts instances of the types of violence outlined above.

4. Blasphemy as Violence

4.1. *Blasphemy as Physical Violence*

The first form of the model of passive blasphemy construes blasphemous acts as threats to the social community because they provoke the wrathful punishment of God. At first glance, blasphemy and violence seem to be merely indirectly related to each other, because blasphemy does not in itself inflict some kind of injury to somebody. Rather, its toleration provokes physically violent deeds, namely God's punishment in the form of earthquakes, famines, and so on. Under certain conditions, however, it is apt to construe such blasphemy as an instance of (physical) violence, namely if God's physically injurious punishment is believed to be a necessary response to blasphemy. This is possible if one assumes that God inevitably responds to blasphemy by punishing the blasphemer and the society that tolerates blasphemy, for instance by means of pestilence, earthquakes, etc. Another way of understanding physical injury as the inevitable consequence of blasphemy refers to the belief that there is a strict connection between human deed and consequence in the sense of the

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are capable of more or less offensive formulations which are nevertheless identical in meaning" (Jones, "Blasphemy," 143). Beyond this, it is clear that the manner-matter distinction is inconsistent with (matter-based) understandings of blasphemy in various religious traditions to which I referred above. This indicates that a one-sided focus on legal discourses is not sufficient to gain an understanding of the kind of injury that believers often feel in view of blasphemous acts and artefacts.

[23] See Nash, *Blasphemy*, 82.

Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang according to which persons simply receive the appropriate fruits of the good and bad deeds they sow.[24] According to Klaus Koch, who coined the phrase *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*, the Old Testament sees God not as judge who directly intervenes to punish wrongdoing and to reward good acts.[25] Rather, humans create for themselves "a good or bad sphere that comes back to affect the doer. Consequently, an evil act results inevitably in a calamitous condition of the doer."[26] God's role is limited in this system, as he performs a midwifery service rather than directly causing injury or well-being.[27]

Historical analyses of blasphemy lawsuits show that the view that blasphemy provokes divine judgment was the dominant understanding in medieval and early modern Europe.[28] However, legal texts such as the aforementioned *Corpus Iuris Civilis* demonstrate that the wrath of God was taken to be a virtually necessary consequence of blasphemy and the failure to prosecute and punish blasphemers respectively. In light of this, both interpretations can in principle be seen as two versions of one and the same assumption, namely that blasphemy indirectly, but inevitably causes physical injury not only to the blasphemer, but also to society at large. However, such an understanding of blasphemy as physical violence is dependent on very specific assumptions such as those delineated above.

4.2. *Blasphemy as Indirect Intersubjective Violence*

The second form of the model of passive blasphemy that sees it as a threat to morality and social cohesion can be related to what I called indirect

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[24] Peter Hatton, "A Cautionary Tale: The Acts-Consequence 'Construct'," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35.3 (2011), 375–384, 375.

[25] See Klaus Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52 (1955), 1–42.

[26] Horst-Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 184.

[27] See Hatton, "A Cautionary Tale." Hatton criticises one-sided interpretations of what he calls the "Act-Consequence 'Construct.'"

[28] See Nash, *Blasphemy*. Nash's analysis includes a thorough investigation of the prevalent punishments that blasphemers received throughout the medieval ages and in the early modern world. These punishments were exacted publicly, and very often they aimed at bringing shame and ridicule upon the convicted individual. The publicity of shame punishments was crucial, because it strengthened the community against a potential danger and made visible the norms of the society from which the blasphemer was on the verge of being expelled (Nash, *Blasphemy*, 153, 155).

intersubjective violence. In order to show this relation it is useful to turn to a problem to which Tariq Modood pointed in his analyses of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and the Muhammad cartoons.[29] Modood criticises the publication of such works by demonstrating that certain religious symbols or figures such as Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad are often taken as representations of the followers of the respective religion. Accordingly, the public display of images that denigrate religious symbols or figures, or that make a religion appear inferior or dangerous in a generalizing manner can contribute to constructing and spreading negative stereotypes of an entire religious group. In so doing they damage the reputation and the social status of the members of the affected religious group which can negatively affect the chances of these people, for instance on the job market. This process, Tariq Modood argues, can be seen analogically to racist forms of stereotyping that construct an 'otherness' and an ostensible inferiority of entire groups by reference to their colour or ethnicity. In order to theoretically deal with this, Modood introduces the concept of 'anti-religious' and more specifically 'anti-Muslim racism' that denotes processes where the 'otherness' that is ascribed to certain people and even the 'groupness' under which they are subsumed is construed by reference to their religion.[30] Cartoons such as the one that depicts Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, with a lit fuse and the Islamic creed written on the bomb are, according to Modood, examples of such anti-Muslim racism. He points out that:

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[29] For the following see Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Tariq Modood, "Obstacles to Multicultural Integration," *International Migration* 44.5 (2006), 51–62; Tariq Modood, "The Liberal Dilemma: Integration or Vilification?," *International Migration* 44.5 (2006), 4–7; and Geoffrey Brahm Levey & Tariq Modood, "Liberal Democracy, Multicultural Citizenship and the Danish Cartoon Affair," in: Geoffrey Brahm Levey & Tariq Modood (eds.), *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 216–242.

[30] See Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, 104, and Modood, "Obstacles," 55. This process does not exclusively apply to Muslims, of course. Rather, Modood points out similarities between what he calls the current racialization of Muslims and the older, but still effective racialization of Jews and the corresponding shift from Judeo-phobia to anti-Semitism; see Levey & Modood, "Liberal Democracy," 237–240. For criticism of the notion of anti-religious racism see Randall Hansen, "The Danish Cartoon Controversy: A Defence of Liberal Freedom," *International Migration* 44.5 (2006), 7–16, and Brendan O'Leary, "Liberalism, Multiculturalism, Danish Cartoons, Islamist Fraud, and the Rights of the Ungodly," *International Migration* 44.5 (2006), 22–33.

[i]f the message was meant to be that non-Muslims have the right to draw Muhammad, it has come out very differently: that the Prophet of Islam was a terrorist. Moreover, the cartoons are not just about one individual but about Muslims per se – just as a cartoon portraying Moses as a crooked financier would not be about one man but a comment on Jews. And just as the latter would be racist, so are the cartoons in question.[31]

In view of the question to what extent blasphemy can be seen as violence, instances of anti-religious racist blasphemy can be compared with the example of the personal website that I mentioned earlier. In both cases it is not necessary that the person that is effectively harmed does actually experience either physical or mental injury. Rather, the possible injury consists in a lowering of persons in the eyes of others, which relates such forms of blasphemy to indirect intersubjective violence. There are, however, important differences between the case of the personal website and anti-religious racist blasphemy. A website that provides compromising information about a person can damage the reputation of this person much more directly than images that denigrate religious symbols. On the other hand, the possible impact of anti-religious racist blasphemy is not limited to a single individual, but it concerns a whole group, namely the followers of the religion whose symbols, practices, and so forth are denigrated by the blasphemous act in question. In that sense certain instances of blasphemy can damage social relations in a way that is equivalent to discrimination and informal social exclusion. By so doing they threaten fundamental moral and political principles of democratic societies and undermine social cohesion which relates them to the second form of passive blasphemy that I outlined above.[32]

These differences between the case of the personal website on the one side and instances of anti-religious racist blasphemy on the other hint at conditions that make it possible that certain forms of blasphemy take effect

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[31] Modood, "Liberal Dilemma," 4.

[32] I do not claim that the possible effects of anti-religious racist blasphemy match exactly the second form of passive blasphemy in the sense that I outlined above. In my description of the model of passive blasphemy I pointed out that the moral foundations of society and social cohesion are sustained by religion. This is not assumed in the construction of anti-religious racist blasphemy as indirect intersubjective violence, however. Here religion rather functions as a 'sticky sign' (Sara Ahmed) that is used to construct negative stereotypes of particular members of society and in doing so to undermine moral and political principles such as equality and the possibility to participate as a peer in social life.

as indirect intersubjective violence: images of religious symbols, persons, and so on, or other blasphemous things and acts can only take effect as indirect social violence if they are received by fellow citizens as denigrating representations of followers of a religion. Since negative stereotyping usually does not initiate, but trades on and reinforces prejudices,[33] blasphemy is not as such indirect intersubjective violence, but only in circumstances where there already are prejudices against the respective religion and their followers. Moreover, blasphemy can only take effect as indirect intersubjective violence if the believers whose religion is scorned do not form the socially and politically powerful establishment, but are in a relatively weak social position. There is evidence that this holds true for the current situation of Muslims in several European countries.[34] In such circumstances, denigrating images of Muhammad can tie in with existing resentments against Islam or Muslims and contribute to their perpetuation and intensification. Accordingly, the publication of a cartoon that depicts Muhammad with a bomb in his turban could be considered indirect intersubjective violence, whereas for example the church-critical and anti-militarist paintings of George Grosz in the 1920s that also tie together religion and violence possibly offended religious sensibilities of devout Christians, but did not constitute indirect intersubjective violence in the sense outlined above.

4.3. Blasphemy as Psychological Violence

How does active blasphemy relate to violence? As I pointed out before, the distinctive feature of active blasphemy is that it concerns the religious sensibilities of believers. Unlike passive blasphemy, active blasphemy is construed from the perspective of an individual who takes offense at something, usually because it breaches a taboo of this person's religion. A more specific understanding of offense, which helps to gain a better understanding of the relation between (active) blasphemy and violence, is provided by

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[33] See Levey & Modood, "Liberal Democracy," 238.

[34] See José Casanova, "Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism: A European Union/ United States Comparison," in: Thomas Banchoff (ed.), *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59–83; Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 57–58; and Modood, "Liberal Dilemma," 5.

Joel Feinberg.[35] According to Feinberg, somebody takes offense (or is offended) if he suffers an unpleasant mental state (e.g. disgust, shame, hurt, grief), attributes his suffering to the wrongful conduct of another person, and resents this person for making him suffer.[36] These components of the notion of offense make offense, and hence active blasphemy, a form of psychological violence: the inflicting of mental injury, that is unpleasant mental states, by somebody who knows or ought reasonably to have known that his or her deed makes somebody else feel fear, grief, etc.

   Analyses of public controversies, such as those concerning Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* or the Muhammad cartoons, indicate that believers actually are offended by such instances of blasphemy. As for the public display of *Piss Christ*, Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsey speak of an act that is "hurtful to believers" and of "pain" and "outrage" that is associated with the exhibition of Serrano's artwork. They quote a newspaper correspondent who invites his readers to think of

> the one person you love more than anyone else in this world, the person you look to for guidance and support, the person who is with you in good times and bad. Now take an image of that person, immerse it in urine, take a picture, hang it in the National Gallery, and call it art.[37]

Strikingly similar responses to the Muhammad cartoons are reported by Saba Mahmood. She refers to devout Muslims who "expressed a sense of grief and sorrow" and uttered "expressions of hurt, loss and injury" in the

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[35] For the following see Joel Feinberg, *Offense to Others* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[36] Feinberg, *Offense*, 2. The above definition refers to offense "in the strict sense of ordinary language" as a "subjective condition – the offending act must be taken by the offended person to wrong him whether in fact it does or not" (Feinberg, *Offense*, 2). Taking this as his point of departure, Feinberg distinguishes a general sense of offense (referring to unpleasant mental states whether or not these are attributed to the wrongful conduct of others) on the one hand and offense in a strict and specifically normative sense on the other. The latter refers to an 'objective condition' in the sense that the unpleasant mental state must actually be caused by wrongful (i.e. right-violating) conduct. These distinctions are essential for Feinberg's normative considerations concerning a possible 'offense principle' according to which certain offensive acts can legitimately be prohibited. Since I am not primarily interested in such normative questions in this article, I will refer to offense in the "strict sense of ordinary language" in the following.

[37] Fisher & Ramsey, "Art," 142.

context of the publication of the cartoons.[38] Some believers expressed their being offended in quite vivid comparisons: "It [the publication of the Muhammad cartoons] is like shoving pork down our throat,"[39] or, quite like Fisher and Ramsey's quotation of the newspaper correspondent,

> I would have felt less wounded if the object of ridicule were my own parents. And you know how hard it is to have bad things said about your parents, especially when they are deceased. But to have the Prophet scorned and abused this way, that was too much to bear![40]

But why is it that at least some believers experience certain instances of blasphemy as psychological violence? What are the conditions that make people especially vulnerable to such forms of injury? As I pointed out earlier, it is a characterising feature of psychological violence that inflicting mental injury can only succeed if the recipient of a potentially violent speech act cooperates in a specific sense. But in what way does a believer who is offended by a certain blasphemous act or artefact cooperate in the process of inflicting psychological violence?

   According to one view, which is advocated by liberal proponents of a strong notion of freedom of expression, this cooperation consists in an improper perception of certain acts or artefacts by believers. People who take offense at images like the Muhammad cartoons, it is said, fail to understand what it means to deal with religious symbols or practices in a satirical manner. They lack the cognitive and emotional competencies to constructively deal with challenges resulting from acts that denigrate their religion. Because of this, they are especially susceptible to offense to their religious sensibilities, and touchy when it comes to criticism of their religion—at least when it is not couched in a decent and discursive language. In the case of the Muhammad cartoons controversy the alleged susceptibility of Muslims to religious offense was interpreted as evidence that Muslims take their religion 'too seriously' and are not able to keep a critical distance to

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[38] Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?," in: Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, & Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 2009), 64–100, 74–75.

[39] Simon Weaver, "Liquid Racism and the Danish Prophet Muhammad Cartoons," *Current Sociology* 58.5 (2010), 675–692, 682.

[40] Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 75.

their religious commitments.[41] In that sense, the problem was seen as resulting from an improper reading practice on the side of believers.[42] Moreover, the cartoon controversy was construed as a conflict between an enlightened, modern, liberal, and secular 'West' and a backward, fundamentalist Muslim 'other.'[43] Analyses of the media treatment of the cartoon controversy in various European countries show that Muslims, who publicly voiced that they experienced the Muhammad cartoons as an assault on their religion, were not only construed as hyper-susceptible to offense and in need of a 'modern' and 'enlightened' reconstruction of their (religious) identity. Rather, they were taken as insufficiently integrated into liberal democratic societies, or even fiercely opposing liberal democracy and its normative foundations including freedom of expression, but in any case not as competent democratic citizens.[44]

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[41] Christian F. Rostbøll, "Autonomy, Respect and Arrogance in the Danish Cartoon Controversy," *Political Theory* 37.5 (2009), 623–648, 626.

[42] See Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 74.

[43] Frauke Miera & Valerie Sala Pala, "The Construction of Islam as a Public Issue in Western European Countries Through the Prism of the Muhammad Cartoons Controversy," *Ethnicities* 9.3 (2009), 383–408, 393.

[44] The tendency to construe opposition against the cartoons as evidence of an ostensible clash of civilizations and a fundamental incompatibility of liberal democracy and Islam was identified in an analysis of the media treatment of the debate about the cartoons in Denmark and France that was carried out by social scientists Carolina Boe and Peter Hervik (Carolina Boe & Peter Hervik, "Integration through Insult?," in: Elisabeth Eide, Risto Kunelius, & Angela Phillips (eds.), *Transnational Media Events: The Mohammed Cartoons and the Imagined Clash of Civilizations* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2008), 213–234). The interpretation of protests of believers against the publication of the Muhammad cartoons as expression of anti-democratic attitudes is remarkable inasmuch as the vast majority of Muslims and other opponents of the cartoons in Europe used perfectly legitimate means to express their discontent, including writing letters to the editor, demonstrating, or suing newspapers that had published the cartoons (see Boe & Hervik, "Integration," 214). This was emphasised by the culture editor of *Jyllands Posten*, Flemming Rose: "Since the Sept. 30 publication of the cartoons, we have had a constructive debate in Denmark and Europe about freedom of expression, freedom of religion and respect for immigrants and people's beliefs. Never before have so many Danish Muslims participated in a public dialogue – in town hall meetings, letters to editors, opinion columns and debates on radio and TV" (Flemming Rose, "Why I Published the Mohammad Cartoons," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2006). Nevertheless, various influential contributors to the debate conflated different forms of protest, both violent and non-violent, and understood all of them in light of an ostensible threat of an anti-democratic religious totalitarianism. One of several examples thereof is Ayaan Hirsi Ali's speech "The Right to Offend" that she delivered in Berlin in

This political interpretation may provide useful insights into dominant ideals of liberalism and democratic citizenship and their exclusionary potential.[45] However, besides its implicit but often insufficiently justified normativity, it is of limited use as an explanation of blasphemy as psychological violence, since it does not provide insights that help us to understand the feelings and experiences of believers who actually take offense at blasphemy.

Because of this, and to gain a better understanding of the deeper roots of the mental injury by which numerous believers respond to blasphemy, it is more promising to understand the mental injury that is inflicted by blasphemy as profound offense (Joel Feinberg). Profound offense, Feinberg points out, is a specific form of mental injury that results from a violation of norms, principles, and values that determine one's higher order sensibilities and hence one's personal identity. In the case of profound offense, "something offends *us* and not merely our senses or lower order sensibilities"[46] which is why profound offense is called deep, shattering, or serious. Furthermore, profound offense can result from the bare knowledge that a norm or value that is essential to one's personal identity has been violated; unlike in the case of other, less serious forms of unpleasant mental states (offensive nuisances) a person does not have to experience the offending act directly. Finally, Feinberg points out, people who are profoundly offended do not think of themselves as victims—despite their suffering an unpleasant mental state. Rather, profound offense is experienced at least partly as impersonal in the sense that the respective act is experienced as

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February 2006. In that speech, Hirsi Ali claims that the publication of the cartoons "has […] revealed the presence of a considerable minority in Europe who do not understand or will not accept the workings of liberal democracy. These people – many of whom hold European citizenship – have campaigned for censorship, for boycotts, for violence, and for new laws to ban 'Islamophobia'" (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, "The Right to Offend," speech delivered in Berlin, February 9, 2006, *NRC Handelsblad,* February 10, 2006). Remarkably, Hirsi Ali mentions ordinary means of civic participation in public debate and democratic processes in one breath with campaigns for violence, and she seems to link all forms of protest against the cartoons to anti-democratic attitudes.

[45] See Bert van den Brink, "Imagining Civic Relations in the Moment of Their Breakdown: A Crisis of Civic Integrity in the Netherlands," in: Anthony Simon Laden & David Owen (eds.), *Multiculturalism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 350–373, and Christoph Baumgartner, "Formelle und informelle Ausgrenzung in kulturell pluralen Gesellschaften," *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 50 (2009), 165–197.

[46] Feinberg, *Offense*, 58; emphasis in original.

offensive because it is considered wrong 'as such,' and not wrong because it makes a person suffer an unpleasant mental state.[47]

These aspects of profound offense can be identified in numerous statements of believers such as those quoted above. For the understanding of the conditions which make some people experience particular instances of blasphemy as psychological violence, it is especially important to consider the status of the object of blasphemy with respect to the personal identity of a believer. In view of Feinberg's considerations on profound offense it proves inadequate to speak of religion exclusively as a system of propositional beliefs that is or is not 'taken seriously' by a believer who assents to them, or who considers certain symbols especially venerable, even sacred, but still remains detached from them in any ontological sense. This has convincingly been shown by Saba Mahmood in her analysis of the relationship of devout Muslims to the prophet Muhammad.[48] In this relationship, Muhammad functions not primarily in a communicative sense (e.g. as messenger of the word of Allah) or as representation of something else (e.g. divine instructions). Rather, he serves as a model to which the devout Muslim tries to assimilate himself. More specifically, Mahmood points out, believers try to emulate Muhammad as much as they can (how he dressed, what he ate, how he spoke, etc.), and these "mimetic ways of realising the Prophet's behaviour are lived not as commandments but as virtues where one wants to ingest, as it were, the Prophet's persona into oneself."[49] From this results a 'relation of intimacy' in which the believer perceives his or her being as inextricably related to and grounded in Muhammad. Accordingly, Muhammad is essential for the identity of the believer not only in a cognitive or symbolic sense, but he is incorporated and embodied and hence a constitutive part of the believer.

Saba Mahmood develops her considerations with reference to Aristotelian philosophy, which enables her to grasp the specific kind of relationship between devout Muslims and Muhammad as an exemplary figure. For the understanding of other aspects that are important for the conditions of blasphemy as psychological violence and that have not been identified, so far, it is useful to turn to Harry Frankfurt's theory of caring.[50]

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[47] Ibid., 59.

[48] See Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 74–78.

[49] Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 75.

[50] For the following see Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and Harry G. Frankfurt,

According to Frankfurt, a person who cares about something guides herself by reference to what he cares about. He identifies himself with what he cares about and gives particular attention to the things related to it and directs his actions accordingly. This concerns not only cognitions (beliefs that something is important), nor is caring restricted to emotions or desires. Rather, a person's caring about something is constituted by cognitive, affective, and especially by volitional dispositions.[51] These dispositions determine to a large extent what sort of person somebody is. "A person who cares about something," Frankfurt points out, "is, as it were invested in it,"[52] that is his personal identity is determined by what he cares about. Because of this, the person's well-being is to a great extent dependent on whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced. Furthermore, a person can care about certain things so much and so wholeheartedly that it is impossible for him to act in a way that is inconsistent with what he cares about. In that case a person is, according to Frankfurt, subject to "volitional necessities." It is 'unthinkable' for the person to perform a certain action, even if he has the capacities to do it. He is unable to develop the will to make use of his own capacities, since otherwise he would betray the object of his caring, and hence himself.[53] Frankfurt illustrates the effect of volitional necessities by means of the famous declaration of (or rather attributed to) Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms: "Here I stand, I can do no other." This example shows that volitional necessities are rightly construed as limitations of a person's freedom (Luther *cannot* retract his writings), but are at the same time experienced as expressions of the will of the respective person himself.

  Although Harry Frankfurt conceptualises volitional necessities explicitly as necessities of the will, his theory can help us to gain a better understanding of why people can experience blasphemy as psychological violence. This becomes clear if we look at situations where people are forced to act against requirements of their own will. As an example, Frankfurt refers to

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Necessity, Volition, and Love (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Harry Frankfurt develops his theory of caring in the context of the philosophical debate about theory of action, especially autonomy and freedom of the will, whereas I am interested in emotional responses to blasphemy. However, since Frankfurt includes emotions in his theory, as well, it is possible to use his considerations on caring in my analysis.

[51] Frankfurt, *Importance*, 85.

[52] Ibid., 83.

[53] See ibid., 85–88 and Frankfurt, *Necessity*, 110–114.

Agamemnon at Aulis who, according to Greek mythology, was forced by the goddess Artemis to sacrifice either his daughter or the Greek army.

> Thus Agamemnon at Aulis is destroyed by an inescapable conflict between two equally defining elements of his own nature: his love for his daughter and his love for the army he commands. […] When he is forced to sacrifice one of these, he is thereby forced to betray himself. Rarely, if ever, do tragedies of this sort have sequels. Since the volitional unity of the tragic hero has been irreparably ruptured, there is a sense in which the person he had been no longer exists. Hence, there can be no continuation of *his* story.[54]

Of course the situation of a believer who is confronted with blasphemy is very different from Agamemnon's situation at Aulis. One important difference is that for the believer, unlike for Agamemnon, there is a way out that does not require him to betray what he wholeheartedly cares about. This way out consists in taking profound offense at blasphemy. In Harry Frankfurt's terminology, he cannot bring himself to overcome the force by which he is constrained to be profoundly offended and hence to experience certain instances of blasphemy as psychological violence. Thus, his 'cooperation' in the process of inflicting mental injury is not a matter of choice, but results from the fact that he wholeheartedly cares about his religion or specific parts of it; he 'can do no other' than to be profoundly offended if somebody vilifies what he cares about. If this option was precluded, and the believer would have to put up with blasphemy without being allowed to experience some kind of aversion against it, his situation was structurally similar to Agamemnon's situation at Aulis since both Agamemnon and the believer would be forced to betray something they care about, and hence themselves.[55] The political interpretation does not sufficiently take this into account if it suggests that believers who experience blasphemy as psychological violence lack certain competencies that are allegedly required in order to be a competent citizen of a liberal and pluralistic society. Such an approach for example to the debate about the Muhammad cartoons, but also to controversies about acts that are blasphemous for

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[54] Frankfurt, *Necessity*, 139.

[55] I do not say, of course, that the situation of a father who finds himself confronted with the necessity to choose between saving his daughter or his companions is comparable to the situation of believers who are confronted with blasphemy. My point is rather that there are structural similarities if we analyze both situations in light of Frankfurt's theory of caring.

followers of other religions not only disregards forms of religion that do not match with dominant forms of 'enlightened' or 'secularised' forms.[56] Beyond this, it exerts a normative disciplinary power that aims to direct the reader of blasphemous texts and the viewer of blasphemous images, films, etc., toward a specific way of life, even if this requires a repudiation of the form of religion that has hitherto been important for the respective person.[57]

5. Conclusion

In this article I have sought to show that blasphemy can be construed as violence in three different forms, and I identified conditions that bring about certain instances of blasphemy that take effect as specific forms of violence. The understanding of blasphemy as physical violence has proven to be dependent on very specific religious assumptions, such as the view that God punishes blasphemy and its toleration or the assumption of a strict connection between human deed and consequence in the sense of the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* that is known in Biblical Studies. This is different in the case of blasphemy as indirect intersubjective violence where blasphemy lowers believers in the eyes of their fellow citizens. Here, it is not even required that a believer knows about blasphemy, but blasphemy functions as a tool to produce and enforce negative stereotypes of followers of a particular religion. Such negative stereotypes tie in with existing prejudices and negative attitudes. Because of this, blasphemy takes effect as indirect intersubjective violence almost exclusively for members of religious groups that are already in a socially weak and marginalised position.

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[56] With the term 'secularised form of religion' I refer to an understanding that sees religion primarily as system of propositional beliefs. Religion here appears as a matter of choice and the primary relation of believers to their religion is assent. Phenomenal forms of religion, for instance rituals and scriptures are understood as inessential messages or signs and symbols that stand in for what 'really matters' (see Mahmood, "Religious Reasons," 71–74).

[57] See Judith Butler, "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood," in: Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, & Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 2009), 101–136, 119.

Although it at first glance seems to be structurally simple and plain to understand blasphemy as psychological violence—a person taking offense at blasphemous acts or artefacts—the conditions that make people especially vulnerable to this type of violence turn out to be relatively complex. An explanation that reduces the conditions that make blasphemy instances of psychological violence to improper reading practices and the lack of an 'enlightened' religious consciousness fails to adequately grasp the deeper roots and the kind of insult that some believers feel when they encounter blasphemous acts. Besides this, it intermingles explanation with normative political claims, often without making this explicit and without providing reasons for the normative claims that are included in it. As for the conditions under which believers experience blasphemy as psychological violence, it can be said that unlike in the case of blasphemy as indirect social violence, the social circumstances and the social standing of believers whose religious symbols or texts are scorned are not of primary importance in the case of blasphemy as psychological violence. Accordingly, socially well-established Christians can experience *Piss Christ* just as much as psychological violence as socially marginalised Muslims can experience the Muhammad cartoons as psychological violence. What is of major importance for the understanding of blasphemy as psychological violence is the status that religion has in the personal identity of believers. That believers can not only be annoyed, but also profoundly offended by blasphemy can be understood if religion is taken as something that is incorporated in the believers themselves. This is not possible if one construes religion exclusively as system of beliefs to which a person assents, and that remains submitted to an "index of doubt"[58] that makes the believer to a certain extent sceptical of his own religion. Rather, religion and religious symbols, texts, figures, practices, and so forth can be understood as objects of caring or even as grounds of volitional necessities in Harry Frankfurt's sense. Within such a framework blasphemy appears as the vilification and denigration of something that one really and wholeheartedly cares about and hence of an essential part of oneself. This is not only possible in view of something that is religious in the sense that it is related to a supernatural being or a notion of an afterlife. Somebody

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[58] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

can also care about a beloved person, about art, or political and moral ideals. Flemming Rose seems to know this when he points out that he is "offended by things in the paper every day: transcripts of speeches by Osama bin Laden, photos from Abu Ghraib, people insisting that Israel should be erased from the face of the Earth, people saying the Holocaust never happened."[59] This indicates that the conditions for experiencing blasphemy as psychological violence do not differ significantly from conditions that make people vulnerable in view of other forms of mental insult. In that sense, nothing is peculiar, 'un-enlightened,' or even fundamentalist about being profoundly offended by certain instances of blasphemy. Rather, it is a matter of what is really important to somebody, and of what a person wholeheartedly cares about.

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[59]   Rose, "Why I published."

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