

## Feature

# The Art of Blasphemy

Charles Pickstone on scandalous tendencies, old and new

The recent publication of a book entitled *Blasphemy: Art that offends* by S Brent Plate, associate professor of the visual arts at Texas Christian University, will rapidly assert itself as useful work of reference in the arena of art and Christianity. It contains lavish reproductions of many of the most controversial images of the last ten years in full colour, as well as a great range of Jewish, Christian and Islamic images and manuscripts from across the history of these faiths. Most of these pictures are well-described and explained in detailed captions, which form a parallel track to the actual text, sometimes illustrating points made in the text, sometimes simply standing on their own.

Readers will have their own favourites. I was pleased to see not only Maurizio Cattelan's infamous *La Nona Ora* (The Ninth Hour), the life-size figure of a Pope very similar to a recent Pontiff felled by a meteorite but still clinging to his crozier (which Plate explains as an image of humility) but also a piece by a Romanian artist, Ciprian Muresan, *The End of the Five Year Plan* which shows an Orthodox patriarch similarly afflicted – a piece which links the downfall of the Orthodox Christian Church to the failure of Soviet Communism. But also featured are infamous works such as Marcus Harvey's portrait of Myra Hindley made up of children's palm prints which was desecrated at the 'Sensation' exhibition in 1997, John Latham's *God is Great* which was removed from a Tate exhibition (see A&C45), mediaeval Books of Hours with graphic goings-on in the shrubbery, a Francis Bacon triptych, Michael Browne's accomplished oil painting of *Eric Cantona as Jesus Christ and the Manchester United Football Team* in the style of Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*, Sarah Lucas *Christ You Know It Ain't Easy* (her cigarette-covered crucifix based on her battle to give up smoking), a still from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and further film stills from Theo van Gogh's (who was murdered by an extremist) controversial film *Submission* that por-



tray abused women with verses from the Holy Quran painted on their skin.

Gilbert & George, however, would not agree to be included, as they do not consider their art to be blasphemous, even though their recent exhibition in London 'SONOFAGOD PICTURES' (see A&C46) prompted Ann Widdecombe to label the pictures 'blasphemous in the extreme, as [G&G] will find out when finally they stand before the Son of God'. (p. 55)

At once, however, simply reviewing this list of a few of the works illustrated in the book, the reader will be aware of the author's problem in writing a book about blasphemy: there is really

no such thing as a simple definition of blasphemy. So great a range of artworks across the years have been labelled blasphemous (and so many possibly more shocking works have not) that it is difficult to discover any single definition. Plate's principal argument is that in cases of blasphemy, context is all; almost always accusations of blasphemy are made for political ends (whether with a large or small p). In a sense, the book is a study in the deployment of power: whether the power of images to cause offence in the viewer, or the power of the artist who creates the images, or the power of the establishment (or of a group or groups

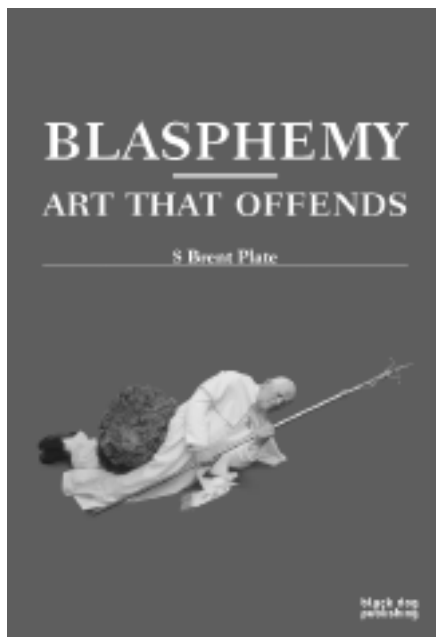
Sarah Lucas

*Christ You Know It Ain't Easy* 2003

Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London

within it) to use or abuse images to seek to gain control or influence. From the Bamiyan Buddhas, recently shelled to pieces by the Taliban in Afghanistan, to Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* which caused a storm in New York but not in London, (the opposite reaction to that elicited by the Myra Hindley picture) politics, he suggests, are more important than religion when it comes to labelling a work as blasphemous.

However, Plate duly does his best to give the reader an abbreviated account of blasphemy in the traditions of the three Abrahamic faiths (chapter 1) before going on to his real interest, 'The Power of the Image meets Religious and Political Power' (chapter 2). His thesis is further developed (chapter 3) by the observation that even in a secular society (following a remark he quotes from T S Eliot, to the effect that blasphemy has an anomalous position in the modern world, in that it is still important even though the modern world 'has for the most part ceased to be capable of exercising that activity or of recognising it') people are still eminently shockable; even secular men and women are capable of being aroused to accusations of blasphemy although they may have few religious beliefs themselves because, he suggests, they have transferred their passion from religious to secular values whose transgression may lead to outrage. The most obvious example of a secular object endowed with pseudo-religious symbolism is that of the flag, whose desecration, especially in the United States, provides endless scope for the secular blasphemer. Another obvious target (whose irony was not lost on viewers of recent TV news footage of a demonstration against the infamous 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons where protesters carried placards stating 'Death to Freedom of Expression') is that of freedom of expression itself, which in the eyes of many deeply religious people has become a *shibboleth*, especially when freedom of speech is linked to the permissiveness of the free market. One of the most shocking images in the book



is Alan Schechner's *Self Portrait at Buchenwald*, where the artist has superimposed an image of himself into a crowd of emaciated prisoners at a concentration camp – holding a can of diet coke.

The book also has a purpose. Since often, the author claims, blasphemy is part of a process of development – of 'moving the lines' that divide the sacred from the profane (terms the author finds particularly helpful in discussing the nature of the blasphemous) – while he would not wish to eliminate all difference between the sacred and the profane 'for that can only end in chaos', he would like to suggest 'that oppressive lines *can* be redrawn'. (Italics original.) Despite his claims of even-handedness, the author is clearly on the side of the liberals. This could be seen as a flaw.

The book is very accessible. With colour pictures on every page, a fairly basic level of explanation, for example, of non-Christian religions, and the frequent use of pull-quotes, its format is perhaps more that of a magazine than a text-book, and it could safely be recommended for (tough-minded) teenagers. (These latter should certainly try out the [www.christonthecrapper.com](http://www.christonthecrapper.com) website recommended on p. 142, which will allow them to send a 'blasphemy

card' to their friends, even if the humorous captions that accompany images appropriated from children's Bibles are, as the author admits, adolescent).

The style of the book is homely. A typical paragraph in a section entitled 'Modernity's repression' begins 'Yet, modernity can only move towards the future by repressing the past, at least in part, and we all know what happens then: the repressed eventually returns' – the repressed in this case being 'its [modernity's] other: religious revival movements'. It would be unfair to harp on about unsubstantiated generalisations such as these, of which the book is full and which this reviewer did find rather shocking, because I suspect that in a book about blasphemy a good author is not above playing shocking tricks upon his audience, to implicate his hypocrite-reader who might otherwise feel rather smugly superior.

If grist were needed for Plate's mill, Britain in recent months has seen a number of exhibitions which have run the gauntlet of blasphemy. Many of the Hogarth images at Tate Britain were of a great and life-affirming vulgarity; at Tate Liverpool, the ever-inventive Jake and Dinos Chapman showed the anxiety-provoking 'Bad Art for Bad People', while currently back at Tate Britain a much deadlier exhibition, *State Britain*, features Mark Wallinger's reconstruction of Brian Haw's sea of banners and signs that once graced Parliament Square in a permanent one-man demonstration. The one-kilometre demonstration exclusion zone around the Houses of Parliament is claimed to run through the middle of the exhibition, but no-one has yet been prosecuted. Gilbert & George at Tate Modern held court for a season and the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British art, Damien Hirst, (an *enfant* growing more middle-aged by the day, as Tracey Emin recently reported) has gained even more notoriety for himself by creating a multi-million pound gleaming skull out of platinum and 8,601 diamonds, based on an Aztec skull at the British Museum. None of



Damien Hirst  
*For the Love of God* 2007  
 Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd  
 Courtesy: Science Ltd and  
 Jay Jopling/White Cube (London)

these exhibitions appear to have caused much fuss – indeed, a country which can laugh at *Little Britain* has nothing much to fear from works such as these.

Hirst's vast oil paintings of human cancerous growths at the White Cube are perhaps reasonably shocking. Despite our increasingly familiarity with the disease, there is still something unsettling about cancer – the illness that used to be even more unmentionable than sexually transmitted diseases – and Hirst's paintings are undeniably repulsive, especially given their vitality and their generous use of paint and rich colour. Like a physiotherapist feeling for knotted muscle or a psychotherapist feeling for resist-

ance, so a good artist is often able to sense the knots in the psyche of his or her contemporaries, the painful areas where a sharp jolt will produce maximum effect.

Plate would no doubt argue that tender spots are the areas just coming into consciousness – where the line of demarcation between sayable and unsayable is in the process of moving forward. The demon cancer now becomes observable, depictable – and naming the demon may rob him of his power, as Moses holding up the brass serpent in the wilderness demonstrated to the children of Israel, an image that has often, from earliest Christian times, been used as a parallel to the crucifixion. (As Plate points out, it is

strange that Christianity should have been one of the religions keenest on protecting itself from blasphemy when St Paul makes so much of the fact that its founder died a blasphemous death on an accursed cross.)

The converse to this point, however, is that these knots in the psyche are often time-delimited. If an image gains its particular edge from transgression, what will happen to it once the particular energies that it taps for its effect have subsided? One wonders how many works of art across the years, which achieved a great impact when first seen, now lie dead as the particular resonance that first gave them life is now inaudible or the particular conflict resolved. A work such as Latham's *God is Great*, which unites a Bible, Quran and copy of the Hebrew Scripture – or Mounir Fatmir's *Les Connexions* which simply connects wires with crocodile clips to an Islamic textbook as if it were a homemade bomb – gain their energy from their times. Will they have life hereafter? Perhaps, if one lives for the present as one should, it does not matter.

finally, writers from George Bernard Shaw (quoted three times by Plate) to Sigmund Freud have pointed out that when art brings out the contents of society's repressed unconscious, the result may be shock – or it may be humour. The 'Hogarth' exhibition reminded viewers of the fine tradition of scurrilous humour of which today's political cartoonists are the contemporary exponents. (A compounding problem with the offensive Muslim cartoons in 2005 was that they were not particularly funny.) Hirst's current weighty canvasses and sculptures, for example, with their often ponderous pseudo-religious titles, may or may not endure. Hogarth's tribute to enduring human perversity and folly certainly will.

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Damien Hirst: 'Beyond Belief' is at White Cube, 48 Hoxton Square N1 and 25-26 Mason's Yard SW1, London 3 June – 7 July; Mark Wallinger: 'State Britain' is at Tate Britain 15 January – 27 August 2007.