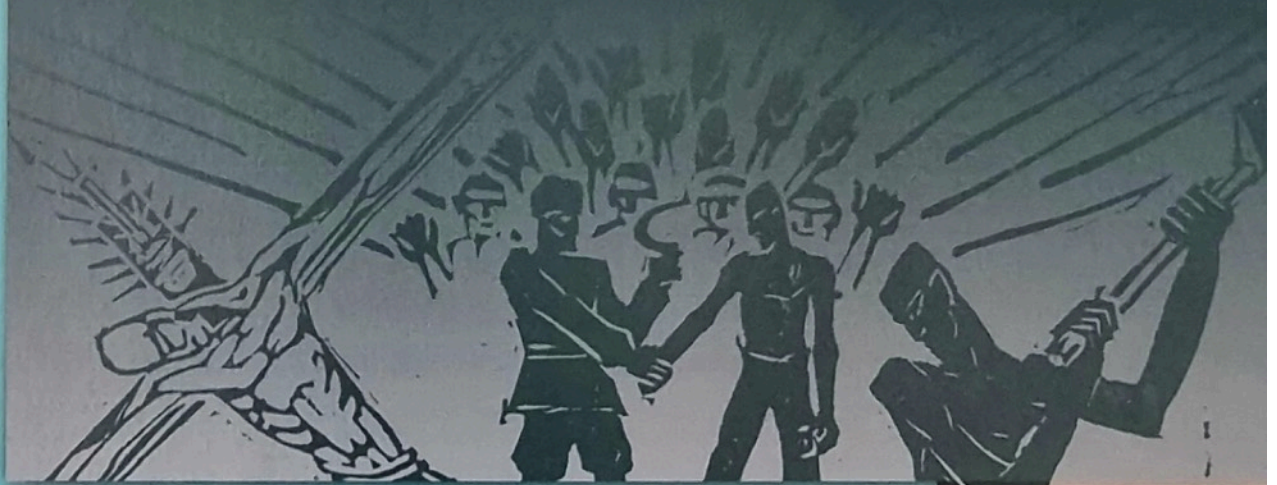


DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

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DEMYSTIFYING THE SACRED

BLASPHEMY AND VIOLENCE FROM THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION TO TODAY



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY
OF LIBERALISM AND FREETHOUGHT



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1 Blasphemy and Violence: Crossing Social Norms and Religious Boundaries in the Modern World



Fig. 1: Tom Herck's installation 'Holy Cow' in the former parish church of Kuttekoven in the Belgian province of Limburg, 2017. Despite its abysmal state, the building's function as a previous place of worship is evident. Photo by Erik Jamar. Kindly reproduced with permission of the artist.

An altar and stained-glass windows were the only religious symbols left in Kuttekoven's church. With the plaster on the walls displaying the results of a merciless humidity and without a pulpit, confessional chair or prayer bank in sight, the building bore all the hallmarks of desertion. In November 2017, however, this parish church in the eastern Belgian province of Limburg suddenly became a focal point for Catholic attention. The reason for this sudden interest was an installation that artist Tom Herck had placed in the nave.¹ It consisted of a mas-

¹ "Holy Cow (2017)," Website of Tom Herck, accessed on November 16, 2020, <http://www.tomherck.com/holy-cow-2017>.

sive basin measuring over eighty square metres filled with five thousand litres of a milky substance. Over the tub hung a crucified cow – the plaster cast of a real animal – with its heart pointing forward, creating a visual echo of images of the Sacred Heart; the legs of the cow were crossed and its head faced upwards, mimicking depictions of Christ on the crucifix. Responding to criticism, Herck declared his work to be a critique of modern consumerism and the “waste in our society”.² The happy cow frequently featured in the food industry’s fancy marketing campaigns had made way for a besieged animal, emblematic of the destruction involved in industrial livestock farming. Meanwhile, the enormous surplus production of dairy, the infamous “milk lakes” that were an eerie by-product of the European Union’s generous agricultural subsidies.

For all the artist’s efforts to tie his installation to ethical questions about animal welfare and the environment, the religious implications of ‘Holy Cow’ were evident. The decaying building, the dead animal and the slowly evaporating milk-like substance read as an analogy of religious decline in contemporary Belgium. Yet whilst secularisation was from a Church perspective something to be lamented, it did not offend. Herck’s appropriation of the crucifix for socio-political commentary was a different matter. The diocese of Hasselt argued that the sacred symbol had been defiled by the display of a cow “at the place where Christ hung on the cross”. That the artist had launched the project aged thirty-three, the same age at which Christ had died, added insult to injury. Diocesan officials called the artwork “harmful” and “derisive,” whilst others saw in it “a satanic image and a disgusting insult to God and to Catholicism.”³

In the absence of blasphemy legislation in Belgium, some went further.⁴ Father Eric Jacqmin from the ultraconservative Society of Saint Pius X staged daily

² “Katholiek protest tegen ‘satanische koe’ in Kuttekoven,” *Het Belang van Limburg*, November 19, 2017, accessed November 16, 2020, https://www.hbvl.be/cnt/dm20171119_03194455. The motive of commercialisation also inspired Andres Serrano’s photograph ‘Immersion (Piss Christ)’ from 1987, which caused believers to attack the artwork. Donald Brook, “Urinating to Windward,” *Artlink* 18, no. 1 (1998): 13.

³ “Katholiek protest”.

⁴ Belgium has never known anti-blasphemy legislation. Although the Sovereign Decision of 23 September 1814, taken by King William of the Netherlands, had criminalised “ridiculing religion,” the Belgian Provisional Government decreed on October 16, 1830 to cancel every law curtailing freedom of expression; many saw this as the *de facto* liquidation of William’s erstwhile decision. The deterioration of Church-State relations around 1860 saw a number of cases still brought to Belgian courts before, in 1863, the Court of Cassation officially nullified the Sovereign Decision of 1814. Bram Delbecq, *De lange schaduw van de grondwet: perswetgeving en persmisdrijven in België* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2012), 167–170.



Fig. 2: Destroyed Installation ‘Holy Cow’ in Kuttekoven church, 2017. The graffiti on the wall includes religious references and antisemitic symbols; the words “Rex Vaincra” refer to a far-right Catholic and nationalist party active in Belgium during the years 1935–1945. Photo by Tom Herck. Kindly reproduced with permission of the artist.

protests at Kuttekoven’s church. On November 18, an act of arson was committed at a nearby chapel that housed another artwork by Herck; three days later, Father Eric and right-wing extremist Robin Vandenberghe smashed a window to gain access to the church to cut the rope on which the plaster cow hung; on the night of December 1, Vandenberghe and four friends destroyed the legs of the cow, created a hole in its stomach and poured acid in it. They also sprayed several religious and antisemitic references onto the church wall, including celebrations of Christ, the motto ‘Vive la Croix!’ and a swastika underneath the artist’s name. Father Eric later defended his actions by querying the artistic value of “art [that brings] no beauty, but only wants to insult and hurt”.⁵ Together with the other five assailants, he was subsequently put on trial for the destruction of both Kuttekoven church and the installation ‘Holy Cow’ as well as for arson.

⁵ “Ultrakatholieken veroordeeld voor vernieling Holy Cow,” *De Standaard*, June 23, 2021, accessed on July 10, 2021, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210623_96186544.

In June 2021, the court of Tongeren labelled the men's behaviour an example of "religious fundamentalism," handing out sentences of up to sixty hours community service and 400 Euro fines.⁶

'Holy Cow' is part of a long line of artistic interventions for which their supposedly blasphemous nature has invited legal sanction, public censure or even physical violence.⁷ During the 1790s, the city of Rome saw French artists with Jacobin predilections mock religious processions; after the papal restoration, officials prosecuted these actions which they regarded as a political insurrection and religious offence in one.⁸ A century later, a painting of young Jesus at the Temple was scorned for depicting the Messiah as a beggar boy, dirty and with dark features, pressing the artist to repaint the image. By giving Jesus light skin and blonde hair, Max Liebermann, an artist of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, yielded to antisemitic charges packed as blasphemy accusations. In the late-twentieth century, publication of *The Satanic Verses* led to death threats against its author, British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. It also prompted real violence, including riots and the murder of the book's Japanese translator – actions ostensibly legitimated by the fatwā that the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had issued against all those involved in the book's publication.

Although these cases share artistic agency, they illuminate a different relationship between offences against the sacred (including blasphemy) and acts of retaliation (including violence). The havoc that the colony of French artists in Rome wreaked on Catholic ritual and imagery was part of a broader revolutionary turmoil, with attacks on God and his worldly representatives echoing ideological antagonism and purification attempts on a grand scale. Blasphemy in this case accompanied a more comprehensive culture of violence. By contrast, the accusations levied at Liebermann drew on anger at the injurious way in which the painter was said to have depicted Christ. Here, the faithful both internalised and described the hurt stemming from the impact of blasphemy as a spe-

⁶ Whereas the charge of destruction was upheld, that of arson was dropped. "Voor de een is het kunst, voor de ander provocatie," *De Standaard*, May 27, 2021, accessed on July 10, 2021, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210526_97643578.

⁷ For blasphemy in art see, e.g., Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias, eds., *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008); Roberto Cuppone and Ester Fuoco, *Blasphemia: il teatro e il sacro* (Turin: Celid, 2019); S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

⁸ For this and following examples see chapters by Marco Emanuele Omes, Christoffer Leber and Manfred Sing in this book.