

BLASPHEMY By T. A. Jackson

"And then came one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls, and spake with me saying, Come hither, I will show thee the judgment of the great harlot that sitteth upon many waters: with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication."—Revelation, xvi.

It is just as well that we should remember that there are other things than "sedition" which will secure one board and lodging in one of His Majesty's Temperance Hotels. There is "blasphemy"—for which a man is now serving a sentence of nine months hard labour: a sentence which the Appeal Court refused to alter, on the grounds that "blasphemy was a most serious crime."

If, however, you ask what, exactly, constitutes the crime of blasphemy, you are left sadly to seek. True, there is a "Blasphemy Law"—but although it was passed as long ago as the time of William III., it has never been used. Those who, since that time, have been indicted for this offence, have not been prosecuted under this statute. They have suffered under the "common unwritten law of the land," which has, at any rate, one great advantage over the other sort (from the Governmental point of view) that nobody quite knows just what is or is not penalised thereby.

The sort of things one says when one treads upon a tack (like the things which one would like to say to the foreman) may be blasphemous; but if action is taken against them it must be under the "Town Police Clauses Act" and the sections thereof referring to the use of "profane or obscene language" in a public place. In these cases of outbreaks of "langwidge," the worst that can happen to you is 40s. or fourteen days. The law gives every encouragement to enterprise in the ever popular art of cursing and imprecation; but in doing so abates not one jot or tittle of its righteous indignation at the "serious crime of blasphemy."

You may be in your speech so foul that the cabbages for miles around turn yellow; you may use terms so terse and in combinations so turgid that experienced police inspectors fall into swoons and sergeant-majors perish of the spleen, and still be innocent of blasphemy as the law defines it.

Contrariwise you may use words of Addisonian purity chosen with a taste that would secure the approval of Henry James and still find yourself "jugged" for this appalling offence.

Let me expound.

According to the statute of William III. above referred to "blasphemy" consisted in (a) asserting that there were more gods than one; (b) denying the existence of God; (c) denying the truth or the divine authority of the Books of the Old and New Testaments, and bringing the same into disbelief among the common people.

While this represented, no doubt with accuracy, the state of the prevailing opinion at the time of its passage, it at the same time would be quite unworkable nowadays, and has been so for the better part of a century. The Empire holds in high honour people who believe in a lot more gods than one. Works like the learned and voluminous *Encyclopaedia Biblica* exist to demonstrate that the Scriptures can only be understood, and rightly appreciated by those who recognise that their origin is human—much too human in some cases. Men who not only deny in long and learned volumes the existence of any such God as conceived by the legislators of the days of William of Orange, but who, notwithstanding, have held high place and position in the State, can be counted by the score.

In fact, it is safe to say that nineteenth-twentieths of the ordinary output of the printing presses in Britain in 1922 (particularly that of the theological publishers) would have been condemned by these our "Revolutionary fathers" to be burned by the common hangman and its authors to be whipped like bawds at the cart's tail.

None the less for that, people can still manage to get into gaol for blasphemy and judges can still show that in sentencing the delinquents they are executing "the law" which existed long before the parents of our Revolutionary Fathers entered upon their conjugal enterprises.

In the days of Cobbett it was accounted blasphemy to deny either of the points of doctrine held to be essential by the State Church. It was (as in the case of Hone and others) held by some lawyers to be blasphemous to indulge in parodies of the Church of England liturgy.

In these days, when nobody knows what the Church of England regards as essential to its faith—(the church which, as Marx long ago noted, would far sooner pardon an attack upon 38 of its 39 articles than one upon one-thirty-ninth of its income)—the legal formula is that anything in the Christian doctrine may be questioned, provided that it be done with "due gravity and propriety." Judges take the view that persons of Christian belief are protected by law from anything which is calculated to cause them pain or shock their feelings.

Observe! Only Christians (within the meaning of the law) have this privilege. You may mock and deride the Book of Mormon to your heart's content, you may cast any aspersion you will upon the memory of Joseph Smith, and do whatsoever disparagement you please to the repute of Brigham Young. You may, if it so please you, describe the whole church of the Latter Day Saints as a conspiracy for sanctifying lechery and venerity, and be free from any fears on the score of Blasphemy. You may ostentatiously fry pork sausages next door to a pious Jew on Black Fast Day, and if he breaks your windows he will be unable to plead that your performance was calculated to give pain to his religious feelings. You may call all the inhabitants of India "benighted heathen," and insult them by raising subscriptions to provide them with the second-hand exhortations of mis-educated missionaries. All this you may do and more—and the blasphemy law will touch you not.

More than that, if you are a Christian you may, on Christian grounds, do your best to drive your fellow Christians of another sect into paroxysms of fury. If you are with Protestants in a city with a large Catholic population, you may (if there are enough of you to make it safe) exercise at once your lungs and your piety by roaring (to the tune of "Kind Words Will Never Die"), "Hell rip and roast the Pope! roast the Pope!! roast the Pope!!! and you blaspheme not. Your privilege as a Christian it is to say just whatever you feel is most calculated to drive into a frenzy anybody vile enough to be addicted to anything else—especially Communism!

* * *

Blasphemy prosecutions have their history.

Where printed matter is called in question the offence is always urged against cheap and popular publications—never against expensive works. Some of these latter, as in the case of Swinburne's "Songs Before Sunrise," were not only likely but designed to insult whatever feeling a Christian might be supposed to possess, yet in no case were they ever prosecuted. The offence was not so much in attacking Christianity, but doing so in such a way that the "common people" were thereby influenced to hold it in disrespect.

It is there that we find the secret of "blasphemy" prosecutions. They are not instituted to prevent angry or ill-tempered theologians from starting a pogrom, nor to prevent conflict between rival sects (as is doubtless possible in a country like India). They are and always have been an adjunct to the police machinery for coercing all who exhibit a tendency to break away from the discipline and control of the ruling class and their state.

This fact is borne out by an analysis of the records of prosecutions. Prior to the French Revolution there were very few cases on record—not for want of unbelievers. The famous case of Thomas Aikenhead, an Edinburgh student aged 19, who was hanged for blasphemy in William III.'s time (a case which falls somewhat outside our purview as coming under Scottish Law) is a conspicuous exception.

With the fall of the Bastille and the rise of the Jacobins commenced a counter-revolutionary scare in Britain, and an outbreak of prosecutions for both sedition and blasphemy. With the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and the stirring of popular

unrest that thereupon ensued followed a fresh outbreak of attacks upon popular freedom of utterance. After a lull with the rise of Chartism came another outbreak, which died down as the Chartist movement faded away. From 1852 to 1883 there were no prosecutions, and many deemed that the "law" had become obsolete. Then, when popular attention had been attracted by Bradlaugh's Radicalism, the newly active Socialism, and the unemployed agitation, came a fresh batch of prosecutions—in this case specially aimed at the destruction of Bradlaugh, who, however, escaped unscathed. A lull followed until twenty years later they recommenced, being especially frequent between 1911 and 1913—years of popular unrest.

It is not to be argued that the "Blasphemers" were in all cases politically revolutionary. In many, if not the majority, of cases they were not. But they were all men and women of popular appeal who exercised an agitating influence (or were regarded as encouraging agitation) among the proletariat.

It is for this that they were prosecuted and subjected to savage sentences. It is always a crime to wean the workers from their adoration of the things the Boss class sees fit to set up for worship.

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