

Offending the Sacred:
Blasphemous Images and Religious Iconoclasm in Contemporary Western Culture

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Iconoclasm has shown to be one of the most debated and inspiring subject of analysis in recent years. The multiplication of studies on the topic arises from the diffusion of contemporary iconoclastic acts of global resonance, directly or indirectly involving the West.¹ The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001² and the Muhammad cartoons controversy, which began after the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 editorial cartoons on Muhammed in September 2005,³ represent two of the main episodes showing the contemporary nature of the problem. These examples also reflect the close relationship iconoclasm and religion have. Tied to political reasons, iconoclasm moved by religious motivations seems to have actually strengthened. The destruction of artworks and of cultural heritage sites by the Islamic State and the terroristic attacks to the satiric journal *Charlie Eβδο* in January 2015, after a new publication of editorial cartoons on Muhammed, are the two most recent and relevant examples of religious iconoclasm the West has been directly confronted with. These events have led the West to question its distinctive values: from the respect of cultural diversity to the universal importance of cultural heritage, from the democratic recognition of the autonomy of artistic expression to the legitimacy of religious satire. Two issues seem to have been particularly debated: the identification of iconoclasm and vandalism, as a direct consequence of the opposition between destructive ignorance and creative enlightenment;⁴ and the freedom of expression as opposed to blasphemy.

Other relevant cases connecting the problem of the offence to religion with iconoclastic acts have affected the West even more directly. In October 2011, some French Catholics burst into the stage of the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris to stop the performance of the pièce *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*, by Italian director Romeo Castellucci. At the heart of the case was a scene showing the face of Christ - a reproduction of the *Salvator Mundi*'s face painted by Antonello da Messina - being hit with excrements and covered by the words 'You are not my Shepherd'. Demonstrations against the play in France were

¹ Stacy Boldrick and othe. (eds.), *Striking Images, Iconoclasm Past and Present* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013); Kristine Kolrud and Marina Prusac (eds.), *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014). See also Anne L. McClanan and Jeffrey Johnson (eds.), *Negating the Image. Case Studies in Iconoclasm* (Burlington: Ashgate), 2005.

² See Jens Braarvig, "Iconoclasm-Three Modern Cases," in Kolrud and Prusac, *Iconoclasm from Antiquity*, 153-170.

³ See Risto Kunelius and othe. (eds), *Reading the Mohammed Cartoon Controversy. An International Analysis of Press Discourses on Free of Speech and Political Spin* (Bochum: Working Papers in International Journalism, 2007); Jamal J. Elias, "The Taliban, Bamiyan, and Revisionist Iconoclasm," in Boldrick, *Striking Images*, 145-163.

⁴ Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 13-20.

followed by public protests in Italy. Catholic organizations and Church authorities called the play ‘blasphemous’, identifying the violation of the image of Christ with an offence to the sacred Person of Jesus and to Christian religion. On the opposite hand, various representatives of the civil society defended the play, claiming the freedom of the artistic expression.

In 1989, Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* was the target of a defamatory campaign, particularly sustained by American senators Jess Helms and Alphonse d’Amato. Serrano’s work is a photograph reproducing a plastic crucifix submerged in a glass with the artist’s urine. In 1997, during a retrospective of Serrano’s work at the National Gallery of Victoria, a visitor wrenched the photograph from the wall and kicked it. Few days later, a youth hammered the work. In 2011, the photograph was vandalized by Christian protesters while on display at the exhibition *Je crois aux miracles*, in Avignon, France. In 2015, the Associated Press removed the image of the work from its image library after refusing to publish the cartoon mocking Muhammed that led to the *Charlie Ebdoo* attacks.

In 1999, when the exhibition *Sensation* opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Chris Ofili’s painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* caused an intense debate.⁵ The painting represents a black Madonna on a yellow and orange background, employing mixed media: the use of elephant dung and collaged pornographic images among them originated the controversy. New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani brought a court case against the museum, which, opposing to Giuliani’s claims, won it appealing to the First Amendment. Some months later, the work was damaged by an elderly visitor, who smeared white paint over its surface, calling the image ‘blasphemous’.⁶ In September 1999, after the work had been restored, Scott LoBaido, an artist who accused Ofili’s painting of ‘Catholic bashing’, was arrested for throwing horse manure at the museum. In 2000, a planned exhibition of the picture at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra was cancelled.⁷

These cases lead to examine the problem of blasphemy and religious iconoclasm in contemporary Western culture starting with some questions: is it possible to speak of a proper religious iconoclasm in the contemporary West? What is the place of blasphemy and

⁵ The case was deeply analysed by William John Thomas Mitchell, “The Violence of Public Art: Do the Right Thing,” in William John Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125-144.

⁶ S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy. Art That Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing), 2006, 48.

⁷ Edward Scheer, “Recomposing the Social Drama: Myra’s Olympic Snafu,” in *MISperformance: Essays in Shifting Perspectives*, ed. Marin Blažević and Lada Čale Feldman (Ljubljana: Maska, Institute for Publishing, Production and Education, 2014), 157-170.

iconoclasm in contemporary Western culture? How do iconoclastic acts inspired by religious motivations contribute to the understating of contemporary Western culture?