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Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History

David Nash

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Blasphemy--the denial or denigration of God--has a long history. Jesus was tried for blasphemy. Early Christians felt that the Jews in taking such action were themselves guilty of it. But it is not a story confined to the remote past. The publication in 2005 of 12 cartoons in a Danish newspaper linking the prophet Mohammed to terrorism sparked outrage in the global Islamic community. And that was not an instance of blasphemy intruding itself upon a Western society unused to such issues within Christianity. In many societies blasphemy remained an offence in law and the prosecution of artistic productions profaning the sacred was still a possibility.

David Nash's new study focuses on the development of blasphemy in the Christian world. Tracing the subject from the Middle Ages to the present, he outlines the history of blasphemy as a concept, from a species of heresy to modern understandings of it as a crime against the sacred and individual religious identity. Investigating its appearance in speech, literature, popular publishing and the cinema, he disinters the likely motives and agendas of blasphemers themselves, as well as offering a glimpse of blasphemy's victims. In particular, he seeks to understand why this seemingly medieval offence has reappeared to become a distinctly modern presence in the West.

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