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Heavens, that's utterly offensive

Seventy years ago T.S. Eliot declared that blasphemy was dead. How wrong he was, says Richard Morrison

Few academics need bodyguards. But if I were the Texan university professor S. Brent Plate, I would be looking into the cost of hiring some muscle, at least while his brave new book *Blasphemy: Art That Offends* (Black Dog Publishing) is in the news.

For a start, its illustrations include dozens of the most notorious religious or anti-religious artworks of our time. They range from Maurizio Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* (Pope John Paul II felled by a meteorite, made in 1999, *right*) and Renée Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (the black woman artist, gloriously naked, taking Christ's place in a reworking of Leonardo's famous tableau) to a brief glimpse of those Danish newspaper cartoons that crudely lampooned Muhammad and led to worldwide protests and 140 deaths.

But as well as reprinting so many images that caused indignation, Plate does something even more useful. He provides a lucid, reasoned account of how different cultures define and react to allegedly "blasphemous" art.

Two of his main points seem especially important. The first is that a powerful image may send out a completely different message from the one intended. As he points out, many famous satires of religious scenes were intended not as critiques of religion itself, but of its crass commercialisation. But that hasn't stopped believers from crying blue murder. He cites a droll short film by Rik Swartzwelder and Benjamin Hershleder called *The McPassion*, which (mimicking the merchandising of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*) presents the teachings, trial and Crucifixion of Jesus as a commercial for a fast-food chain, replete with a "McLoaves and Fish Sticks Meal Deal". It was hilarious to some, but grossly offensive to others. Does that mean that blasphemy, like beauty, is always in the eye of the beholder? Plate leaves us to ponder that point.

Even more thought-provoking, perhaps, is his other main point. It's that supposedly tolerant, "post-religious" Western democracies also have their "gods", and are just as liable to declare certain images "blasphemous" if they seem to treat these totems with disrespect. He notes the uproar over Alan Schechner's *Self Portrait at Buchenwald*, which digitally interpolated a can of Coke into the hand of a concentration-camp inmate, and was thus regarded as blaspheming the sacred status of Holocaust victims. "Modern liberal societies redefine rather than banish the sacred, in spite of their best wishes."

Back in the 1930s, T. S. Eliot told his readers that they were living in a world from which religion had so far retreated that "blasphemy is impossible". How wrong can you get? Today it's hard to think of an abstract subject that is more newsworthy, for all the wrong reasons. Plate's book will certainly make its readers think more deeply about their own prejudices. Unfortunately, it's unlikely to be read by those who could benefit most.

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