Chapter 14

Religious and ideologically motivated taboos

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14.1 Introduction

The Latin proverb *cuius regio, eius religio*, which may be loosely translated ‘whoever is in power imposes their preferred religion’, precisely captures the correlation between power and religion. We might usefully revise the Latin proverb to *cuius regio, eius idealogia* (whoever is in power imposes their preferred ideology) because religions are ideologies originally motivated by a creation myth that typically involves metaphysical beings and a belief that life on earth is preparation for a life (or lives) after death; non-religious ideologies focus on social and political life in the material world. Ideologies (and therefore religions) routinely lay claim to moral rectitude through statements that are professed (and too often believed) to present the ultimate truth and so inform social hypotheses, community practices, and political realities. Ideologies become manifest instruments of power. In this essay I shall focus on religious taboos and make only occasional reference to comparable taboos in non-religious ideologies.

*Taboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). All ideological taboos arise from perceived traducing of dogma, and/or insult to revered and/or intimidating persons, institutions, and objects. Perhaps the most heinous offence is heresy: the rejection of what some sect takes to be the orthodox teaching of the ideology. Believers in one ideology are heretical with respect to others: thus schisms arise in the Abrahamic faiths between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; between Catholic and Protestant; between Sunni and Shia; between Salafi and Sufi; between Leninist and Trotskyist; between communist and anarchist; and so forth. Apostates, who put aside one ideology, typically to embrace another, are ipso facto heretical and subject to sanction. For one example, in Pakistan, a young Christian, Augustine Ashiq ‘Kingri’ Masih converted to Islam in order to marry his sweetheart; shortly after his marriage he reconverted to Christianity for which

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2 I am using *sect* to mean an ideological group which claims to possess unique and privileged access to the truth or salvation, and that ‘their committed adherents typically regard all those outside the confines of the collectivity as “in error”’ (Wallis 1975: 133)
apostasy he was sentenced to death in 2000. Incidentally, as a guard against heresy, there is a
general taboo on ‘marrying out’, i.e. there are strong social constraints, and even laws,
against marrying someone from another faith. It is usual for one of the pair to convert to the
religion of the other before the marriage can be performed. Children of the couple are then
raised with the one faith of both parents.

For many centuries in many places, witches were supposed to serve the Devil, often in the
form of a different religion or religious sect; pour encourager les autres they were executed
like heretics. Various Christian authorities tried more than 100,000 Europeans for witchcraft
between 1400 and 1750 and about 50% of them were executed, mostly by burning, in public
spectacles intended to frighten people into toeing the official line. ‘The prosecution of
witches in a religiously divided area served … as an alternative to the prosecution of heretics’
(Levack 2016: 116). In Britain and elsewhere blasphemy was punishable by burning up until
the end of the 17th century; however, beliefs modified after the 1648 Peace of Westphalia
ended the wars of religion (see Leeson and Russ 2017) and since then, many indictments for
blasphemy could equally well have been for heresy. For example, in 1750 Baptist shoemaker
Richard Phillips was accused and convicted of ‘being moved and seduced by the instigation
of the Devil, and contriving and intending to scandalize the true and Christian Religion
within this Kingdom … and also to blaspheme the Person, Wisdom, Omnipotence, and
Majesty of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and also to scandalize and villify the Church of
England’ (Phillips 1750: 3). Phillips supposedly said that the Virgin Mary was a whore, Jesus
was an imposter, all that go to the Church of England shall be damned, that he (Phillips)
would blow up the parish church with the Bishop of Gloucester in it, and lastly that ‘The
Baptism of Infants was no more avail than to christen a Puppy or a Kitten’ (because infants
are too young to understand what is happening). Although Phillips claimed to be the victim
of malicious falsehoods, he was fined one mark (more than half a guinea) and given two years
in prison. So blasphemy – impious irreverence – came to be penalized by fines and/or
imprisonment.

More germane to the linguistic topic of this volume than heresy and apostasy are the
offences of blasphemy and its sidekick profanity. The Ancient Greek roots of blasphemy
combine blas– ‘evil, profane’ with –phemos ‘speaking’; the Latin roots of profane, combine
pro– ‘before, outside of’ with –fanus ‘temple’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines
blasphemy as ‘Profane speaking of God or sacred things; impious irreverence’; profanity is
‘irreverent, blasphemous, ribald; impious, irreligious, wicked.’ So the difference is that
blasphemy vilifies or ridicules the deity, the deity’s family, divine mouthpieces like prophets
and the priesthood, divine scriptures; profanity uses religious terms – such as the name of the
deity etc. – without blasphemous intent, yet with careless irreverence. Heresy is interpretable as blasphemy and it may give rise to profanity. Blasphemy is treason against god. Treason against a non-religious ideology is a heresy. After a Stalinist show trial in 1953, Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, former First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, was executed for treasonous acts such as ‘the undermining of Worker’s and Peasant’s Soviets’ (Hogan 1955: 410). Insulting the King of Thailand is lèse-majesté (treason or blasphemy) that in 2017 caused Vichai Thepwong to be initially sentenced to 70 years in jail, reduced to 35 when he pleaded guilty.

Religious taboos on the unclean govern constraints on what can be eaten and drunk, how to manage bodily effluvia, sexual behaviour, social outcasts, the sick, and the dead; they are primarily behavioural rather than linguistic and therefore marginal to our concerns in this volume. For example, Orthodox Jewish law forbids men from watching women dance lest they be sexually aroused. In December 2017 Israeli singer-songwriter Yonatan Razel was photographed with the tape plastered across his eyes while singing and playing the keyboard at his women-only concert in Jerusalem. On September 18, 2017, someone posted captioned images showing a group of young Hasidic Jewish males wearing blindfolds at an airport in order to prevent them seeing immodestly clad women (https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/70uwco). Reposted by Being Liberal on FaceBook, it provoked a recollected instance of shomer negiah – for a Jewish person who observes the taboo against touching a member of the opposite sex. (There is a similar taboo observed by some Muslims.)

When an Orthodox Jewish man entered her office a woman reports:

I reached out to shake his hand and he said to me, “I won’t touch you, you’re a woman and you’re unclean ... but it’s nice to meet you. (Pat Kavanagh, FaceBook January 2, 2018)

Touching something unclean requires ritual cleansing mikveh (מקווה) – immersion in water to restore ritual purity after menstruation, childbirth, and ejaculation, or as preparation for burial. Similar cleansing rituals are quite common across the globe.

14.2 Taboos on the name of a god

Personal names are taboo among some peoples on all the inhabited continents, and on many of the islands between them. The fear is that malevolent magic can be performed when another person is in possession of one’s true name in the same way it can be wrought on one’s faeces, spittle, nail parings, hair clippings, blood, etc.

[I]t was believed that he who possessed the true name possessed the very being of god or man, and could force even a deity to obey him as a slave obeys his master. (Frazer 1911: 389)
In ancient Egyptian mythology, Isis gained power over the sun god Ra because she persuaded him to divulge his name. In the European folktales about the evil character variously called Rumpelstiltskin (Germany, parts of England), Terry Top (Cornwall), Tom Tit Tot (Suffolk), Trit-a-Trot (Ireland), Whuppity Stoorie (Scotland), and Ricdin-Ricdon (France), the discovery of the villain’s name destroyed his power. To utter a tabooed name is to assault the owner of the name, and requires sanctions to be brought against the offender. In some societies it seems to have been acceptable to know a personal name provided the name was never spoken; for instance in many Austronesian societies the names of affines and some cross-kin may not be used. In some, no two people may bear the same name. In several Australian languages, those whose personal names have been tabooed – usually because of the death of someone bearing the same or a very similar name – are addressed as No Name (e.g. nyapurr). Not only are personal names tabooed: in some societies even the names of communities were not divulged to strangers.

When we say of Jane Doe’s son Sam that Sam’s a real Doe, we are speaking as if the surname itself carries the genes that make Sam a chip off the old block. The same is true for phrases like make a name for oneself, have a good name, bring one’s name into disrepute, clear one’s name, and so forth. Even today we speak and act as if the name carries the properties of the name bearer. And names do in fact have some such force: that is why proper names enter the general lexicon, sometimes in direct reference to an original celebrated name-bearer as in the case of, e.g. He’s a little Hitler (spoken of, for instance, Sam Doe). So, as Shakespeare reminds us:

> Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
> Is the immediate jewel of their souls.  
> Who steals my purse steals trash; ’tis something, nothing;  
> ’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands;  
> But he that filches from me my good name  
> Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
> And makes me poor indeed. (Shakespeare Othello III.iii.155)

In ancient Rome, the emperor or senate could have an individual’s property seized, his name erased, and his statues defaced in a practice later labelled damnatio memoriae ‘condemnation of memory’. A very similar practice was adopted by the Thought Police in George Orwell’s 1984 (I,i): ‘Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: vaporized was the usual word.’
What applies to the names and naming of ordinary folk applies a fortiori to gods and to rulers, because any threat to their power endangers the entire society they dominate, even the whole of creation. Taboos on the names of gods seek to avoid metaphysical malevolence by counteracting possible blasphemies and profanities that arouse their terrible wrath.

And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour? And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret? (Judges 13:17-18)3


The Hebrew original reads ‘שם יהוה’ Shem YHWH ‘the name YHWH’ because it was blasphemous to name the god of the Jews and his cohorts. The Jewish god’s name was written without diacritics יהוה YHWH and read out as אדני Adonai meaning ‘my Master, Lord’ – a euphemism carried over into Christianity for both addressing and naming God and Jesus Christ. In Exodus 3:14, when Moses asks for the name of the person speaking to him from the burning bush,

God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM [יהיה אֲשֶׁר יְהָיָה]: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM [יהי, ‘Ehyeh] hath sent me unto you.

Whence it appears that God’s name is ‘Ehyeh /ʔɛhjɛh/, in English ‘I Am’. The euphemisms for Adonai used outside of formal religious service by devout Jews are Adoshem ‘The Master’s name’, HaShem ‘the Name’, and rarely HaMakom ‘the Place’. When Eloha and Elohim are used in lay conversation, the h is replaced with a k, as in Elokim. The many words in Hebrew that end with י are often written with ‘ in instead. Very devout Jews will write G-d/G*d for God (as do some devout Christians), just as they would write Yah, an abbreviation for the first two letters of YHWH or a variant of Jah ‘15’. The י combination is avoided not only in writing but in Gematria, a practice in which each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value such that numbers are represented by a letter combination. י Hē, the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet, has the numerical value of 5, and י Yōd, the tenth letter, has the numerical value of 10. The most straightforward way to express 15 would be Yōd-Hē ‘10-5’, but this would become י. Therefore, the representation of 15 in Hebrew is Tēt-Vav ‘9-6’ instead. The Biblical New Testament God is addressed as Father as in the Lord’s Prayer.

3 All quotes from the Bible in this chapter use the King James Version.
The Aramaic word חכם Abba ‘Father’ is used by Jesus in Mark 14:36 and also appears in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. Addressing God as Abba or Avinu ‘our Father’, has made its way into Talmudic discourse and Jewish prayers and is another form of euphemism that people use freely not only in prayers but also in regular conversations.

It is no surprise that the names and address forms to gods and their cohorts are exactly similar to those used for rulers such as sovereigns and their cohorts. Kings and Queens are often divine in themselves as in Ancient Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, medieval Europe, and modern Thailand. In Ancient Rome, Julius Caesar was officially recognised as a god and his adopted son, the first Roman Emperor Augustus, allowed the Hellenic cities of Asia Minor to set up temples to himself. In the modern world, monarchs are typically the earthly representative of god. And it is notable that tyrants like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao, and Franco are often labelled tin gods though the term is applied to minor officials, too. The point is that gods are treated like monarchs and monarchs like gods. The terminology applied to both is similar, the taboos on them are similar, and, indeed, their behaviour is similar. Thus the Christian God rules the Kingdom of Heaven, hence ‘Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come…. ’ One of the names for Allāh (ventus) in the Qur’an is Al-Mālik ‘the King, Sovereign’ (20:114, 23:116, 59:23). Both sovereigns and gods are described as magnificent, exalted, honourable, and the like. For example at the March 1989 coronation of Prince Mangkubumi in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the new Sultan was given the following title: Ngarso dalem kanjeng ratu inkang sinuhan sri sultan hamengku buwono adipati ingalogo ngabdurahman sayidin panoto gomo kalifatullah kaping X ‘His Exalted Majesty, whose Honour Shines Bright, Sultan of all the world, Commander in Chief, Servant of God, Protector of Religion, Assistant to God, the tenth.’ Allāh is Most Graceful (Ar-Rahmān), Most Merciful (Ar-Raḥīm), the Supreme (Al-Mutakābbir), the Creator (Al-Khāliq), the Provider (Ar-Razzāq), the All Seeing (Al-Baṣīr), the Magnificent/Great (Al-‘Azīm), the Sublime (Al-‘Aliyy), the Exalted (Al-Jalīl), the Bountiful (Al-Karīm), the Majestic (Al-Majīd), the Truth (Al-Ḥaqq), the Giver of Life (Al-Muḥiyi), the Bringer of Death (Al-Mumīt), the All Powerful (Al-Qādir), the Most High (Al-Muta‘ālī), the Beneficent (Al-Barr), The Timeless (Aṣ-Ṣābūr). The Christian God has comparable titles. Popes wear crowns as did the Egyptian Pharaohs and European monarchs; Roman Emperors Trajan, Caligula and Marcus Aurelius wore crowns as did Roman gods and heroes as tokens of their divine status. The mitre of Christian Archbishops is crownlike. Taboos surrounding behaviour towards terrestrial sovereigns and princes are virtually identical with the taboos surrounding religious sovereigns and princes.

Franco’s coins read ‘Francisco Franco Caudillo de España por la Gracia de Dios’.
Jesus was a divinely inspired name:

the angel of the Lord appeared unto him [Joseph] in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)

The Christogram IHS mimics the first two and either the third or final Greek letters of Jesus ἸΗΣΟΥΣ or Biblical Greek IHCOYC as in the Eastern Orthodox Christogram IC XC from ΙΗϹΟΥϹ ΧΡΙϹΤΟϹ Ἰēsoys Christos. Alternatively, the Christogram XP or ☧ (chi rho) is also found in Catholic and Orthodox churches.

In Islam there are 99 names for God, Allāh. Perhaps the most significant, because they occur in every surah but one of the Qur‘ān, are ‘Ar-Rahmān ‘the Most Gracious’ and ‘Ar-Raḥīm ‘the Most Merciful’. There are many Hindu gods, some of whom, e.g. Krishna, Ganesha, Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, have 108 names each, many of which are comparable with the names used by Jews, Christians, and Muslims for their deities.

14.3 Blasphemy and profanity

For Ancient Hindus, Sanskrit vedas had to be in the pure form (śuddah) described by Pāṇini in the Aṣṭādhyāyī (4th century BCE). ‘A mantra [hymn] recited with incorrect intonation and “careless”, arrangement of varna (letters) [reacts] like a thunderbolt and gets the reciter destroyed by God Indra’ (Sic, Kachru 1984: 178, quoting a sutra). Why? Because it is blasphemous to deviate from the prescribed rendition of the holy text. At about the same period, Plato warns against speaking ill (βλασφημῶσιν) of the gods (Republic 381e, Plato 1997).

It is often blasphemous to name a person after a deity. The names of God are not used in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, though descriptions like Servant of God, Abed Allāh/'Ar-Raḥīm (Slave of Allāh/the Merciful) do occur. In Puritan England there were Fear-God and Praise-God, whose son was If-Christ-had-not-died-for-thee-thou-hadst-been damned. An exception is that Hispanic communities frequently use the first name Jesús/Jesusa, whose equivalents are not found in other Catholic or Protestant countries.

14.3.1 Blasphemy and profanity in Christendom

Modern European constraints on the use of God’s name hark back to the Semitic founders of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to Leviticus 24:16, God prescribes the penalty for anyone who blasphemes:
he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death.

For claiming Jesus to be the Son of God, the Jews accused Jesus and his disciples of blasphemy and prepared to stone him, but he escaped (John 10:31–40). However, they did succeed in stoning Stephen to death (Acts 7:59) (see 14.4 below). In Europe, blasphemy came to be penalised by fines and/or imprisonment. Thus, in 1606 the Act to Restraine Abuses of Players (3 Jac.I. cap.21) severely penalized profanity.

If ... any person or persons doe or shall in any Stage play, Interlude, Shewe, Maygame or Pageant jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie ... [they] shall forfeite for every such Offence by him or theme committed Tenne pounds. (Quoted in Hughes 1991: 103)

In consequence, the 1616 folio of Ben Jonson’s plays replaces By Jesu with Believe me (Jonson 1981). A 1634 edition of Beaumont and Fletcher’s Philaster (first acted 1608, Beaumont and Fletcher 1620) had Faith either cut or replaced by Indeed or, somewhat strangely, by Marry – a remodeling of Christ’s mother’s name; By Heaven is remodeled to By these hiltis; and, despite the original reference to pagan gods not being truly profane for a Christian, by the (just) Gods is altered to By my sword, By my life, By all that’s good, By Nemesis, And I vow (see Gildersleeve 1961: 128f). Religious censorship remained in force until significantly weakened during the 20th century. That it has not yet disappeared is demonstrated by the fact that Andres Serrano’s photograph Piss Christ (of a cheap plastic crucifix in urine) has been accused of being blasphemous. 5 It was verbally attacked in the US senate in May 1989 and physically attacked with hammers in The National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne, Australia) in October 1997 and again in Yvon Lambert’s gallery in Avignon France, in April 2011 (despoiling another print).

As I pointed out in Chapter 1.10, taking the Lord’s name in vain was frowned upon in Tudor Britain and eventually banned. It led to the development of so-called ‘minced oaths’ such as ’sblood ⇒ ’s ’lood ⇒ ’stud, ’sbody, ’sfoot, ’slid [eyelid], ’slight, ’sprecious [body], ’snails, God’s bodkins [nails] ⇒ ‘Od’s bodikins, God’s wounds ⇒ ’swounds ⇒ zounds pronounced /zuːnz/ ⇒ zaunds pronounced /zaunz/, God rot it! ⇒ ’Od rabbit it ⇒ Drat it! ⇒ Drat!. Such remodellings of the word god are deliberate ploys to avoid explicit profanity as

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5 This is obviously not primarily an example of linguistic blasphemy, although some Christians hold the phrase Piss Christ to be blasphemous. Serrano does not regard the image as sacrilegious and has said ‘The best place for Piss Christ is in a church’ (‘Shooting the Klan: an interview with Andres Serrano’ by Coco Fusco http://archive.li/kEccl).
also Cock! Cod! Cor! Cor lumme! Gad!, Gog! Golly! Gorry! Gosh! Gorblimey! Gordonbennet! Gordon’ighlanders! Goodness (knows)! (Good) gracious! For goodness’ sake! Today’s ubiquitous OMG and its attendant emoji, :o, is the euphemistic version of Oh my god! In So help me! ⇒ Swelp me! and So save us! there is omission of God (or Lord) replaced by so. Similarly, (Oh) Lord!, Lordy! Lawdy! La! Land’s sake! and Heavens (above)! or Heavens to Betsy!. The names Jesus, Jesus Christ, or Christ are avoided in Jis – which possibly derives from the romanization of IHS and is the likely source for Gis (Hamlet IV.v.55). These have given way to Jeeze! and Gee! (which doubles as both a clipping from Jesus and being the initial of God); Gee whiz! is a remodelling of either jeeze or jesus. More adventurous remodellings with a few clippings but more substitutions are By jingo! Jeepers creepers!, Jiminy cricket!, Christmas!, Cripes!, Crust!, Crumbs!, and Crikey!. Christmas!, of course, is semantically related to Christ. It is likely that By Jove! is a clever choice of a name beginning with J- which is at the same time the name of the chief god in the ancient Greek pantheon. One of the best disguised remodellings of Christ is in For crying out loud! which is a euphemism for For Christ’s sake. Holy Mary! may be the motivation for such as Holy Moses! Holy mackerel!

In addition there are such phrasal expletives as in For Christ’s sake, what are you doing? and What in God’s name are you doing? and variants on these. For chrissake is an orthographic remodeling from For Christ’s sake; lexical variants are For God’s sake, For Jesus’ sake and the euphemistic For heaven’s sake. What in God’s name ... has variants What in Christ’s name ... and the euphemistic What in heaven’s name .... If the expressions like Holy Mary! are euphemistic, Holy Jesus! is outright profane – and some people would say blasphemous.

Expletives ran the gamut of reference to God, Christ, heaven, hell, and the Devil; curiously, though, dysphemistic epithets are restricted to invoking either the Devil or hell. Only euphemistic epithets invoke God, Christ or heaven, cf. the adjectives godlike, christlike, heavenly. Dysphemism can be achieved by negating such invocations as in ungodly, unchristian, etc. Otherwise, profane epithets invoke the Devil or hell in one way or another, cf. devilish, hellish; He’s a devil. The latter is of course ambiguous between the dysphemism He’s wicked and a term of approbation if not outright praise, He’s a dare-devil. Note that He’s a little devil / demon is an affectionate description for, e.g. a naughty boy, with only very slight disapprobation; it is comparable with dare-devil, and perhaps devil-may-care – which are not at all dysphemistic. It’s a devil / hell of a nuisance uses ‘a devil / hell of” as a dysphemistic intensifier, cf. I had a devil / hell of a job reaching him. In these environments heck is the standard euphemistic dysphemism for hell, as it is too in expletives like What the devil / hell /
heck [are you doing]?, compare What the fuck .... Semantically associated with hell is the euphemistic epithet flaming, cf. flaming hell / heck, and what is probably a remodelling of it: flipping. The initial f- suggests that these may link up with fucking (cf. fucking hell), whose illocutionary point (i.e. message) they share.

Ritualized superstition is revealed in our response of Bless you when someone sneezes. It was to prevent the devil from entering the body momentarily emptied of its soul. Notice the euphemistic omission of God as the subject of Bless you. And before we leave aside euphemisms motivated by religious superstition What the dickens... for What the devil... avoids calling up the malevolent spirit of Old Nick a.k.a. Old Harry, Old Bendy, Old Bogey, Old Poker, Old Roger, Old Split-Foot, the Old Gentleman, Old Billy. Perhaps What in Hades?! ... is a euphemism for What in hell?! .... Curiously, although What the deuce ... is formally analogous to What the dickens ... and What the devil ..., ‘deuce’ here derives from the Norman French oath Deus! ‘God’.

Hell!, Hell’s bells! and Heck! will stand alone as expletives, where they have about the same force and meaning as the expletive Damn! and its cohort Damnation! Although dash could stand for any expletive, it probably gets some motivation from damn (even Oh dear, though it presumably derives from (Oh) dear God, might get some push from damn – compare Dear me! with Damn me!). Save for Oh dear, all of them condemn a provocative situation to hell. Damn! is based on a verb meaning ‘condemn’ (condemn essentially combines con– with damn) which has become an expletive along the lines of Shit! or Fuck! but milder; this is more likely than that it is an end-clipping from damnation. All of these are modelled on a clause in which God is the agent: (May / Let) God damn NOUN PHRASE (giving rise to the euphemistic dysphemism Dagblag it!). According to Montagu 1968, between the 15th and 19th centuries, the English were known in France as Goddams because of their ubiquitous use of this oath; and it is still going strong. In the same vein is Strike! (euphemized to Stripe!) from God strike me dead [if I’m not telling the truth].

In place of the malevolent curses Damnation! and Damn! there the corresponding euphemistic dysphemisms Tarnation!; What in tarnation?!; Consarn it! and Darn!, Dang!, Drat! – all of which are remodellings. There are also Blast! and What the blazes!, both of which clearly invoke hell. Blast it!, and the more euphemistic Bother it!, presumably mean (May) God blast / bother it! and so euphemistically omit God’s name. The euphemistic dysphemism Blessed thing! does the same. The expletive Bother! has a cohort botheration, cf. damnation, tarnation; it also has a variant, Brother! whose profane credentials may be affected by brother in Christ.
Despite the secularization of English speaking communities during the 20th century, profanity (blasphemy) is still a potent source for dysphemism. Moreover, phrases like *God damn X*, which invoke God as an agent of malfeasance, and which are found euphemistically abbreviated to *Damn X* in order to avoid explicit profanity, provide a model for more potent imprecatives such as *Shit on X, Fuck X, Bugger X*, etc. Thus we can account for a set of otherwise inexplicable dysphemistic constructions.

Despite persisting incantations like ‘Χριστέ, ἐλέησον’, ‘Kyrie, eleison’, ‘Lord, have mercy’ in Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican churches, it is unlikely that more than a handful of Christians nowadays seriously fear divine wrath to the extent that they are strongly motivated to use euphemisms to guard against it. Indeed, most people using the euphemistic dysphemisms discussed above are unaware of using euphemism at all. Like euphemisms everywhere, these have become ritualized and conventional behaviour. The changing nature of taboo will always be reflected in shifts among preferred terms of opprobrium. The history of swearing in English, for example, has seen the sweeping transition from religious to secular swearing. Blasphemy, religious profanity, and religious insults have lost their punch.

### 4.3.2 Blasphemy in Islam

According to Tolan (2016: 38),

In Islamic law, the common term for blasphemy is *shatm*, a word that does not appear in the Qur’an, though a word with a related meaning, *sabb*, appears once. The basic meaning of *shatm* is insult or vilification. To insult God or Muhammad (or for some jurists, Muhammad’s Companions), was a crime equivalent, for some legal scholars, to apostasy (*ridda*) or unbelief (*kafr*), each of which could warrant the death penalty in certain cases.

As stated in Chapter 1.3, today apostasy is punishable by death in a number of Muslim countries; Islamic militants believe that assassinating those who do not follow the same dogma as themselves (infidels) is rewarded in heaven; and the Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris, January 2015, demonstrated that, even today, insulting the prophet Muhammad warrants assassination.

By tradition, the Qur’ān offers the following strictures against blasphemy, though they look more like the appropriate punishment for heresy.

The only punishment of those who wage war against Allāh and His Messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is that they should be murdered, or crucified, or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides, or they should be imprisoned. This shall be a disgrace for them in this world, and in the Hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement. Except those who repent before you overpower them; so know that Allāh is Forgiving, Merciful. (5:33-34)
Those who annoy Allāh and His Messenger – Allāh has cursed them in this World and in the Hereafter, and has prepared for them a humiliating Punishment. Truly, if the Hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease, and those who stir up sedition in the City, desist not, We shall certainly stir thee up against them: Then will they not be able to stay in it as thy neighbours for any length of time: They shall have a curse on them: whenever they are found, they shall be seized and slain (without mercy). (33:57-61)

Radical Islamicists fervently adopt these commandments. More moderate Muslims say these extreme punishments were appropriate in Muhammad’s day (fl. 609-632 CE) but no longer are. Usually an infidel was given the opportunity to become a good Muslim or be executed. And, usually, women were not executed unless they refused to repent. The Hanbali school, however, does not permit such leniency.

Consider the fatwa issued in 1989 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran demanding the death of British Indian author Salman Rushdie for publishing the novel The Satanic Verses (Rushdie 1988). Earlier in 1988 a Farsi translation of Rushdie’s novel Shame had been given an award by an official jury appointed by a ministry of the Iranian Islamic government. The publication of The Satanic Verses led to severe political repercussions in Iran, Europe, India, and Pakistan. Khomeini’s fatwa was for blasphemy of the Prophet Muhammad and his wives. Some Muslims find the description ‘satanic verses’ to be sacrilegious in itself and a fabrication of heretics. The novel’s title refers to the Gharaniq, a legend that, in violation of monotheism, verses 18–22 in surah 53 (An-Najim) of the Qur’ān, permit prayer to three pre-Islamic Meccan goddesses, Al-lāt, Uzza, and Manāt. Rushdie’s novel recounts several episodes in the life of Muhammad and, an important sub-plot in The Satanic Verses is that the utterance and withdrawal of these verses on the grounds that Shaytan, Satan, had sent them to deceive Mohammad into thinking they came from God. The sacrilege is that Rushdie (and his supporters) are believed to be claiming that part of the Qur’ān is the work of the Devil.

The Satanic Verses is a magical tale involving Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, two expatriate Indian actors living in England, who journey back to India. On the return flight, their plane is hijacked by Sikh nationalists. During an argument amongst these terrorists they accidently detonate their bomb, destroying the plane over the English Channel. The two protagonists miraculously survive but are transformed by the experience: Gibreel gains a halo and takes on the character and physical characteristics of the archangel Gabriel; Saladin grows horns and becomes Satan. During his fall from the plane, Gibreel also experiences an elaborate vision that involves Mahound, a Muhammad-like figure. It is details of this subplot that angered many Muslims. To start with, Mahound was a derogatory term for Muhammad used by Crusaders. Pre-Islamic Mecca is called Jahilia ‘time of ignorance’. The archangel
Gibreel (Gabriel) is a film star; the great Muslim hero of the Crusades, Saladin, becomes Satan. Ayesha, the name of one of Muhammad’s wives (Aisha), is a fanatical Indian woman who leads her village on a fatal pilgrimage. Moreover, the brothel of the city of Jahilia was staffed by twelve prostitutes with the same names as Muhammad’s wives, the Mothers of all Believers. The prophet in Rushdie’s novel, as he lies dying, is visited in a dream by the Goddess Allat (Al-lāt), suggesting either that she exists or that the Prophet thought she did. ‘Fact is, religious faith, which encodes the highest aspirations of human race, is now, in our country, the servant of lowest instincts, and God is the creature of evil’ (Rushdie 1988: 518).

The Iranian government backed the fatwa against Rushdie until 1998 when President Mohammad Khatami said Iran no longer supported the killing of Rushdie. However, the fatwa remains in place, and in February 2016 the Fars News Agency reports that forty state-run Iranian media outlets have jointly offered a new $600,000 bounty for the assassination of Salman Rushdie. In the interim, Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of The Satanic Verses, was stabbed to death outside his office at Tsukuba University, the Italian translator Ettore Capriolo survived being stabbed at his apartment in Milan, and the novel’s Norwegian publisher was shot three times in the back and left for dead outside his home in Oslo.

Graphic representations of the Prophet Muhammad are ipso facto blasphemous (though at least one 17th copy of a 14th century Persian painting of the Prophet preaching does exist, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maome.jpg). In 2005, reports that Danish writer Kare Bluitgen could find no one willing to illustrate his children’s book Koranen og profeten Muhammeds liv (The Qur’ān and the life of the Prophet Muhammad) led newspaper Jyllands-Posten to publish several cartoons of Muhammad, one of which, by Kurt Westergaard, depicted the Prophet with a bomb in his turban. This caused protests around the world, consumer boycotts of Danish products, the withdrawal of the ambassadors of Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Syria from Denmark. Some non-Muslims agree that association of the Prophet with terrorism is offensive to a vast majority of Muslims. In France, satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo republished the Jyllands-Posten cartoons of Muhammad. It was taken to court by Islamic organizations under French hate speech laws, but acquitted.

The November 3, 2011 issue of Charlie Hebdo was renamed Charia Hebdo (mocking Shariah ‘canonical law’) and featured the Prophet Muhammad as apocryphal guest-editor. On November 2 the editorial office was firebombed. Editor Stéphane Charbonnier, a.k.a Charb, and two co-workers subsequently received police protection. In September 2012, the newspaper published a series of satirical cartoons of Muhammad, some of which feature nude caricatures – ipso facto blasphemous. In January 2013, Charlie Hebdo announced a comic book on the life of Muhammad, but it was never published. On January 7, 2015, two masked
Islamist gunmen opened fire on Charlie Hebdo’s staff as vengeance for its frequent caricatures of Muhammad. 12 people were assassinated, including Charb, and 11 others were wounded. During the attack, the gunmen shouted *Allāhu akbar* (‘God is great’) and also *On a vengé le prophète* ‘The Prophet has been avenged’/‘We have avenged the Prophet’. The massacre led to much sympathy across the world and the *Je Suis Charlie* movement. The print run of issue 1178 of *Charlie Hebdo* was raised from 60,000 to five million. However, this is no recompense for the lives lost. *Jyllands-Posten* did not re-print the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons in the wake of the attack, with their editor-in-chief citing security concerns.

### 14.4 Religious martyrs

Religious martyrdom is voluntary death in the service of one’s religion. Martyrdom among adherents to Abrahamic religions seems to have begun with the Maccabees, Jewish rebels in the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire at the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes c. 215–164BCE who lived in Judea. According to the rebels, Antiochus banned many traditional Jewish and Samaritan religious practices: burned copies of the Torah, made possession of the Torah a capital offence, banned Sabbaths and feasts, outlawed circumcision, forbid ritual sacrifice, defiled the Temple with an idol of Olympian Zeus, and sacrificed unclean animals (such as swine) there. Those Jews who died for nevertheless continuing to practice their religion were martyrs. In the end they prevailed. (King Herod was the last of the Maccabean monarchs.)

Christian martyrs suffered hardship (such as forced labour) or were executed giving testimony for Jesus by subjecting themselves to Him rather than Caesar. Deaths were typically by stoning, crucifixion, or burning. It was believed that martyrs were inspired by the Holy Spirit and could intercede between plaintiff and God. By tradition the first Christian martyr is St Stephen (c. 5–34CE, a Hellenized Jew); he was accused of violating two taboos: he had declared that Jesus would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and that he had subverted the customs of Moses. He answered them

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name
was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my
spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.
And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:51-60)

According to Tertullian (c. 155–240BCE, a Christian Berber from Carthage) it is acceptable
for Christians to be put to torture and to death because ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of
the Church’ (Apologeticus pro Christianis 50).

One more example of a Christian martyr, St Edmund Campion, SJ (1540-1581). He began
as an Anglican priest under the patronage of William Cecil and the Earl of Leicester, both
advisors to Queen Elizabeth I. Between 1564 and 1569 Campion suffered ‘remorse of
conscience and detestation of mind’, he went to Ireland then to what is now North East France, Rome, Moravia, and Prague where he became a Jesuit. He joined a secret Jesuit
mission to Britain in 1580 administering the sacraments and preaching to Catholics in
Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, and Lancashire. He wrote a pamphlet against the
Anglican Church and was arrested by a priest hunter who took him to London with his arms
pinioned and a paper on his hat identifying ‘Campion, the Seditious Jesuit’. He was offered
freedom if he recanted and accepted Anglicanism but he refused, preferring martyrdom. He
was convicted with two others of treason and sentenced as follows:

You must go to the place from whence you came, there to remain until ye shall be drawn
through the open city of London upon hurdles to the place of execution, and there be hanged
and let down alive, and your privy parts cut off, and your entrails taken out and burnt in your
sight; then your heads to be cut off and your bodies divided into four parts, to be disposed of at
Her Majesty’s pleasure. And God have mercy on your souls. (Waugh 2001: 116)

Campion was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn in December 1581, beatified by Pope
Leo XIII in 1886, and canonized in 1970 by Pope Paul VI as one of the forty martyrs of
England and Wales.

Shia Muslims get the name from being Shī‘atu ‘Alī ‘followers of Ali’, i.e. Ali ibn Abi
Talib (601-661CE), Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, married to Fatimah. Shias believe
that Muhammad explicitly named Ali as his successor; Sunnis assert that Muhammad never
appointed a successor and, on the Prophet’s death, Abu Bakr (573-634CE) was elected first
caliph by the Muslim community. Ali was elected to be fourth caliph in 656 and was
martyred in 661 while praying in the Great Mosque at Kufa, mortally wounded by Abd al-
Rahman ibn Muljam who was within a week himself despatched by Ali’s son Hasan. Ali’s
younger son Husayn (625-680) was also martyred, being beheaded at the battle of Karbala.
Husayn is highly regarded by Shi’ites for refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid, the
Umayyad caliph, because he considered the rule of the Umayyads unjust. He inspires Shias
who mourn his martyrdom every year on Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram (10 October). The proverb *Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala!* indicates the significance of sacrificing oneself to God and to other Muslims.

According to Lamb (1988: 287) Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini said ‘The purest joy in Islam is to kill and be killed for Allāh’. Some Muslims celebrate and revere suicide bombers, knowing that martyrdom in the service of Allāh is glorified:

And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allāh as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision, Rejoicing in what Allāh has bestowed upon them of His bounty, and they receive good tidings about those [to be martyred] after them who have not yet joined them – that there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve. (Qur’ān 3:169-170. See also 9:111, 22:58).

In the Qur’ān the prophets, incarnations of Islam, are called *shuhadā* (plural of *shahīd*) meaning witnesses or paradigms (models); it is only later that the same term was used for martyrs. The act of martyrdom is *istishhad*. The struggle to extend and grow or to develop within Islam is *jihad*. Suicide is a sin, but suicide bombers and others who kill heretics and infidels for the greater glory of Allāh are, in their own eyes and those of their supporters, *shuhadā*.

It is sometimes said that Islamic martyrs believe they will go direct to Paradise to be rewarded with 24 or 72 virgins for their pleasure. Although the gardens and vineyards of Paradise are promised in Qur’ān 78:32 and a full cup (presumably of wine) in 78:34 the virgins are an extrapolation from *wakawāʾiba atrāban* ‘and well-matched [feminine] splendid companions [feminine]’ (Qur’ān 78:33). No number of these comely women of faith is given.

### 14.5 Rounding up

Taboo imposes restrictions on behaviour. I began this chapter by comparing religious ideologies with non-religious ideologies: religions are motivated by a creation myth that typically involves metaphysical beings and a belief that life on earth is preparation for life after death; non-religious ideologies focus on social and political life in the material world. Both religious ideologies and non-religious ideologies lay claim to moral rectitude and access to the ultimate truth that informs social hypotheses, community practices, and political realities. They are similar enough that the proverb *cuius regio, eius religio* should be rephrased *cuius regio, eius ideologia* with wider application and truth.

All ideological taboos arise from perceived traducing of dogma, and/or insult to revered and/or intimidating persons, institutions, and objects. I discussed taboos on the names for and terms of address to gods and their cohorts, which are comparable with those used for other
powerful dominators such as sovereigns and dictators and their courts. It’s for same reason: because any threat to their power endangers the entire society they dominate, even the whole of creation.

Next, I turned to the most prolific area for linguistic taboos within the scope of this chapter by investigating the fields of blasphemy and profanity. Blasphemy vilifies or ridicules the deity, the deity’s family, divine mouthpieces like prophets and the priesthood/imams/muftis/rabbis) and divine scriptures. Profanity uses religious terms with careless irreverence. In the ancient world, blasphemy was a capital offence but today it only remains a capital offence in the Ummah (Islamic world) – hence the Charlie Hebdo massacre in 2015. Blasphemy is avoided through the euphemism of substitute terms (e.g. Lord for YHWH) or frequently accomplished through formal remodelling (jeeper for Jesus). In English the term profane has been extended to non-religious expletives such as shit! I surveyed blasphemy in Christendom and then in Islam.

I also differentiated and discussed the taboos of heresy and apostasy and recounted the histories and treatment of a few traitors, heretics, witches, and martyrs who allegedly violated ideologically sanctioned taboos. Religious and ideological taboos still have a hold today, and, as we see almost daily, fatal consequences for some. Those who fanatically believe they are guided by a god or ideology and feel the need to impose their worldview on everyone else would, in my humble opinion, be better guided by H.L. Mencken:

We must respect the other fellow’s religion, but only in the sense that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart. (Mencken 1956: 1)

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