

The Dialectic of Blasphemy:

Transgressive Speech from Luther to Freud and Beyond

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Abstract: Drawing on a table talk by Martin Luther from the Spring of 1540, this essay first presents a new taxonomy of blasphemy, in which instances of injurious speech are distributed along four fundamental axes, which are designated as 'quality', 'source', 'judgement' and 'response'. This elementary taxonomy is then refined via a re-reading of the way in which blasphemy occurs in Freud's case-study of the Rat Man, which generates an additional axis, notably that of the 'object'. In light of Luther's struggles with the Catholic Church and his own frequent '*Anfechtungen*', it is argued that the components on the axes of blasphemy do not stand in a one-to-one relationship to one another, but follow a subjective pathway. On the basis of the re-reading of Freud's case-study of the Rat Man, this idiosyncratic, subjective dialectic of blasphemy is further substantiated with reference to the logic of the obsessional fantasy. Finally, it is concluded that a psychoanalytic approach to the question of blasphemy needs to start from a critique of the relationship between the subject and language, and from the observation that words have the power to heal as much as they have the ability to injure

Introduction

Thirty years ago, it would have been impossible to write about blasphemy without mentioning the Rushdie affair. In effect, until the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie, 1988), at the end of September 1988, most Westerners had never come across any instances of alleged blasphemy with such large-scale socio-political consequences. In addition, when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against its author, on 14 February 1989, the sentence not only seemed excessive and disproportionate to the nature of the putative crime, but the Islamic world suddenly

appeared as dangerous, tyrannical, and barbaric.¹ Now, in 2021, it is extremely difficult to address the question of blasphemy without referring to the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who was ritually assassinated on 2 November 2004 in retaliation for his purportedly blasphemous short film *Submission*, which in turn triggered various arson attacks on Muslim schools and mosques (Buruma, 2006; Eyerson, 2008). Now, it is virtually impossible not to recall the global repercussions of twelve tiny cartoons of the prophet Mohammed, which were first published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 30 September 2005 and subsequently reprinted in various outlets in continental Europe as an act of solidarity with international campaigns for the preservation of the freedom of the press (Sifaoui, 2006; Sniderman *et al.*, 2014; Favret-Saada, 2015; Rose, 2016). It is exceptionally hard not to rekindle the case of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who was sentenced to death in November 2010 after being found guilty of contaminating a supposedly Islamic water supply by drinking a few cups from the local tap (Bibi & Tollet, 2012; 2020). In 2021, no scholarly volume on blasphemy can possibly ignore the shootings at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015, in which twelve people lost their lives (Bordet & Telo, 2017; Lançon, 2018; Eko, 2020). And most recently there was the brutal murder of Samuel Paty, decapitated in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, just a few miles away from the school where he taught and where he had reportedly shown some of the Mohammed cartoons published previously in *Charlie Hebdo*, as part of a lesson on freedom of expression (Héran, 2021; Collectif Hors Pistes, 2021). In 2021, it is almost unthinkable not to associate blasphemy with a typically Islamic crime committed by secular or non-Islamic people, for which they can expect to pay a very high price, despite the fact that historically blasphemy was predominantly of concern to

Christians and that there is no shortage of contemporary examples of hard-line Christians protesting against conceivably blasphemous portrayals of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or the Pope.²

Given the international shock waves that have been unleashed by the aforementioned instances of extreme retribution for blasphemous incidents, and the ongoing, ostensibly intractable debate over how the political protection of free speech can be reconciled with the legal safeguarding of multiculturalism, religious diversity, and the individual liberty to practice one's faith, it may seem odd, then, if I take this essay in a slightly different direction, or if I approach the question of blasphemy from a different angle. However, in an attempt to bring psychoanalytic insights to bear on the issue of blasphemy, I shall avoid reflecting on one or the other concrete recent event, lest the challenging, controversial questions that are being posed by each of these cases be unjustifiably closed and trivialized with the truth and knowledge of psychoanalytic reason. I do not consider it to be the primary task of psychoanalysis to generate (new, alternative) answers to the prevailing questions of our times, however pressing and urgent they may be, but rather to unfold and dissect those questions, thereby demonstrating how the way in which they are being formulated and have been answered is often an integral part of the underlying problem. In other words, I consider it to be the primary task of psychoanalysis to analyse, in the mathematical or chemical sense of the word. As Freud himself intimated, the work of psychoanalysis is geared towards disentangling and breaking down complex networks into their elementary components, whereby the reconfiguration of these constitutive features into a new conglomerate can be left to others, if it does not already happen intuitively and spontaneously (Freud, 1915*a*, p. 170; 1919*a* [1918]), pp. 160-161).

Accordingly, my purpose in this essay is threefold. In the first section, I shall attempt to reformulate the question of blasphemy as a multifaceted, intricate arrangement of interlocking forces, whereby I shall take my lead from an informal speech delivered by Martin Luther during the Spring of 1540. This will essentially result in the articulation of a basic taxonomy of blasphemy along four distinct axes, which I shall designate as ‘quality’, ‘source’, ‘judgement’ and ‘response’. In the second section of the essay, I will then take advantage of the implicit resonances between Luther’s outlook on blasphemy and the way in which impious speech occurs in one of Freud’s most famous case-studies in order to finetune this taxonomy, clarify the dialectical relations between its components, and probe deeper into its composite layers. Finally, by way of conclusion, I shall examine what the psychoanalytic space, as the most authentic (and perhaps the only remaining) discourse in which absolute freedom of speech is not only guaranteed but actively encouraged—as a mental exercise that is completely devoid of any kind of external judgement—can contribute to a more discerning understanding of the question of blasphemy and the various challenges it poses to our contemporary life-world.

The Man Luther and Blasphemous Religion

Sometime between 21 May and 11 June 1540, Martin Luther delivered a ‘table talk’ at his home in Wittenberg in which he responded to his student Severus (Wolfgang Schiefer) presenting him with the sorry case of an unnamed doctor from Linz, whose “every attempt at prayer was always disrupted by blasphemies against Christ entering his mind [*in oratione semper sentiat blasphemias in Christum*]” (Luther, 1916 [1531-1546], p. 601, my translation). To the small handful of loyal followers gathered around

the dinner table, Luther's extensive comments on the case were probably as surprising as they were instructive. When Luther heard about the poor tormented soul from Linz, his immediate reaction was:

That is a good sign! There are two types of blasphemy. First, there is active blasphemy, when someone is knowingly and intentionally looking for reasons to insult God . . . May God protect us from this! However, blasphemy is passive when the devil puts such evil thoughts into our head against our will and despite us fighting against them. This is how God wants to train us [*Eis vult Deus nos exercere*] . . . But at the end of our life, whatever affects us as temptation comes to an end [*sub finem autem vitae, quidquid illarum est tentationum, desinet*] . . . This is why, Dr Severus, you should write to that man and tell him that he should not torment himself, but have confidence, trust God, and keep to his word. Eventually, the devil shall of his own accord stop forcing those blasphemies upon him (Luther, 1916 [1531-1546], pp. 601-603, my translation).

This passage, which is part of a much longer disquisition, is striking for at least two reasons. First, it would seem that Luther was prepared to forgive and somewhat console the man from Linz, because his predicament clearly reminded him of his own personal battles with the scourge of passive blasphemy. The key word, here, is 'temptation'. Throughout his life, or at least from the second year of his monastic period, in 1506, Luther had suffered recurrently from what he himself designated as '*Anfechtungen*'—sudden, intense und uncontrollable attacks of debilitating anguish,

which would always manifest with a wide range of physical symptoms, such as profuse sweating, splitting headaches and painful ringing in the ears, but which would also elicit profound spiritual crises, Luther questioning his faith, or desperately trying to understand why God would have singled him out for such harsh punishment.³ Reflecting upon these agonizing episodes in 1533, Luther wrote: “At those times I was the most miserable man on earth. Day and night were just howling and despairing in vain, which no one could steer” (Luther, 1912 [1533], p. 148, my translation). One of the most severe of these ‘temptations’ occurred on 6 July 1527, when Luther grew pale, lost consciousness, lay motionless on the floor of his bedroom, and only came back to his senses with the conviction that his torment was irreversible and that he was going to die.⁴ About a month after the attack, on 2 August, he wrote to his brother in arms Philipp Melanchthon:

For more than a week I was in death and hell; I was sick all over and my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ in the waves and bursts of despair and blasphemy against God, but God was moved by the prayers of saints, started to take pity on me, and eventually saved my soul from the depths of hell (Luther, 1933 [1526-1528], p. 271, my translation).

It should not surprise us that over the years numerous people, including quite a few established Luther-scholars, have tried to make sense of Luther’s overall clinical picture by means of the terminology of contemporary psychiatry. In this respect, the retrospective diagnoses have ranged from depression to full-blown psychosis, whereby the aetiology of the mature Luther’s suffering is often situated in the young

man's strained relation with his father after his decision to exchange the prospect of a lucrative career in the legal profession for the contemplative life of a monk.⁵

However, this is not what interests me here. What I wish to focus on is Luther's elementary taxonomy of blasphemy, in which he distinguished between a deliberate, intentional form and an unexpected, involuntary type, from which he himself had suffered regularly, especially during his *'Anfechtungen'*. In terming the first 'active' and the second 'passive', Luther did not underestimate the brute force of the latter's appearance, insinuating that the former was distinctly stronger than the latter. Instead, he highlighted the possibility of human beings becoming blasphemers against their own conscious will, all the more so as they have wholeheartedly devoted themselves to God. In what follows, I shall put Luther's distinction under the heading of 'quality' and maintain his nomenclature as well as its meaning, even though the terms 'active' and 'passive' have sometimes been employed differently in the literature on blasphemy.⁶

The second reason as to why Luther's reflections on the man from Linz are interesting is that at least three additional axes or dimensions of blasphemy emerge when these comments are considered in the context of Luther's life history and the broader religious debates following the publication of his ninety-five theses in 1517. In his elementary taxonomy of blasphemy, Luther unequivocally condemned all instances of 'active blasphemy', yet this is of course what he himself had been accused of by the Catholic church and what had brought him to the Diet of Worms in 1521. In other words, whereas Luther did not hesitate to concede that he himself had fallen prey to the trials and tribulations of 'passive blasphemy', in the eyes of his Catholic opponents he was primarily an 'active' blasphemer. Whereas he himself accepted his

own 'passive blasphemy', the '*Anfechtungen*' remained largely unacknowledged by his detractors, yet at the point where he saw his own theology as the most truthful representation of the Christian spirit he had to reckon with the external allegation (and the final conclusion) that he was an obstinate heretic. Hence, Luther was effectively a blasphemer against his own will according to two dialectically opposed modalities: as a passive quality that he recognized within himself and as an active quality that was only ever attributed to him by the representatives of institutionalised Catholicism. However, apart from categorically refusing to recant his own theological positions, Luther's persistent response to the practices and principles of the Catholic Church was that they themselves constituted an unambiguous source of active blasphemy. At some point, Luther even went so far as to accuse the Pope of being the incarnation of the Antichrist, hurling hyperbolic insults and launching endless invectives against the Holy See that were often couched in the most explicit scatological metaphors.⁷

Three additional axes of blasphemy are being opened up here. If we accept that the first axis stages the quality of the blasphemous act ('active' or 'passive'), the second refers to its source or location. Within the confines of Luther's conflict with Rome, 'active blasphemy' is only ever situated 'on the other side', which means that it is always externalised and treated as an 'objective' issue. For both Luther and the Catholic church, the active blasphemer is always a threatening Other, who may be personified in the Devil, Luther and his acolytes, or the Pope, but who is never located in the subjective sphere. 'Active blasphemy' is an attribution of deliberate impious speech by an aggrieved subject to an external object. This strict externalisation of 'active blasphemy', on both sides of the religious divide, always coincides with the

rigorous denial of its occurrence as a subjective issue, although one might easily venture the hypothesis that, in this way, it is but the symptomatic outcome of a repressed unconscious force. In a sense, one could also say, then, that Luther only felt the need to invent 'passive blasphemy', because he could never bring himself to admit that he himself was occasionally an 'active' exponent of its sinful incidence. This additional dynamic underscores the importance of the third dimension, which supersedes the dialectical axes of quality and source. On this third axis, a specific judgement enters the arena, which either acknowledges the act as blasphemous, minimizes its impact, or denies its existence altogether.

Strange as it may seem, blasphemy reveals itself, here, as operating according to the same logic as the Freudian joke. In the fifth chapter of his 1905 monograph *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argued that the joke differs from the comic insofar as the latter can be effective in the presence of two agencies (the person who laughs and the person, object or situation which is found funny), whereas the former requires the intervention of a third party, '*die dritte Person*', without whom the joke loses its impact (Freud, 1905c, p. 144). Put differently, it is this 'third' who is responsible for allowing the joke to exist as a joke, by judging it to be funny, or by recognizing its status on account of laughing with what the teller has said. Freud did not really consider the possibility of the teller laughing at his or her own jokes, yet were this to be the case, it would not necessarily exclude the third person, but signal the presence of a third that is internalised—the teller of the joke elevating him- or herself beyond the speech act and its object in order to validate it as an effective joke. If we apply this logic to Luther's outlook on blasphemy, it implies that the judgement of the Catholic church was crucial for adding blasphemous weight to his theology, or

even that it was a necessary precondition for Luther's ideas to become the most important counterweight in the history of Christianity. Validation by a third, who is generally the aggrieved or the offended (an external agency), but who may equally manifest itself internally, at the point from which the speech act emanates, is the *conditio sine qua non* for blasphemy to exist as such.⁸ This also implies that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the options on the axis of 'judgement', which range from acknowledgement to denial, and the elements on the axis of 'source', which opposes external to internal.

Finally, there is a fourth dimension in the dialectic of blasphemy, which I have kept in the background until now, even though it was definitely as important back then as it is in our 21st century socio-political debates on freedom of speech and religious toleration. This fourth axis concerns the quandary of response, and it obtains once again both to those who are being accused and to those who feel aggrieved. Without entering into historical or contemporary examples, we know that responses may vary from unconditional apologies and radical defiance on the side of the (alleged) blasphemer, and from the most extreme forms of punishment to complete forgiveness on the side of the affronted, but we also know that here too there is no one-to-one correspondence between the axis of judgement and the axis of response or, for that matter, between quality and response. Just because a representation or speech act is acknowledged and thereby validated as an external, deliberate instance of blasphemy does not imply that it *de facto* attracts a harsh punitive response from all those who feel offended. Just because a certain act of potential blasphemy remains unacknowledged, and thus loses some or all of its blasphemous impact, does not mean that a response is not forthcoming. The latter situation is quite paradoxical, if

only because in this case nobody really claims the right to feel aggrieved, yet the best example, here, is the hugely successful musical comedy *The Book of Mormon*, which has taken various countries by storm ever since it opened on Broadway in 2011 and which unapologetically satirizes the beliefs and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Rather than condemning the satirical portrayal of the Mormon missionaries in the show as blasphemous, the public relations department of the Church issued an official statement in which it was asserted that the original book is much better than the parody, and it has consistently taken advantage of the production's international crowd-puller status to advertise its beliefs and recruit new members (Lee, 2012).⁹

In sum, blasphemy is not a unitary, monolithic phenomenon, but a complex, multi-layered constellation of conflicting agencies and opposing principles, which can be tabulated along at least four distinct axes, whose options do not stand in a uniform relation to each other, which do not follow a clear path, and which are undoubtedly also influenced by circumstantial, individual and institutional variables. In the next section of my essay, I shall explore this dialectic further through a new reading of Freud's case-study of the Rat Man.

The Man Freud and Blasphemous Patients

How does one move from a God-fearing, rabid religious reformer to a science-loving, self-confessed godless Jew? Even though one could argue that Luther's categorical opposition to the humanist idea of free will and Freud's erstwhile conviction that the psychoanalytic movement should preferably be led by a Swiss protestant already offer some useful connections between psychoanalysis and Lutheran theology, I intend to

concentrate on the resonances between Luther's experience of 'passive blasphemy' and how impious speech erupts in the context of Freud's clinical work. If I have thereby chosen to focus exclusively on his case-study of the Rat Man, it is not because profanations cannot be found elsewhere in the clinical psychoanalytic literature, including in Freud's own work, but because this text has acquired 'canonical status' and because Freud's own interpretations of his patients' impious speech in this extraordinary document remain highly instructive.¹⁰

The clinical history of the Rat Man, which Freud presented as a case of obsessional neurosis, is exceptionally complex for intrinsic as well as extrinsic reasons. Intrinsically, the neurosis of the young lawyer called Ernst Lanzer, which Freud considered to be "a dialect of the language of hysteria", is incredibly difficult to comprehend, so much so that Freud himself disclosed in his introduction to the case-study that he had "not yet succeeded in completely penetrating [*restlos zu durchschauen*] the complicated texture" of its origins and expressions (Freud, 1909d, pp. 157 & 156).¹¹ Extrinsically, coherent insight into the clinical materials produced by the Rat Man is impeded by the fact that his analysis is documented in three interrelated yet considerably discrepant records: Freud's published case-study, his original notes for the first four months of the patient's treatment, and Otto Rank's minutes of two lectures by Freud at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Within the space of this essay, I will therefore not be able to do justice to the unique and peculiar challenges of the case, neither as regards the diversity of its clinical manifestations, nor in terms of the jumbled entanglement of its predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors.

Be that as it may, when taken in its original, etymological sense of ‘injurious speech’, blasphemy appears in the case-study of the Rat Man on three separate levels. Firstly, and most conspicuously, Ernst Lanzer suffers (or claims to have suffered) from symptoms that are almost identical to those reported by the doctor from Linz whose case was presented to Luther during the Spring of 1540. Two weeks into his analysis, the Rat Man conceded that in early adolescence, when he was devoutly religious, he would often invent his own prayers, which tended to last longer and longer, because they would consistently become contaminated with words and phrases signalling the opposite of what he intended to relay. At this stage, Freud’s published case-study follows his original notes almost verbatim, yet in the transcript of the Rat Man’s session of 8 November 1907 it is added, without any specification, that the patient suffers from “sacrilegious compulsions”, which seems to indicate that his blasphemous plight was more than a historical phenomenon and definitely more than a distant memory (Freud, 1909*d*, p. 193; 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 260 & 277).¹² On the first level, the Rat Man thus presents with what Luther, roughly 370 years earlier, would have termed ‘passive blasphemy’. We might even go so far as to say that, in this corner of his obsessional neurosis, Ernst Lanzer replicated a central feature of Luther’s own infamous ‘*Anfechtungen*’.¹³ The incidence of these troubling episodes was thereby validated by Freud and the patient alike, who responded to them in the same way he dealt with all his other unwelcome, frightening thought processes: in a desperate attempt to exorcise his demons, he proceeded to invent ever more complicated, time-consuming and labour-intensive rituals, only to discover that these compulsions rapidly became part of the problem, if only because they always turned out to be insufficient or ineffective.

However, apart from this instantly recognizable, paradigmatic manifestation, blasphemy also appears in the case-study of the Rat Man at two more insidious and psychoanalytically problematic junctions. The first of these entails the patient's "principal magic word" (*Hauptzauberwort*), which he tended to use as a universal apotropaic formula "against every evil" (*zum Schutze gegen alle Anfechtungen*), and which was made up from the initial letters of his six most powerful prayers, plus the concluding word 'amen' (Freud, 1909d, p. 225).¹⁴ Were it not for the fact that, quite miraculously, Freud's original notes of this part of the analysis have survived and we also have the minutes of the meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society of 1907, we may never have known the precise composition of the Rat Man's magic word, because for reasons of confidentiality Freud did not include it in the published case-study. But even without these additional documents, the quality, the source and the judgement of the blasphemy in question are unequivocal. According to the original record of the case, the Rat Man's hybrid protective formula was 'Glejisamen', which he had allegedly first used in an attempt to ward off the fantasmatically anticipated evil consequences of masturbation. When Freud analyzed this utterance, he detected in it both an anagram of the patient's girlfriend, Gisela, and the common German word for sperm, 'Samen', which prompted him to conclude that the young man must have masturbated with a mental image of his beloved. Rather presumptuously, Freud wrote in his notes: "He [the patient] was of course convinced and added that sometimes the formula had secondarily taken the shape of Giselamen, but that he had only regarded this as being an assimilation to his lady's name (an inverted misunderstanding)" (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 280-281). Remarkably though, in the published case-study, the impact of Freud's construction is rendered quite differently: "He himself

[the patient], however, had never noticed this very obvious connection; his defensive forces had allowed themselves to be fooled by the repressed ones” (Freud, 1909*d*, p. 225).

Irrespective of the effect it had on the patient, two aspects of Freud’s analysis of the Rat Man’s magic word stand out here. The first and most striking observation is that, by contrast with Ernst Lanzer’s typical passive blasphemies, the blasphemous content of ‘Glejisamen’ is not at all acknowledged by himself, at least not at the point where the word is first pronounced. It is Freud who turns his patient’s condensed prayer into a blasphemous exclamation by inserting the semen into it. It is not until Freud’s ‘verbal insemination’ of the Rat Man’s formula with a (male) sexual substance that the prayer becomes sacrilegious. Since the patient admitted that he himself had consciously and deliberately constructed this convoluted formula, we would have to conclude that it was an instance of active, rather than passive blasphemy, yet the source of this quality is external, insofar as it is strictly attributed to him by Freud, in whom it also finds its first acknowledgement. Given the disparity between the original case-notes and the published case-study, it remains unclear to what extent the Rat Man really agreed with Freud’s deduction, yet inasmuch as he might have protested against the desecration of his carefully crafted spell, Freud would probably have felt all the more justified that he had hit the patient’s pious portmanteau on its unconscious, blasphemous head. Upon hearing ‘Glejisamen’, it is Freud who slides (in German: *gleitet*) the ‘*Samen*’ into the Rat Man’s beloved Gisela. Reactivating Lacan’s definition of the psychoanalytic transference, and drawing on Avital Ronell’s wholly irreverent yet highly entertaining critique of Freud’s stubborn habit of inserting all kinds of suppositions into the Rat Man’s narrative, one might even say that, in this

particular instance, the analyst does not so much appear as a ‘supposed subject of knowing’ (*‘sujet supposé savoir’*), but rather as a ‘suppository subject of knowing’ (Ronell, 1988).¹⁵ In a more serious vein, one is also reminded here of Michel de Certeau’s argument, which was notably developed in the context of a most perceptive dissection of Freud’s own supreme blasphemy, i.e. his conception of an Egyptian Moses, that Freud authors his subjects against, or at the end of religious tradition and thereby in his own image of “a rebellious son who defends paternal authority” (de Certeau, 1988 [1975], p. 327).¹⁶

The second observation is that Freud’s unshakeable conviction when it comes to the semen stands in sharp contrast to the forgetfulness, uncertainties, hesitations, and errors that mar his own recollections of the Rat Man’s story and his adherence to his analytic position, as evinced by the original record of the case. Amnesia already kicks in when Freud enumerates and explains the prayers from which the patient has derived his ‘Glejisamen’: in the case of the ‘e’ and the ‘s’, Freud states (to himself) ‘forgotten’—if not immediately after the end of the session, at least shortly after the session had taken place.¹⁷ To be clear, it was not the Rat Man himself who had forgotten from which prayers he had taken the first letter, because during the scientific meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society of 20 November 1907—one day before the date of the ‘Glejisamen’ entry in the original record of the case—Freud first explained that the ‘e’ is “derived from the word *alle*”, which is already problematic because it suggests that in this case the Rat Man would have taken the third letter of his magic word from the end rather than from the beginning of the first word of a prayer, and then went on to admit that he had “forgotten the origin of the e and the s” (Nunberg & Federn, 1962, p. 246).¹⁸ Yet symptomatic formations such as

these appear throughout Freud's case-notes and are particularly prominent in his account of the first months of the treatment. For example, on two separate occasions, Freud recorded the title of Goethe's autobiography, a book with which he would have been deeply familiar, as *Wahrheit und Dichtung* rather than *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 262 & 267). In his notes for 12 October, Freud admitted that he could not remember the second reason as to why the Rat Man had not acted upon his suicidal ideation and he also wondered whether he had not confused the memories he was attributing to the Rat Man with those of another patient (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 262 & 267). Two days later he started his notes with a reflection upon his own "uncertainty and forgetfulness" and confirmed that the patient-memories he had doubts about really did belong to the Rat Man, but that he had forgotten them owing to "complexes of my own" (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], p. 264). On 28 December 1907, Freud escorted his patient to the kitchen of his apartment and offered him a herring. During the first session after New Year, the first set of notes are erroneously recorded as referring to 2 December rather than 2 January, and Freud again offers his patient something to eat (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 303-311).¹⁹ For all Freud's investment in the case of Ernst Lanzer, it would seem that he was persistently distracted, befuddled and misdirected, so much so that he would be brought to exchange his analytic position for that of a solicitous providore, despite the firmness and authority with which he would 'serve up' the Oedipus complex with a nice lacing of blasphemy.

The third instance of blasphemy, *qua* 'injurious speech', in the case of the Rat Man may very well constitute the most important one, partly because it remains largely unacknowledged by Freud, partly because it is not embedded in the patient's

clinical history, but triggered and sustained by the analysis itself. In this instance, it is Freud himself who becomes the object of blasphemy, without him passing judgement on it in the capacity of *'dritte Person'*. Whereas the Rat Man himself may have been fully aware of the blasphemous nature of these new mental productions, Freud remains strangely unaffected by it, which might be interpreted as evidence of his analytic neutrality, had it not been the case that his impermeability coexists with a series of redirections, diversions and displacements.

What I am referring to, here, is the Rat Man's indefatigable propensity to engage in brutal provocations that are directly addressed at Freud and the members of his family. The most well-known of these insults concerns the patient's repeated references to Freud as 'Captain' (*Herr Hauptmann*), a speech act by which he placed his analyst in the exact same position as the cruel military commander who had elicited his great obsessive fear (Freud, 1909d, p. 169). Yet as the analysis progressed, the Rat Man almost did not let a session go by without informing Freud of a new elaborate fantasy he had entertained, almost all of which involving one or more of Freud's nearest and dearest. In fact, it would seem that the first of these occurred immediately after Freud had put the semen into the magic word (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], p. 281). Freud noted:

Next day [after the analysis of 'Glejisamen'] he came in a state of deep depression [*in tiefster Verstimmung*], and wanted to talk about indifferent subjects; but he soon admitted that he was in a crisis. The most frightful thing had occurred to his mind while he was in the tram yesterday. It was quite impossible to say it . . . It was only after a forty minutes' struggle . . . [that he

gave me] to understand that it concerned my daughter. With this, the session came to an end (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], p. 281).

Soon enough, the Rat Man revealed that he had fantasized about cheating on Gisela with Freud's daughter, which effectively signals the start of an endless concatenation of offensive images and verbalisations, in which the analyst always plays a certain part: Freud's daughter performs oral sex on a deputy judge; Freud's mother is dead; Freud's apartment is a '*Freudenhaus*' (a brothel), etc. (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], pp. 282-285, 287, 293, 296 & 307-308).

A great many of these profanations did not make it into the published case-study, which may be less conditioned by Freud's own sense of decorum than by his tenacious inclination to divert them away from what they are—psychoanalytically conditioned permutations of an unconscious fantasy—in the direction of relatively benign, incidental manifestations of obsessive fear and revenge. Freud's case-notes of the Rat Man overflow with references to the Rat Man's fantasy (-world), yet time and again Freud minimizes its significance by designating his patient's active, blasphemous imagination as 'dirty transferences' (*schmutzige Übertragungen*) (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], p. 295). As a result, the great unknown in the case-study of the Rat Man is the specific structure of the obsessional fantasy and the function of blasphemy within it, which may explain why, quite a few additional cases and more than fifteen years later, Freud did not hesitate to admit:

[a]s a problem it [obsessional neurosis] has not been mastered. It must be confessed that, if we endeavour to penetrate more deeply [*tiefer eindringen*]

into its nature, we still have to rely upon doubtful assumptions and unconfirmed suppositions [*unsichere Annahmen und unbewiesene Vermutungen*] (Freud, 1926d, p. 113).

It goes without saying that the Rat Man's own, fundamental obsessive fear—that something bad might happen to his loved ones, in particular his father and his girlfriend—was based on a large number of doubtful assumptions and unconfirmed suppositions too, so in a sense Freud was only echoing, here, one of the major obstacles of one of his most famous obsessional patients, which may just about warrant the conclusion that Freud's psychoanalytic outlook of obsessional neurosis might have been more advanced if his attempts at clarification had not been obscured by the forces of his own obsessional psychic economy.

One could easily deduce from these explorations that the incidence of (alleged) passive or active blasphemy follows an obsessional pattern, that obsessional neurotics are particularly prone to blasphemous acts, or that those who perpetrate and/or accuse others of having committed blasphemy are somehow at the mercy of an obsessional fantasy. However, this is not what I wish to take from them, because it could easily lead to the logical fallacy of the *non distributio medii*—if obsessional neurosis invariably leads to (alleged) blasphemy, all (alleged) blasphemy is therefore not necessarily an instance of obsessional neurosis—and because I have already dealt with the function of blasphemy in the fantasy of obsessional neurosis elsewhere (Nobus, 2008). What I wish to extract from my reconsideration of the dialectic of blasphemy via the emergence of its axes in Freud's psychoanalytic treatment of the Rat Man is, in a sense, much simpler and perhaps more broadly applicable to

contemporary debates than any presumed link between blasphemy and obsessional neurosis.

Much like other Freudian case-studies, the analysis of the Rat Man demonstrates the importance of the subject's relation to speech and language, or (in more general terms) to the realm of representations. As I have tried to indicate, this applies as much to the patient as it obtains for the analyst. As far as blasphemy is concerned, then, the four axes that I identified in the first section of my essay—quality, source, judgement and response—need to be considered strictly as symbolic, representational functions. They only exist within a representational space, which gives them their meaning and structures their relations. However, as the case-study also shows, the logic underpinning the relations between the four axes is highly subjective, even if the two parties involved seem to share a similar psychic economy. In the analytic space between Freud and the Rat Man, the collision between the two parties' idiosyncratic logic sometimes leads to agreements—both the Rat Man and Freud acknowledging that (passive) blasphemy has occurred—yet much of the time it also generates disparities, Freud turning his patient into an active blasphemer at the point where he is convinced that he has found the perfect magic formula, and the Rat Man relentlessly exposing his analyst to the most extreme insults without the latter acknowledging their impact. The subjective logic governing the relationships between the four representational axes of blasphemy thus needs to be assessed within as well as between the speaker and the recipient of the speech act, with the added complication that the speaker is of course also the recipient of his or her own act, even if the latter is explicitly directed outwards and aimed at an external agency.

In addition, the case-study reveals that the object of blasphemy, which is not to be confused with the 'third' and which could be adduced as 'the fifth dimension', is generally a sacred, hallowed and inviolable principle, but also something that is endlessly diverse, easily exchangeable and strangely elusive. Whereas the Rat Man's passive blasphemies all appear to revolve around the profanation of God, in the course of his analysis his injurious speech becomes more and more directed at Freud. Yet in some cases it is not even entirely clear what the precise object of blasphemy is, where it is to be situated, or where it can be detected. This elusiveness of the object is particularly prominent in Freud's analysis of 'Glejisamen'. No one is likely to doubt that by inserting semen into the prayer, the latter acquires a sacrilegious status, yet who or what is being blasphemed? One might even venture the hypothesis, here, that the object is not God or Gisela, but the Rat Man himself, and that the patient's subsequent blasphemies against Freud constitute an unconscious retaliation for the subjective injuries he has endured as a result of his magic word being desecrated at the hands of his analyst. Much like anxiety in Lacan's theory, blasphemy shows itself here to be never without an object, which means that the object is always present, but not always easily pinpointed (Lacan, 2014 [1962-1963], p. 89).

Finally, the peculiar dynamics of blasphemy in the case-study of the Rat Man reveal that a space in which absolute freedom of speech is not only guaranteed, but actively encouraged by no means excludes the eruption of blasphemous ideation and hurtful insults. The Rat Man is evidently not representative, here, for each and every psychoanalytic patient, let alone each and every human being, yet this does not take away the need to reflect upon the possibility that (the emergence, detection and policing of) injurious speech is not exclusively associated with (self-)imposed

restrictions on freedom of speech, but also with the imposition and expectation of absolute freedom of expression, which in this case becomes a new, paradoxical sacrosanct object. Put differently, a space in which all restrictions are being dropped, and the lifting of prohibitions is carefully guarded and strictly enforced, could easily transmute into a newly consecrated environment whose secular orders of absolute freedom then become the target of new transgressions and violations.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to open a more nuanced perspective on blasphemy than that which proceeds from the simple opposition between the preservation of freedom of expression and the tolerance of (restrictive) religious beliefs. As such, I have endeavoured to tabulate the incidence of blasphemy along four (possibly five) distinct axes, whilst underscoring the significance of the subject's relation to what Lacan would have termed 'the function and field of speech and language' (Lacan, 2006 [1953]) for the inception and development of a certain dialectic logic between the quality, the source, the judgement, the response and the object of the blasphemous representation. I do not pretend that these dimensions are exhaustive and more could undoubtedly be said about the origin (aetiology) and the purpose (goal) of the (alleged) blasphemy, because it also seems way too simple to claim that it is all about breaking taboos, transgressing boundaries, and exposing barbaric practices, or vice versa about safeguarding secular principles, protecting moral standards, and maintaining religious values. Yet what the case of the Rat Man shows, amongst many other things, is that blasphemy is conditioned by a fantasy. In the clinical psychoanalytic setting, this fantasy may be called 'obsessive' or 'obsessional', but this

does not necessarily mean that all those who entertain it are by definition suffering from obsessional neurosis. However, outside the clinical domain, it seems important to me that the impact of this fantasy is also identified and analysed, because it may very well offer to key to unlocking some of the most intractable issues in contemporary debates over freedom of speech and the conservation of the sacred. In this context, I agree with Talal Asad that the classic neo-liberal response to the shocking brutality with which (alleged) blasphemers have often been taken to task for their putative crimes cannot be divorced from an underlying socio-political ideology (fantasy) of a fully self-governing, autonomous, free human being, much like the (alleged) blasphemy itself is conditioned by the conviction (fantasy) that human beings are inherently accountable to an inviolable, higher, divine order (Asad, 2013).

Finally, psychoanalysis may also be the first discipline to reveal that speech has the power to heal as much as it has the ability to wound, whereby the process of healing is never to be attributed entirely to the influence of the psychoanalyst. As Freud put it at the end of one of his technical papers, once the treatment has reached a certain point, the psychoanalyst “has nothing else to do than to wait and let things run their course, a course which cannot be avoided nor always hastened” (Freud, 1914g, p. 155). The impact of injurious words is not irreversible and their very perception and assimilation as wounding, malicious representations may be altered if the symbolic structures and circumstances in which they are embedded are constructed and reconstructed. Freud referred to this restorative process of symbolic reconfiguration as ‘working-through’ and Lacan at one point termed it the traversal of the fantasy (Freud, 1914g; Lacan, 1994 [1964], p. 273). In the context of secular and religious socio-political conflicts over blasphemy and hate speech, I would call it

narrative reframing. As psychoanalysis has demonstrated, the redemptive effect of these permutations is not illusory, yet it does require that one acknowledges and maps the dialectic logic in which a representation is lodged and carefully decomposes the fantasy that conditions and maintains its manifestations.

Notes

1. For critical analyses of the Rushdie affair and its aftermath, see Appignanesi & Maitland (1989), Aubert (1990), Ruthven (1990) and Pipes (1994).
2. In the monumental history of blasphemy by the American scholar Leonard W. Levy, a mere five pages are devoted to the issue of impious speech in the Islamic world, notably as part of a discussion of the Rushdie affair (Levy, 1995 [1993]). For comprehensive surveys of the history of blasphemy as a Christian offence, see Nash (2007), Cabantous (2015), de Saint Victor (2016) and Schwerhoff (2021).
3. For in-depth discussions of Luther's *'Anfechtungen'* and their influence on his theology, see Büchler (1942), Beintker (1954), Hovland (1962), Begalke (1982), Scaer (1983) and Trozzo (2014, pp. 15-23).
4. A very detailed account of Luther's condition in July 1527 was recorded by his friend Justus Jonas and his father confessor Johannes Bugenhagen. For this document, see Luther (1914 [1531-1546], pp. 80-90).
5. In 1941, the Danish psychiatrist Paul J. Reiter did not hesitate to diagnose Luther as psychotic, yet contemporary biographers generally content themselves with the label depression. See Reiter (1941), Oberman (1989 [1982], pp. 320-324) and Stanford (2017, p. 356). The first to speculate extensively about the pathogenic influence of Luther's conflict with his father was Erik

Erikson in his 1958 psychobiography, yet the hypothesis lingers on in contemporary biographical studies. See Erikson (1958) and Roper (2016, pp. 59-61).

6. See, for example, Nash (2007, pp. 49 & 82).
7. Luther's lifelong obsession with scatological imagery, which he also used in his own personal struggles with the Devil, inevitably prompted psychoanalytically minded scholars, such as Norman O. Brown, to diagnose his anal character and to see his theology as a profoundly excremental vision rooted in sexualized religious anality. See Brown (1959, pp. 177-233). For excellent studies of Luther's conception of the Pope as the Antichrist, see Bäumer (1971), Russell (1994) and Whitford (2008). It should be noted, here, that Luther's vitriolic accusations were not just restricted to the Bishop of Rome, but were routinely extended to include the Islamic world and the Jewish tradition as well. For an excellent revisionist study of Luther's anti-Semitism, in which it is argued that his hatred ran much deeper than the spirit of the age, see Roper (2021).
8. I should emphasize, however, that the one who acknowledges the speech act as blasphemy is not necessarily the one who takes offence, if offence is taken at all, as will also become clear from the second section of my essay. Furthermore, it may also happen that someone takes offence on behalf of someone else, who may or may not be the 'third'.
9. Incidentally, the most vehement criticisms of *The Book of Mormon* have come from secular reviewers, many of whom felt it necessary to call out the musical's stereotypical, caricatural representation of the tribal people in the Nigerian village to which the missionaries have been sent.
10. Blasphemy also plays an important part in Freud's case-study of the Wolf Man (Freud, 1918b [1914]). In fact, the early psychoanalytic literature pullulates with clinical instances of blasphemy, sacrilege and profanation, which makes it all the more remarkable and puzzling that very few psychoanalysts have tackled the question head on. During the first half of the 20th century, a mere two clinical psychoanalytic essays were exclusively devoted to the topic. See Hárnik (1927) and Wietfeldt (1929).

11. In 'The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power', Lacan endorsed Freud's exasperation by saying that, in the analysis of obsessional neuroses, the analyst "does not simply need the blueprints to a reconstructed labyrinth, nor even a pile of blueprints that is already worked up", but "the general combinatory that . . . governs their variety [and] . . . even more usefully, accounts for the illusions or, better, shifts in the labyrinth that take place right before one's eyes" (Lacan, 2006 [1958], p. 526).
12. Interestingly, when Freud detailed the Rat Man's 'passive blasphemy' during his early adolescence, he added a footnote in the published case-study saying "Compare the similar mechanism in the familiar case of sacrilegious thoughts entering the minds of devout persons" (Freud, 1909*d*, p. 193, footnote 1). No such observation was included in his case-notes, yet at the point where the latter referred to the patient's ongoing sacrilegious compulsions, Freud laconically added "like nuns" (Freud, 1955 [1907-1908], p. 277).
13. As I mentioned previously, I do not wish to focus, here, on a retrospective diagnosis of Luther's state of mind, yet the confluence between his passive blasphemous thoughts and those reported by the Rat Man, paired with the prevalence of his anal erotism, has provided some scholars with sufficient proof that the great religious reformer was neither (endogenously) depressed nor psychotic, but suffered instead from a severe obsessional neurosis. See, for example, Lewis (1967, pp. 157-172), Cole (2000) and Osborn (2008, pp. 45-68).
14. This is the only passage in the published case-study where the word '*Anfechtungen*' occurs, yet it remains unclear whether it has been taken from the patient's discourse, or constitutes Freud's own formulation.
15. For transference as the function of the 'supposed subject of knowing', see Lacan (1994 [1964], p. 232), where the French term '*sujet supposé savoir*' has been translated as 'subject who is supposed to know'. I have decided to adopt 'supposed subject of knowing', because this is how Schneiderman renders Lacan's concept in his 1980 anthology of papers, supposedly in agreement with Lacan and Miller (Schneiderman, 1980, p. vii). For another take on Freud's practice of interpretative insemination in the case of the Rat Man, see Hodge (1999).

16. For Freud's conception of Moses as an Egyptian, see Freud (1939a [1939-37]). For a brilliant application of de Certeau's argument on the way in which blasphemy also permeates Freud's case-study of the Wolf Man, see Lawton (1993, pp. 144-176).
17. In the English edition of the original record, the single German word '*vergessen*' is rendered as 'meaning forgotten', which has the disadvantage that it may prompt the reader to conclude that Freud did not so much forget the prayer as such, but only its significance in the psychic economy of his patient. See Freud (1955 [1907-1908], p. 281).
18. This passage is part of Freud's contribution to a discussion of a case of anxiety hysteria by Wilhelm Stekel, which occurred two weeks after Freud's second of two consecutive presentations on the Rat Man. The fact that Freud did not include his analysis of '*Glejisamen*' in these original presentations suggests that the patient had not mentioned the exact word yet—although he had hinted at it during the session of 11 October—and that on 20 November 1907 Freud informed his colleagues of fresh material, some of which he had already forgotten. It is also worth mentioning, here, that in her unsurpassed critical edition of the German text of Freud's case-notes on the Rat Man, Elza Ribeiro Hawelka added a footnote to Freud's initial assertion that the '*e*' was derived from '*alle*', in which she indicated that a reversal of '*alle*' would conjure up Ella, the first name of the patient's niece, and that '*e*' is of course also the first letter of the patient's given name. However, all of this still would not explain Freud's forgetfulness, or his marked hesitation at this place in the formula. See Freud (1955 [1907-1908], p. 260; 1974 [1907-1908], p. 149, footnote 286).
19. I should concede, here, that Freud's record is rather ambiguous at this point and that he may have just been referring to the herring he had offered his patient before.

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