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The Sound of Blasphemy in Early Twentieth-Century Spain: Vulgarity, Violence and the Crowd

Isn't it sad, isn't it dreadful to see how the burning lava of that infernal current – that shout, that howl of satanic rage against the holy name of God – has extended across the beautiful face of our Christian nations to even reach Spain, that beautiful Spain so beloved by God and so showered by his blessings?¹

Félix Sardá i Salvany's thundering denunciation of blasphemy was particularly eloquent but far from unusual. Catholic writers often singled out the role played by blasphemy as both the symptom and cause of the alleged sorry state of Catholicism in Restoration Spain (1874–1923), bringing shame to a country they celebrated as the principal bastion of the Catholic faith. Sardá i Salvany, author of the best-selling *Liberalismo es pecado* [*Liberalism is a sin*], published his pamphlet on blasphemy in 1899 as Spain stood on the cusp of a decade of an intensified secular-religious culture war that intersected with a wave of national soul-searching in the wake of the “Disaster” of 1898 – defeat in the Spanish-American War and the resultant loss of the remnants of Spain's overseas empire – that appeared to confirm Spanish backwardness and decadence.² Yet belying this intellectual pessimism, early twentieth-century Spain was experiencing significant, albeit uneven, economic and social change consistent with an emerging mass society. Blasphemy served to draw together anxieties about the changing nature of Spanish society and fears of urban, social degeneration circulating in Spain and wider Europe at this time.

Blasphemy in modern Spain has drawn little attention from scholars despite the consolidation of an important body of work on anticlericalism and secular-religious struggle.³ In short

¹ Félix Sardá i Salvany, *¡Calla, blasfemo!* (Barcelona: n.p., 1899), 2.

² On the “Disaster”, e.g. Sebastian Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ For the early twentieth century, e.g. Julio de la Cueva and Feliciano Montero, eds., *La secularización conflictiva* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007); Eduardo Sanabria, *Republicanism and Anticlerical Nationalism in Spain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Julio de la Cueva, *Clericales y anticlericales: el conflicto entre confesionalidad y secularización en Cantabria (1875–1923)* (Santander: Universidad de Cantabria, 1991); María Pilar Salomón

remarks or passing mention of blasphemy, scholars have tended to echo Catholic lamentations, according to which Spain was a “land of blasphemers” and “blasphemous oaths [we]re a routine aspect of daily life”.⁴ Yet little research has been conducted into legal records that could help gauge the prevalence of blaspheming.⁵ The wider historiography on blasphemy in Europe has tended to focus on France, Germany and Britain. This scholarship has underlined that blasphemy can help illuminate attitudes towards the sacred and the profane, moral order and power dynamics in past societies.⁶ Key themes in this work, which has often focused on the early modern period, including the association of blasphemy with incivility and vice, its social function as a mark of belonging, and its role in violent encounters are patent in early twentieth-century Spanish context. For many Catholics, Spanish society and Catholicism were coterminous, which meant that blasphemy was not reduced to a religious matter, but rather was integral to wider social and political questions.

This chapter examines the meaning of blasphemy through two moments of secular-religious conflict in 1909 of differing scale and gravity: an anti-blasphemy campaign in Madrid and the “Tragic Week” in Barcelona. The former was nothing new, for anti-blasphemy campaigns by mayors and civil governors were a common occurrence during the first decade of the twentieth century. The latter was more exceptional, for the Tragic Week was the most violent outburst of anticlerical violence in Spain since the 1830s. A strike and demonstration against the call-up of reservists to fight in Morocco developed into several days of unplanned and unstructured

Chéliz, *Anticlericalismo en Aragón: protesta popular y movilización cívica (1900–1939)* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2002); Joseba Louzao Villar, *Soldados de la fe o amantes del progreso: Catolicismo y modernidad en Vizcaya (1890–1923)* (Madrid: Genuève, 2011); María Thomas, “The Faith and the Fury: The Construction of Anticlerical Collective Identities in Spain, 1874–1931,” *European History Quarterly* 43, 1 (2013): 73–95.

⁴ The first quotation is from Ramón Sarabia, quoted in Víctor Manuel Arbeloa, *Aquella España católica* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1975), 100; the second from Timothy Mitchell, *Betrayal of the Innocents: Desire, Power and the Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 15. For remarks on blasphemy: Manuel Delgado Ruiz, *Luces iconoclastas: anticlericalismo, blasfemia y martirio de imágenes* (Barcelona: Ariel, 2001), 129; Cueva, *Clericales*, 273, 275; Laura Orlandini, “Anticlericalismo y catolicismo en España e Italia al principio del siglo xx. Una perspectiva comparada,” Ph.D. thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2013, 255–262; Salomón Chéliz, *Anticlericalismo*, 235–236. The early modern period is better served, e.g. Martí Gelabertó Vilagran, “No tomarás el nombre de Dios en vano. Blasfemia y castigo divino en Cataluña (siglos XVI–XVIII),” *Espacio, tiempo y forma. Serie IV, Historia moderna* 23 (2010): 153–180; Maureen Flynn, “Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Past & Present* 149 (1995): 29–56; Manuel Santana, *El delito de blasfemia en el tribunal inquisitorial de Cuenca* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 2004).

⁵ As Salomón Chéliz noted in *Anticlericalismo en Aragón*, 235.

⁶ Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

revolt accompanied by the burning of dozens of religious buildings, the desecration of religious objects and the deaths of three religious figures.

Blasphemy is approached here as a speech act and as part of the sonic environment of the streets of Madrid and Barcelona in 1909, drawing on attempts by historians to “listen” to the past.⁷ In histories of sound, the modern city has been a particular subject of interest. Urbanisation and industrialisation had profound effects on the “soundscape” of cities and critics denounced the polluting noise produced by machinery and traffic. There were concerted attempts to regulate and control objectionable “noise” (which was separate from permissible “sound”).⁸ Attitudes to sound – and labelling something as ‘noise’ in particular – therefore shed light not only on individual and collective identities, but also on how social difference and moral orders were understood and policed.⁹ The ephemeral nature of speech renders listening for past utterances of blasphemy impossible, yet this has not prevented scholars in the field of sound studies from examining historical sound, for, as Daniel Morat underlines, “what is at stake is always the reconstruction of meanings that belonged, or were ascribed, to the particular sounds in question.”¹⁰ The print discussion of the blasphemy was more common amongst its critics rather than blasphemers themselves. The anti-blasphemy campaign in Madrid only received brief criticism from the tenaciously anticlerical *El Motín* and appears to have not drawn comment from the anarchist and socialist press, while testimonies of blasphemy during the Tragic Week come from Catholic victims, rather than blasphemers themselves. Accordingly, this is a study of how blasphemy was understood, imagined and discussed by its opponents in 1909.

The Backdrop for Blasphemy

⁷ A useful starting point is Peter Bailey, “Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise,” *Body & Society* 2, 2 (1996): 49–66.

⁸ Key texts on sound and the modern city include: Emily A. Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

⁹ Pioneering in its historical treatment of sound and identity is Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-century French Countryside* (London: Papermac, 1999). On sound, social difference, civility and politeness, see Peter Denney, Bruce Buchan, David Ellison and Karen Crawley, eds., *Sound, Space and Civility in the British World, 1700-1850* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019). For Spain, Samuel Llano, *Discordant Notes: Marginality and Social Control in Madrid, 1850-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Daniel Morat, “The Sound of a New Era: On the Transformation of Auditory and Urban Experience in the Long Fin de Siècle, 1880–1930,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 7, 1 (2019): 593.

The secular-religious “culture war” that was fought over the place and role of Catholicism in Spanish society emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. A sector of the Liberal party sought to shore up its position by seeking restrictions on the Catholic Church, which created an important crack in the corrupt yet stable political system of the Restoration monarchy, in which the Liberal and Conservative parties fixed elections to manage their alternation in power. This political move by Liberals combined with the troubles of 1898 and the emergence of Republican populism, as well as the growing socialist and anarchist movements, to help fuel anticlericalism. Anticlericalism transformed from an intellectual position into a mass movement formed by a range of anticlerical leagues and associations, and underpinned by a vigorous, polemical print culture, extending from the press to lurid pornographic pamphlets.¹¹

Opposition to the Catholic Church cannot be divorced from its massive expansion during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the characteristics of which reflected wider Catholic revivalism across Europe. The size and number of religious orders multiplied and new schools, churches, charitable initiatives and organisations, including rural savings banks and workers’ “circles”, were founded.¹² This “reconstitution” of the Spanish Catholic Church under the Restoration monarchy had not been straightforward, not least due to predominant Integrist traditionalism that rejected the liberal constitution, but by the end of the century this position had softened to an accommodation with the Restoration system.¹³

The culture war played out in government and parliament, in the press and at the level of street politics, in a similar manner to other culture wars over religion that occurred across Europe in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ Attempts by Liberal governments to place restrictions on Catholic religious orders and to assert the role of the Spanish state in areas that the Church considered its purview, such as marriage, failed in the face of opposition from the Church and the

¹¹ For an overview, William J. Callahan, *The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875–1998* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), ch. 3. See also Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹² An overview in Julio de la Cueva, “Católicos en la calle: la movilización de los católicos españoles, 1899–1923,” *Historia y política* 3 (2000): 55–80. See also Feliciano Montero, *El movimiento católico en España, 1889–1936* (Alcalá: Universidad de Alcalá, 2017) and José Andrés Gallego, *Pensamiento y acción social de la Iglesia en España* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1984).

¹³ “Reconstitution” in Joseba Louzao Villar, “Catholicism versus Laicism: Culture Wars and the Making of Catholic National Identity in Spain, 1898–1931,” *European History Quarterly* 43, 4 (2013): 657–680. An overview of Integristism in Feliciano Montero, “El peso del integrismo en la Iglesia y el catolicismo español del siglo xx,” *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 44, 1 (2014), accessed March 1, 2020, doi: 10.4000/mcv.5537.

¹⁴ Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, eds., *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Conservative party. Catholic opposition increasingly adopted modern techniques in defence of the Church's interests, including the prolific creation of Catholic Leagues that attempted to control local level politics, petitions and, from 1907, rallies.¹⁵ Anticlerical activists founded their own Leagues and associations, which organised meetings and demonstrations, held ostentatious feasts of meat on Good Friday and disrupted religious processions.

Secular-religious conflict was fuelled by the wider socioeconomic changes that Spain was experiencing. Thousands left the countryside for swelling cities and industrial areas from the end of the nineteenth century. Barcelona, where wide leafy avenues populated with elegant modernist mansions contrasted with the tight narrow streets of overcrowded working-class districts, inaugurated its first electric tram in 1899 and less than a decade later there were over 200 automobiles on the streets.¹⁶ Madrid lacked the industrial backbone of Barcelona, yet was a more dynamic and diversified modern metropolis than the small, staid city populated by bureaucrats of the mid nineteenth century.¹⁷ The growth of a mass press, trade unions, and sporadic waves of strike action also broadly followed European patterns of an emerging mass society, even if this was weaker and less developed than in northern Europe.

Across Europe, the emerging disciplines of sociology and criminology sought to analyse and diagnose the results of these changes. In Spain, theories of degeneration, social hygiene and crowd psychology all circulated in the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly in the context of the insalubrious working-class neighbourhoods of Madrid and Barcelona.¹⁸ The latter was also infamous as the "city of bombs", thanks to a series of terrorist attacks in the 1890s, followed by further bombings between 1904 and 1909. In the face of social protest, swelling cities and desperate social conditions, elites were conscious of the fragility of the existing liberal bourgeois social order, not least as the rigged political system and often vigorous repression of social movements contradicted the promise of liberal freedoms and the

¹⁵ See Callahan, *The Catholic Church*, ch. 3; Cueva, *Clericales*, 361.

¹⁶ Joaquín Romero Maura, *La rosa de fuego: republicanos y anarquistas: la política de los obreros barceloneses entre el desastre colonial y la semana trágica, 1899–1909* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1975), 60.

¹⁷ A significant body of recent work covers this. Summaries in Luis Enrique Otero Carvajal, "La sociedad urbana y la irrupción de la Modernidad en España, 1900–1936," *Cuadernos de historia contemporánea* 38 (2016): 255–283 and Borja Carballo, Fernando Vicente and Rubén Pallol, *El ensanche de Madrid: historia de una capital* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 2008). On the discursive construction of Madrid's dark side, e.g. Fernando Vicente Albarrán, "Barrios negros, barrios pintorescos. Realidad e imaginario social del submundo madrileño (1860–1930)," *Hispania Nova*, 12 (2014): 37–65.

¹⁸ Rubén Pallol Trigueros, "Fear in the City: Social Change and Moral Panic in Madrid in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Writing Wrongdoing in Spain, 1800–1936: Realities, Representations, Reactions*, ed. Alison Sinclair and Samuel Llano (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2017), 217–236.

existence of universal manhood suffrage.¹⁹ The emerging mass society also threatened to erode a social hierarchy regulated by middle class notions of civility, which foregrounded politeness and cleanliness in its demarcation of social distinction.²⁰ It is only against such a backdrop that the meaning of blasphemy can be understood.

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A Sin, a Vice and a Legal Infraction

Catholic commentators invariably denounced that blasphemy was on the increase in Spain and that Spaniards were the worst offenders in the world.²¹ Blasphemy was a vice and a serious sin for it violated Christians' primary duty to love God above all others.²² Yet it was also perplexing in its pointlessness. Theft, robbery or murder at least originated in the "passions" or material self-interest, whereas blasphemy afforded no gain.²³ Blasphemy was not only "repugnant, disgusting and foul from a social perspective [but also] irrational, monstrous and absurd from a philosophical standpoint."²⁴ Combatting blasphemy was of vital importance, as cursing God was a threshold sin that opened the door to committing further wickedness.²⁵

Blasphemy was understood fundamentally an act of speech. Many Spaniards allegedly "d[id] not know how to speak without inserting words of dubious taste [and] markedly obscene, repugnant blasphemies into their conversations".²⁶ In doing so, blasphemers sullied and

¹⁹ Richard Cleminson, "Liberal Governmentality in Spain: Bodies, Minds, and the Medical Construction of the 'Outsider,' 1870–1910," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 22, 1 (2016): 23–40; Matteo Millan, "The Shadows of Social Fear: Emotions, Mentalities and Practices of the Propertied Classes in Italy, Spain and France (1900–1914)," *Journal of Social History* 50, 2 (2016): 336–361. On Madrid as a contested space, e.g. Rubén Pallol Trigueros, "La lucha por la calle. Conflictos en la redefinición del espacio público en las ciudades de comienzos de siglo XX," *Crisol* 5 (2019): 1–35.

²⁰ See Jesús Cruz Valenciano, *El surgimiento de la cultura burguesa: personas, hogares y ciudades en la España del siglo xix* (Madrid: Siglo XIX, 2014).

²¹ E.g. Agustín Coy Contonat, *Blasfemias y obscenidades en el lenguaje* (Barcelona: Manuel Vergés, 1918), 7; *La Vanguardia*, September 3, 1929. On Spain in a worldwide context, Joan Maragall, E. Sanz Escartin and Ivón L'Escop, *Lliga del Bon Mot: en pro de la cultura del lenguaje* (Barcelona: P. Santmartí, 1912), 14.

²² José María Martín de Herrera, *Carta pastoral del emmo. y revmo. señor cardenal José María Martín de Herrera, arzobispo de Santiago, contra la blasfemia* (Santiago de Compostela: Seminario Central, 1903), 8–9; Josep Torras i Bages, *Contra la blasfemia: exhortació pastoral* (Vich: Lluçia Anglada, 1909), 8.

²³ Ramón Font, *La blasfemia* (Gerona: Tomás Carreras, 1887), 8. See also Sardá i Salvany, *¡Calla...!*, 5–6; Coy Contonat, *Blasfemias*, 27.

²⁴ Font, *La blasfemia*, 7–8.

²⁵ *La Vanguardia*, November 15, 1909.

²⁶ Coy Cotonat, *Blasfemias*, 18. See also Sardá i Salvany, *¡Calla...!*, 7; *Carta pastoral...José María Martín de Herrera*, 7; Julio Chillida Meliá, *La blasfemia: manual del propagandista en su contra* (Castellón: J. Armengat e hijos, 1913), 26; and Rucabado's article "El apoteosis" in *La Veu de Catalunya*, August 26, 1909.

polluted language, which should be “pure” and “holy”.²⁷ Although writers emphasised that blasphemy “infected” even the “highest classes” of Spanish society and was no longer the preserve of “muleteers, mariners and soldiers”, most nevertheless associated blasphemy with the lower classes, particularly the urban working class.²⁸ Such criticism claimed to draw on commentators’ own experiences of hearing the “virus of impiety” on a daily basis “in the streets, squares, and other public spaces [by] men, women and even children”, and appeared to be verbal confirmation of the alienation of many Spaniards from the Church – the so-called “apostasy of the masses”.²⁹ There was a further dimension: by bracketing blasphemy together with the vices of gambling and pornography, concerns about blasphemy reflected wider concerns about the degeneration of Spanish society, which echoed similar anxieties across Europe, and was shared by critics beyond the Catholic fold, as will be explored below.³⁰

Catholic writers advocated solutions that included the abstention from frequenting taverns, the mobilisation of shame and the use of swear boxes as means of self-regulation and developing individual responsibility, but, above all, they demanded a stricter application of the law and encouraged Catholics to pressure state authorities.³¹ In his anti-blasphemy “handbook”, Julio Chillida Meliá provided his readers with model denunciations for reporting blasphemers to the police and guidance on how to approach the state.³² Catholics also visited civil governors and mayors to demand a crackdown on blasphemy. While the Penal Code of 1870 did not make explicit reference to blasphemy – which clerics lamented – cursing the sacred could be prosecuted under provisions for offences against public morality, as was clarified in jurisprudence. Blasphemy could be punished as a minor infraction that entailed detention for between one and ten days and a fine of five to 50 pesetas.³³ Civil governors, who were the

²⁷ Coy Cotonat, *Blasfemias*, 16.

²⁸ Font, *La blasfemia*, the quotations at 11; Joaquim Ruyra, *Del mal parlar* (Barcelona: Perelló y Vergés, 1913), 9; Sardá i Salvany, *¡Calla...!*, 10–11.

²⁹ *La Vanguardia*, November 3, 1909. On the “apostasy of the masses”, see Feliciano Montero García, “La ‘apostasía de las masas’ y la recristianización de la sociedad: las estrategias pastorales de la Iglesia española en el siglo XX,” in *El siglo XX: balance y perspectivas. V Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2000), 391–398.

³⁰ See, e.g., Richard Cleminson and Teresa Fuentes Peris, “‘La Mala Vida’: Source and Focus of Degeneration, Degeneracy and Decline,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 10, 4 (2009): 385–397; Ricardo Campos Marín, José Martínez Pérez and Rafael Huertas García-Alejo, *Los ilegales de la naturaleza: medicina y degeneracionismo en la España de la Restauración (1876–1923)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2001); Daniel Pick, *Faces of degeneration: A European disorder, c.1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).

³¹ Juan Guerra Díaz, *El amigo del católico campesino* (Valladolid: Cuesta, 1919), 59–60; shame in Font, *La blasfemia*, 19; Sardá i Salvany, *¡Calla...!*, 14.

³² Chillida Meliá, *La blasfemia*, 230–232.

³³ For the Penal Code: *Gaceta de Madrid*, August 31, 1870. Administrative bulletins published circulars reminding state officials of the penalties. See also a similar remind in a monthly police journal: *Revista Técnica de la Guardia Civil*, June 30, 1915.

maximum political authority in each province, and mayors confirmed the penalties in regular circulars and proclamations during the first decade of the twentieth century. However, an anti-blasphemy campaign in Madrid in 1909 went further still.

Madrid: An Anti-Blasphemy Campaign

On 11 May 1909, the new Chief of Police in Madrid, Ramón Méndez Alanís, issued a circular to policemen in the Spanish capital. Not only did he remind them to fine blasphemers, but he also ordered them to log offenders' details in a new central register. His circular alleged that blasphemy undermined the "esteem" and "respect" that citizens deserved and the measures aimed to restore decorum in public behaviour. It was widely reproduced in the press and even reached the Spanish parliament, where Julià Nougués, a Democratic Federal Republican deputy, complained to the Minister of Justice that a newspaper had been sequestered for criticising the circular.³⁴

The Catholic press welcomed the anti-blasphemy campaign as a "fair and cultured measure" to combat the "pestilent and ultra-coarse language that continuously offends the ears of the decent people of Madrid".³⁵ Liberal and republican newspapers were more critical. They expressed scepticism that rich culprits would be fined and quipped that it would be easier to take the census to the police station than produce a register of blasphemers.³⁶ Their opposition focused on defending freedom of speech and criticising the police's role in determining permissible speech, but made little attempt to defend blasphemy as a practice. As Nougués stated in parliament, blasphemy "should not be tolerated", but "he who wants to blaspheme has the right to do so".³⁷ Such a view was shared by Jacinto Benavente and Mariano de Cavia, both prominent writers. For Cavia, the remedy lay in liberty of conscience and education at home and at school, not in the hands of the police.³⁸ Benavente agreed: "coarseness of language is only a symptom of spiritual coarseness [which] will not disappear with poultices and little patches. Good, purifying tonics from parents, teachers and educators are the most adequate and efficacious [measures]".³⁹

³⁴ *Diario de las sesiones de cortes*, May 14, 1909.

³⁵ *La Lectura Dominical*, May 15, 1909. See also *El Siglo Futuro*, May 12, 1909.

³⁶ *El Imparcial*, May 13, 1909; *El País*, May 13, 1909.

³⁷ *Diario de las sesiones de cortes*, May 14, 1909.

³⁸ *El Imparcial*, May 13, 1909.

³⁹ *El Imparcial*, May 17, 1909.

Underpinning the reactions from intellectuals and the Catholic press was therefore the tacit agreement that blasphemy was a vulgar act that revealed a “lack of manners [*educación*]” and “very poor taste”.⁴⁰ Benavente compared blaspheming to other bodily functions as a “physiological need”, distasteful yet excusable. Blasphemy was oral flatulence: “an expansion of the nerves and an escape of energy through ostentatious words that have no weight beyond their purely onomatopoeic value”.⁴¹ Even though it was hardly the most laudatory defence of blasphemy, he was met with a furious response from the Jesuit-owned *La Lectura Dominical*, which accused him of placing civilisation itself in peril: “Shall we punish blasphemers or shall we burn all of the legal codes and laws of the world?” Laws and circulars were the dams holding back the threatening flood of vulgarity that threatened to drown Spanish society: “This is a problem of education, decency, moral hygiene and human dignity, a problem that is dealt with by every decent school, every nation – even if they are not Catholic or even Christian – and all men of a certain decorum, even if they are freethinkers”.⁴²

Blasphemy was therefore not reduced to a religious matter. Beyond the pulpit and pamphlets produced by Catholic propagandists defining it as a sin, blasphemy was also considered to pertain to morality and the social order more widely. These concerned religion insofar as Catholicism provided the moral inspiration for proper governance and the moral foundation for a healthy society, yet the association of blasphemy with vulgarity afforded a common space for discussion with writers critical of the Church founded on a rejection of the acceptability of blasphemy. There was a shared understanding that blasphemy undermined politeness and good manners in the streets of the capital. As Jesús Cruz has observed in etiquette handbooks, the late nineteenth century saw a widespread turn to a reliance on Catholic morals to underpin notions of middle-class respectability.⁴³

Cleanliness was a notion particularly emphasised by middle class culture and reactions to the anti-blasphemy campaign included a comment on the appearance of crowds in urban Spain in the early twentieth century that reflected on the relationship between hygiene and society.⁴⁴ Azorín, a member of the “98 Generation” of intellectuals and writers like Benavente, was particularly eloquent in decrying the vulgarity of blasphemy and the changing nature of social

⁴⁰ *Diario de las sesiones de cortes*, May 14, 1909.

⁴¹ *El Imparcial*, May 17, 1909.

⁴² *La Lectura Dominical*, May 22, 1909.

⁴³ Cruz Valenciano, *El surgimiento de la cultura*, 94.

⁴⁴ Cruz Valenciano, *El surgimiento de la cultura*, 88–92.

relations in twentieth-century Spain. He compared a man uttering a blasphemy to an individual walking the streets “dirty and disastrously dressed when he could [clothe himself] well”. Blasphemy, like the latter, was an insult to wider society, for “cleanliness, like speaking well, are duties that we must fulfil to our fellow citizens”. Citizens had to uphold higher moral standards now that they lived in a “society”, in which “*other citizens* have the *right* (sic) to our respect and our esteem”. The “old concept of freedom – exclusivist, individualist, wild – is changing”.⁴⁵ These ideas reflected reformist attitudes towards society and the individual at the time, according to which human beings were interdependent, individual and collective – social – needs existed in tandem, and, as a result, human actions should be guided by what was deemed to be the common good.⁴⁶ Blaspheming polluted and undermined the tenets of a modern, civilised and *European* society. This reflected a combination of middle-class notions of politeness, respectability and cleanliness, circulating social hygienist, degenerationist and criminological ideas and desires for the “regeneration” of Spain after the “Disaster” of 1898.⁴⁷

Azorín connected his aural and visual experiences of urban spaces to his view of the problems facing Spain in the early twentieth century. What was *heard* in the streets was understood as an auditory slice of national character that revealed the relative level of progress and modernity of Spanish society. As another writer commented, “I find it perfectly agreeable to praise the latest circular on blasphemy for the reason that one walks down the street and suddenly hears: ‘*Rediez!*’ [bloody hell!]”.⁴⁸ The criticism of the distasteful sound of blasphemy in the streets reflects the term “aural hygiene”, which Llano has used to describe how the Madrid city authorities policed the performances by organ-grinders and choirs. For Llano, aural hygienic policies were a middle class strategy that sought to safeguard bourgeois society by policing and controlling marginal groups viewed as a threat to public morality, which was achieved by “protecting certain areas of the city from the intrusion of ‘impure’ and unwanted sounds and

⁴⁵ *ABC*, May 16, 1909. Cabantous remarks that from the seventeenth century the blasphemer was depicted as a “fringe element who refused fellow feeling and authority” in *Blasphemy*, 115.

⁴⁶ Miguel Ángel Cabrera, *El reformismo social en España (1870–1900)* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2014), ch. 3.

⁴⁷ Cleminson and Fuentes Peris, “‘La mala vida’”, 385–397. The most emblematic studies are Constancio Bernaldo de Quirós and José María Llanas Aguilaniedo, *La mala vida en Madrid. Estudio psicosociológico con dibujos y fotografías al natural* (Madrid: Asociación de Libreros de Lance de Madrid, 2010 [1901]) and Rafael Salillas, *El delincuente español. Hampa (Antropología picaresca)* (Madrid: Librería de Victoriano Suárez, 1898). On the underworld, see also Sinclair and Llano, eds., *Writing wrongdoing*.

⁴⁸ *Nuevo Mundo*, May 27, 1909.

musical practices that were consequently described as ‘noise’”, as in other European cities.⁴⁹ It was not just music that was policed, however, for the criticism of blasphemy reveals that desires for a hygienic, unpolluted soundscape stretched to shouts and curses heard in the street. The anxieties were not solely fixated on policing spatialised class hierarchies, but betrayed wider fears about modernity, progress and the general direction of a changing Spanish society.

Blasphemy was not the only speech act to receive the attention of Méndez Alanís, who introduced a number of initiatives that sought to suppress vulgar, sonically conspicuous behaviour in an attempt to enforce genteel conduct and good manners. He attempted a ban on street-selling in the central square of Puerta del Sol and a crackdown on the practice of subjecting women to *piropos*, defined as “remark[s], sometimes obscene, sometimes even friendly, but always sexual about a woman’s physical appearance”.⁵⁰ The attempted ban on *piropos* is illustrative. The practice had many more supporters than blasphemy for it formed part of a particular ideal of Spanish masculinity and gender relations. Whereas blasphemy was not “appropriate for a country with electric lighting, police with helmets and shops that even sell foie gras”, “without *piropos*, Recoletos [a central avenue] will become an outpost of the Sahara Desert”.⁵¹ There was nothing anti-modern about unaccompanied women being subject to a cacophony of lascivious remarks in public space for the *piropo* was an art form, the “seasoning of youth” and the most “inoffensive” thing that could pass between a man and a woman. More provocatively, *piropos* were holy for they were the first step towards courting and the sacrament of marriage.⁵² Such self-indulgent, abstract and patriarchal philosophising contrasted with the reality of the *piropo*: days later a pregnant woman was injured in a scuffle when she objected to a *piropo*.⁵³ Twenty years later *piropos* once again came under attack and searching questions were asked about the nature of modern Spanish masculinity.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Samuel Llano, “The Sacred in Madrid’s Soundscape: Toward an Aural Hygiene, 1856–1907,” in *The Sacred and Modernity in Urban Spain: Beyond the Secular City*, ed. Antonio Cordoba and Daniel García-Donoso (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2; Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, ch. 2.

⁵⁰ Nerea Aresti, “Shaping the Spanish Modern Man: The Conflict of Masculine Ideals through a Court Case in the 1920s,” *Feminist Studies* 33, 3 (2007): 606–631.

⁵¹ *Nuevo Mundo*, May 27, 1909.

⁵² Félix Mendez, *¡¡Ole, ole las mujeres!! Protesta contra la supresión del piropo dirigido en público a las mujeres y razonada a su modo* (Madrid: Nuevo Mundo, [1909]), 8, 13, 24–5, 29.

⁵³ *ABC*, May 25, 1909.

⁵⁴ Aresti, “Shaping the Spanish Modern Man”.

Whereas blasphemy was by its very nature vulgar, a *piropo* could show “grace, ingenuity and good breeding” as conservative, Catholic *ABC* had explained in 1906.⁵⁵ Yet the 1909 campaigns raised the same questions of how sonic behaviour in public spaces should be policed. Benavente questioned whether women would stop hearing “rude comments” if *piropos* were banned and whether the police would be actually capable of eradicating “this and a thousand other impertinences” that occurred in the street. Echoing Azorín’s comments on blasphemy, he argued that citizens needed to exhibit self-control by hiding their individual shortcomings, as the street belonged to everyone. This self-control was the “most evident sign of the culture of a people”.⁵⁶ As with blasphemy, Nogués raised the ban on *piropos* in parliament, which he labelled as ridiculous. It was not the role of the police chief to decide what was “culture” and good taste, to which the Minister of Justice replied that “everyone who walks the streets should be polite [*educado*] and those who are not polite should hide their lack of politeness and not bother anyone”.⁵⁷ This was the “idealised aspiration” of the liberal subject, who was “self-aware”, “active” and responsible.⁵⁸ The police would reprimand those who were unable to control themselves and follow the behavioural codes of bourgeois society. Suppression of bad behavioural habits in public was the tonic for a healthy society.

Blasphemy was therefore not singled out for special treatment in Madrid in 1909, but rather formed part of a wider offensive on behaviour deemed to be socially unhygienic and a sonic disturbance. Nor was Méndez Alanís unique in drawing attention to blasphemy. The year 1909 saw several anti-blasphemy campaigns across Spain, including in Ávila, Lleida, Santander and the village of Fermoselle (Zamora), where the mayor published broadsides banning blasphemy and “exhorting the inhabitants to clean the streets”.⁵⁹ Nor was 1909 unique. Provincial bulletins and newspapers published warnings of the penalties for blaspheming in the years preceding and following 1909. Blasphemy tapped into “regenerationist” anxieties about Spain after 1898; eradicating blasphemy thereby demonstrated societal progress towards civilised norms. As Lugo’s *El Progreso* elaborated in its approving report on the crackdown on blasphemy, blasphemy was the manifestation of “rudimentarism” and “cultural poverty” caused by the

⁵⁵ *ABC*, October 6, 1906.

⁵⁶ *Los Lunes del Imparcial*, May 24, 1909.

⁵⁷ *Diario de las sesiones de cortes*, May 19, 1909.

⁵⁸ Cleminson, “Liberal governmentality,” 26.

⁵⁹ See, respectively, *El Salmantino*, March 27, 1909; *La Vanguardia*, June 3, 4, September 13, 1909; *El Progreso*, April 16, 1909; *Boletín oficial de la provincia de Santander*, November 12, 1909; *Heraldo de Zamora*, March 16, 1909.

state of “abandonment” of the working classes and the latter’s own “indifference”.⁶⁰ As in Madrid, blasphemy was often simply part of a wider moralising campaign that targeted gambling, begging and the circulation of pornographic material as part of a civilising mission aimed at the lower classes.⁶¹ Such tutelage was necessary to foment decorous behaviour, for these sectors of society “unfortunately lack[ed] the level of necessary education to understand the damage” their actions caused.⁶²

Similar anxieties centring on blasphemy, popular culture and the alleged vulgarity of the working class surfaced in Catalonia in an intellectual spat played out in the press from mid-June 1909. The libertarian writer Gabriel Alomar decried anti-blasphemy activism as a far-right strategy reminiscent of the Inquisition and defended the virility of blasphemous cursing by claiming freedom of speech.⁶³ His “L’Apologia del mal mot” (“An apology for the bad word”) was a swipe at celebrated poet Joan Maragall and his support for an initiative called the Lliga del Bon Mot (League of the Good Word), which had begun life as a newspaper column before morphing into an association. The Lliga was energetic in its anti-blasphemy activism and during the 1910s it spread across Catalonia and Spain, organising rallies, publishing pamphlets, books, cartoons and calendars, and disseminating anti-blasphemy propaganda, including the erection of 200 signs in the small village of Sant Feliu de Codines alone.⁶⁴ The Lliga was the work of an energetic young cleric, Ricard Aragó, who would write a number of books drawing on theology, biology and linguistics that denounced the polluting, corroding effect of blasphemy on speech.⁶⁵

Alomar’s polemic drew chastisement from Maragall and the wrath of other writers, who used the opportunity to express their own views on blasphemy.⁶⁶ The young Catholic and Catalan writer Ramón Rucabado seized on Alomar’s words and claimed to take them to their logical,

⁶⁰ *El Progreso*, April 16, 1909.

⁶¹ The association of gambling and blasphemy in Nash, *Blasphemy*, 56–7, 112–4.

⁶² *Boletín oficial de la provincial de Gerona*, June 3, 1909.

⁶³ *El Poble Català*, June 17, 1909.

⁶⁴ On the activities of the Lliga del Bon Mot, e.g. *Apuntes para la historia de la cultura del lenguaje (1908-1912)* (Barcelona: P. Sanmartí, 1913); *Lliga del Bon Mot, 1908–1918: report* (Barcelona: A. Artís, 1918). The only biography of Aragó is Josep M. Mas i Solench, *Ivón L’Escop i la Lliga del Bon Mot* (Barcelona: La Formiga d’Or, 1992), but see also Joaquim Capdevila i Capdevila, “Noucentisme i Festes Cívils de la Llengua Catalana: les Festes del Bon Mot i la Diada de la Llengua Catalana de 1916,” *Urtx: Revista cultural de l’Urgell* 16 (2003): 281–304 and Reis Fontanals, “Ivón L’Escop i la Lliga del Bon Mot,” *Haidé* 8 (2019): 119–126.

⁶⁵ E.g. Ivón L’Escop [Ricard Aragó], *La paraula viva: com entren els mals mots en nostres llengües vives, com poden ésser fàcilment eliminats* (Barcelona: Políglota, 1924).

⁶⁶ E.g. *La Veu de Catalunya*, July 9, 1909.

yet perverse, conclusion, that blasphemy was a sign of “energy, progress, civility” and excellent collective moral health.⁶⁷ In further elaborations, blasphemy became a vehicle for Rucabado to express anxieties about vulgarity and mass society, specifically popular entertainment. He compared blasphemy to bull-fighting, “haemophilia” – by which he meant gory, sensationalist literature, “*sicalipsis*” – picaresque eroticism, and the *género ínfimo* – a form of cheap, cabaret-style theatre, which “can all be summarised in one word: INCIVILITY (sic)”.⁶⁸ His ideas were shared by José Vilalta Comes who, drawing on crowd psychology, depicted the urban masses as showing a “complete absence of conscious will” which was the result of poor education in rural areas and only knew how to “exteriorise their feelings through blasphemy” at visits to bullrings. Only better education would transform the weak-willed and thereby eradicate “collective blasphemy”.⁶⁹ Such critiques responded to the moralising drive by Antonio Maura’s conservative government, which had included new legislative restrictions on bull-fighting, and expressed anxiety at the proliferating theatres, cabarets and café-concerts in Barcelona.⁷⁰ They were also an attack on the waves of migrants from rural areas and other regions that were swelling the ranks of the urban working class.⁷¹ The fears soon became very real. Two weeks later Barcelona – as well as towns across Catalonia – was the scene of a revolt that lasted for several days and was accompanied by widespread anticlerical and iconoclastic violence.

Barcelona: The Tragic Week

Two months after Méndez Alanís’ campaign was launched in Madrid, Barcelona was shaken by what became known as the “Tragic Week”. On Monday 25 July, following days of rallies and demonstrations, the city was the scene of a general strike called to protest the departure of local reservists to fight in Spanish-occupied Morocco. The calm but tense situation in the morning escalated into clashes between strikers and the police, and martial law was declared at four o’clock. Events soon moved beyond the control of the strike committee. The following day barricades appeared in the streets and would-be revolutionaries engaged in shoot-outs with the security forces. A wave of anticlerical violence began with the torching of the Marist school in Poble Nou district. That evening, residents of the city sat on the rooftops and observed a

⁶⁷ *La Veu de Catalunya*, July 5, 1909.

⁶⁸ *La Veu de Catalunya*, July 20, 1909.

⁶⁹ *La Publicidad*, July 11, 1909.

⁷⁰ Adrian Shubert, *Death and Money in the Afternoon: A Social History of the Spanish Bullfight* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 105, 173. For similar anxieties in Madrid, see Pallol Trigueros, “La lucha por la calle.”

⁷¹ See Chris Ealham, *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona, 1898–1937* (London: Routledge, 2005), 13.

skyline illuminated by the fires of burning religious buildings, including convents, churches, schools, welfare institutions and workers' circles. The next few days were characterised by further bouts of anticlerical rioting and sporadic shootouts between the security forces, who were too few in number to impose their authority, and those who had access to weapons. The arrival of reinforcements marked the end of the revolt and relative normality returned by the end of the week.⁷² Barcelona was the epicentre of the revolt, but uprisings and anticlerical violence occurred across Catalonia.⁷³

The recent emphasis on Tragic Week as a “polyhedral”, multifaceted event irreducible to an anticlerical revolt should not overlook the centrality of anticlericalism and iconoclasm to the use of violence, for it overwhelmingly targeted Church property, primarily religious buildings and their contents.⁷⁴ Bands of attackers broke into churches, convents and religious schools, desecrated liturgical objects and religious sculptures, and setting fire buildings. One common technique was to collect religious images and burn them in a pyre in front of, or inside, the church. Other sacrilegious episodes included an “arsonist [who] dressed in an alb and danced amongst the revolutionaries as they sang encouragement”, and the infamous act of disinterring the mummified remains of female religious from several convents. Some were paraded in a mock religious processions and others dumped in the street for the eyes of passers-by who dared to venture out.⁷⁵ Less common was anticlerical violence meted out on the bodies of the living. Three male religious figures lost their lives during the Tragic Week. Two were shot and a third died of the stress and suffocation he suffered while hiding in the basement as his parish church burned above him.

The severity and widespread nature of physical violence meant that verbal assaults on the sacred were not accorded a prominent place in testimonies of the Tragic Week. It is therefore impossible to provide a comprehensive account of blasphemy in the Tragic Week. Yet Catholic

⁷² The classic studies are Joan Connelly Ullman, *Tragic Week: A Study of Anticlericalism in Spain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) and Romero Maura, *La rosa de fuego*. Recent contributions include: Dolors Marín i Silvestre, *La Semana Trágica. Barcelona en llamas, la revuelta popular y la Escuela Moderna* (Madrid: La Esfera de Libros, 2009); Josep Pich i Mitjana and David Martínez Fiol, *La revolución de Julio de 1909: un intento fallido de regenerar España* (Granada: Comares, 2019).

⁷³ A summary in Gemma Rubí, “Protesta, desobediencia y violencia subversiva. La Semana Trágica de julio de 1909 en Cataluña,” *Pasado y Memoria* 10 (2011): 243–268.

⁷⁴ Rubí, “Protesta,” at 248; Josep. M. Pons-Altés and Miguel A. López-Morell, “Barcelona and the Tragic Week of 1909: A crazed mob or citizens in revolt?” *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 29, 1 (2016): 3–19.

⁷⁵ See Riera, *La semana trágica*, 144, 156–7; José María Francés, *Memorias de un cero a la izquierda* (Mexico: Olimpo, 1962), 243.

victims or witnesses to anticlerical violence often remarked on its prevalence. Blasphemy accompanied sacrilegious acts and the use of anticlerical violence, and often featured in descriptions of the anticlerical crowd. On occasion blasphemy was described as a violent act in its own right.

Blasphemous cursing was described as a warning and augur that presaged an anticlerical assault.⁷⁶ Blasphemy formed part of the cacophonous din of anti-religious shouting that accompanied the appearance of the anticlerical mob. When the “arsonists” appeared at the school of Santa Teresa de Jesús, they caused “a great commotion and proffer[red] all kinds of insults and blasphemies. Amongst them were a good number of children and women”.⁷⁷ The augural quality of blasphemy was also central in the case of Ramón Usó, who was fatally shot during the attack on the church of San Magín and the Franciscan convent. Usó was the superior of the convent and one of the last to leave the building. The other friars had left to seek sanctuary in private homes after vespers. Francisco Brangulat, who accompanied Usó, recounted that groups of armed men appeared as they attempted to escape. The men “simply burst into a horrible blasphemy and fired a volley at us, mortally wounding the Superior”. They fled and managed to find refuge.⁷⁸ According to his testimony at least, uttering a blasphemy was the signal to shoot – a disinhibiting cry that facilitated the use of lethal violence.

Blasphemy also accompanied the use of physical violence. Blasphemous cries accompanied the desecration of the church of Carmen and the associated Hieronymite convent, specifically an assault on the crucifix and the throwing of the statue of the founder into the garden.⁷⁹ In a similar fashion, the church of Santa María de Taulat was assaulted amidst blasphemies, “insults and death threats”, while a woman allegedly profaned an altar in a religious school in a “repulsive and disgusting” manner while the “savage mob applauded rabidly and voiced all kind of blasphemies”.⁸⁰ For the attackers exuberant blasphemous shouting plausibly functioned as a cathartic expression of anticlerical collective identity and a further level of transgression that underlined that the world had turned upside down. For victims and witnesses, blasphemy served as oral proof of the barbarism of the attackers.

⁷⁶ As it was in early modern episodes of interpersonal violence. See Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, 193.

⁷⁷ Riera, *La semana trágica*, 192.

⁷⁸ *La Correspondencia de España*, August 20, 1909.

⁷⁹ Riera, *La semana trágica*, 128.

⁸⁰ Riera, *La semana trágica*, 193, 198.

In the aforementioned episodes the violent nature of blaspheming was largely implicit, but on occasion the “horrific” sound of blasphemy was experienced as a violent act in itself.⁸¹ An attack on the Minim convent forced an eighty-six-year-old friar to leave the building whereupon he became a “victim of the brutality and ferocity of the mutinous horde who proffered the most repugnant blasphemies and insults”.⁸² Franciscan nuns departed their convent in Poble Sec “amidst howls and blasphemies” voiced by the mob.⁸³ Blasphemy as violence was most clear in the testimony of a Franciscan sister, who differentiated between physical and verbal violence. She recalled that the sisters had been “verbally” but not physically harmed by the rioters – “what things they said, good heavens!”.⁸⁴

Blasphemy was violent in a wider sense for it was an integral part of a deafening anticlerical soundscape formed not only by “infernal yelling”, but also the sacrilegious sounding of bells and the applause of those observing the destruction.⁸⁵ This was loud street theatre, in which ringing the church bells against the grain of the prescriptive rhythms of liturgical ritual and time was a further exhibition of the carnivalesque transgressive quality of anticlerical actions.⁸⁶ A female witness of the destruction of the church of San Pedro de las Puellas recalled the “deafening” sound of a mob “vociferating and gesticulating like demons in a frenzy”, characterised by “arrhythmic shouting, the striking of picks on stone, of axes and hammers on wood, of windows violently broken [...] it all reached my ears like the confused murmur of a far-away storm”.⁸⁷ The wall of discordant anticlerical sound contrasted violently with the unnerving silence of empty streets before and after the attacks.⁸⁸

The anticlerical din was central to the portrayal of the protagonists of anticlerical violence as undifferentiated members of a mob that was an unthinking, unified mass. One young man, who was initially exhilarated by the revolt before he recoiled at the anticlerical violence, later

⁸¹ *ABC*, August 21, 1909.

⁸² Riera, *La semana trágica*, 212.

⁸³ Riera, *La semana trágica*, 166.

⁸⁴ The Franciscans in *El País*, August 14, 1909.

⁸⁵ Bells and the quotation in *El Siglo Futuro*, August 18, 24, 1909; applause in *El País*, September 28, 1909.

⁸⁶ On the transgressive, performative dimension of anticlericalism during the Spanish Civil War, see Mary Vincent, “‘The Martyrdom of Things’: Iconoclasm and its Meanings in the Spanish Civil War”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 30 (2020): 141–163.

⁸⁷ *El País*, August 25, 1909.

⁸⁸ For the din, e.g. Miguel Roura y Pujol, *Incendio, destrucción y rehabilitación del templo parroquial y casa rectoral de San Martín de Provensals (Clot)*, Barcelona: impresiones del reverendo don Miguel Roura (Barcelona: La Hormiga de Oro, 1910), 12. Silence in Widow of Trias, “Ocho días en Barcelona: apuntes para la historia de la revolución de 1909”, undated manuscript, Arxiu històric de la ciutat de Barcelona, shelfmark b299; *El País*, August 4, 1909.

described the participants with evident revulsion as a “frenetic, screaming crowd, dancing, roaring and whipping itself up.”⁸⁹ This depiction of the mob owed much to ideas from crowd psychology circulating at the beginning of the twentieth century, which provided a “distorting mirror” that shaped the depiction of crowds as an abject, monstrous, collective other, beholden to animalistic instincts and base desires.⁹⁰ The alleged mastermind behind the mob was Francisco Ferrer, a libertarian educator and bohemian, who was framed in the aftermath of the Tragic Week. Ferrer had neither planned nor participated in the events, yet he was executed for the crime of “rebellion”. The vilification of Ferrer leaned heavily on ideas of contagion and suggestion underpinning crowd psychology, according to which Ferrer had incited the unthinking crowds to revolt.

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Ferrer was the most prominent victim of the state response to the Tragic Week – and the subject of an international campaign in his defence – but many others faced the wrath of state repression. Three thousand were arrested and over 700 judicial investigations were opened, which implicated over 1700 individuals. Nearly 60 were sentenced to life in prison and 17 sentenced to death, of which five sentences were carried out.⁹¹ Although anticlericalism had been the salient characteristic of violence during Tragic Week, the pressing matter for prosecutors was the threat to state authority and prosecution of participants focused on the crime of “rebellion”. José Miguel Baro and Clemente García, two of the five executed, were convicted for rebellion rather than their anticlerical acts. Baro stood accused of leading rioters in San Andrés de Palomar, burning the church, building barricades, attacking the Civil Guard and the illegal possession of arms.⁹² García, who had danced with mummified remains in the streets, was charged with rebellion for having helped construct a barricade and with the profanation of a cadaver, rather than for an offence against religion.⁹³ When the regional press

⁸⁹ Francés, *Memorias*, 241.

⁹⁰ The image of the mirror in Susan Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981). Other key texts include: Robert Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage, 1975); Jaap Van Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology and Politics, 1871–1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Spain is not well served by this literature.

⁹¹ Eduardo González Calleja, *La razón de la fuerza: orden público, subversión y violencia política en la España de la Restauración (1875–1917)* (Madrid: CSIC, 1998), 438.

⁹² *La Vanguardia*, August 18, 24, 1909.

⁹³ Ullman, *Tragic Week*, 291.

carried news over the following months of participants in the Tragic Week on trial, it was usually for rebellion. The crime of rebellion superseded that of blasphemy and even sacrilege, which was a matter to be judged in civil courts.⁹⁴

The scale of anticlerical and iconoclastic destruction facing the Catholic Church meant that blasphemy was far from the focal point of attempts to understand what had happened. If it were mentioned, it was limited to a symptom of apostasy and by extension the erosion of civilised behaviour. The Social Defence Committee – an organisation created in 1903 to defend Catholicism and conservative, elite politics – singled out the anticlerical violence as divine punishment for the “sin of blasphemy, so widespread and deeply-rooted”, but criticism generally focused on the fury of the mob and, in particular, the propagation of secular or anticlerical beliefs, especially through schools like Ferrer’s “Modern School”.⁹⁵ Pastoral letters depicted the Tragic Week as an inexplicable, satanic insurrection against God perpetrated by a furious mob drawn from the dregs of society, while politicians of the conservative, Catalanist Lliga Regionalista directly accused the “moral perversion” engendered by freethinking, rationalist schools and the “suggestive words” pronounced by Republican populist politicians at rallies, drawing again on psychological theories that emphasised how crowds could be swayed and controlled by manipulative leaders. The wave of anticlerical violence encouraged both Lliga Regionalista politicians and the republican, anticlerical newspaper *El Diluvio* to lament the backwardness of Catalan society through comparing Barcelona to the Balkans and Turkey respectively, and asking why Catalonia could not resolve its political problems like the British or the Swiss, rather than them expressing them through “African passions”.⁹⁶ The Tragic Week had served to underline regenerationist fears of backwardness on the Catalan side of the Pyrenees, just as blasphemy periodically did across Spain as a whole.

One writer already had blasphemy on his mind, however. Ramón Rucabado returned to the themes he had developed in his criticism of Alomar and described the Tragic Week as the “apotheosis” of social vice, the rise of individualism, egotism and an indifference towards society that had its roots in an influx of newcomers to the city. Echoing Vilalta Comes, Rucabado alleged that migrants’ incomprehension of the dynamics of social life in the

⁹⁴ Ullman, *Tragic Week*, 285.

⁹⁵ *La Vanguardia*, September 8, 1909.

⁹⁶ See *Boletín Oficial Eclesiástico del Obispado de Barcelona*, August 12, 23, 1909; for Torras i Bages’ pastoral, “La gloria del martiri,” September 1, 1909, see *La Veu de Catalunya*, September 18, 1909; *El País*, August 20, 1909; *El Diluvio*, August 3, 4, 1909.

metropolis had led to hatred, poor speaking ability, protest and blasphemy. Blasphemy was therefore a symptom of the supposed atavism of the those who had migrated to the Catalan capital over the preceding decades, which had laid the foundations for the Tragic Week.⁹⁷ Explicitly linking curses heard in the street to the iconoclastic violence of the Tragic Week, he warned that “we have seen that it is not a large step from blasphemy-as-verb to blasphemy-as-act”.⁹⁸ Recasting iconoclastic destruction as the physical manifestation of blasphemy was distinctive and a means of drawing a clear link between the ills of modern society and anticlerical acts. Despite the proliferation of pious anti-blasphemy initiatives, blasphemy was not at the forefront of concerns in the wake of the Tragic Week. Instead, it was simply one dimension of a discussion heavily shaped by theories of crowd psychology, which, like in Madrid in May, revealed interwoven anxieties concerning vulgar manners, popular culture, mass society and urban space.

The Sound of Blasphemy in Early Twentieth-Century Spain

Neither the anti-blasphemy campaign in Madrid nor the events of the Tragic Week constituted a particular watershed in the history of blasphemy. Over the following years, mayors and civil governors continued to publish circulars and broadsides that sought to curtail blasphemy. Three years after Méndez Alanís’ campaign, his replacement as the Chief of Police in Madrid issued a circular demanding that his predecessor’s anti-blasphemy measures be upheld and the Catholic press continued to publicise incidents in which blasphemers were punished by the police and courts.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the work of the Lliga del Bon Mot had only just begun. Over the coming years it organised rallies and published a range of printed material. Linking blasphemy to morality, and indeed to *piropos*, also continued. The 1928 Penal Code introduced by the authoritarian, corporatist and Catholic Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–30) placed *piropos* and blasphemy in articles side by side in a section on offences against public morality.¹⁰⁰

The criticism of blasphemy in 1909 cannot be divorced from the wave of Catholic mobilisation that began in 1906, when a Liberal government tried and failed to place restrictions on religious communities. The machinery of Catholic Action moved quickly into gear. Ministries were

⁹⁷ *La Veu de Catalunya*, August 26, 1909. On labour conflict in this period, Ealham, *Class*, 13.

⁹⁸ *La Veu de Catalunya*, August 26, 1909.

⁹⁹ *El Siglo Futuro*, June 17, 1912; *El Restaurador* (Tortosa), March 13, 1913.

¹⁰⁰ *Gaceta de Madrid*, September 13, 1928.

inundated with petitions and women played a particularly active role in defending the Church.¹⁰¹ The resultant government crisis led to the return to government of the Conservative party under the leadership of Antonio Maura, who sought to strengthen the monarchy and Catholic morality in Spain, with the support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁰² This favourable context stimulated Catholic organisations and initiatives, including agrarian unions, “social weeks”, associations to promote the “good press” and other initiatives to combat anti-religious propaganda. Yet discussion of blasphemy cannot be reduced to Catholic organisations and their activism, for blasphemy was a vice deplored not only by the Catholic Church, but also by writers of a more liberal persuasion. Even if the latter defended Spaniards’ right to curse God, they nevertheless deplored blaspheming as a dirty habit. Blasphemy was therefore a social and moral problem.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, blasphemy was seen as a symptom of Spain’s backwardness and concentrated fears about an emerging mass urban society. It was associated, above all, with the urban working class and poor, particularly the crowds in the streets of Madrid, but also forms of mass entertainment, including bull-fighting and popular theatre. While an urban phenomenon, the association of blasphemy with atavism meant that its roots were identified in the alleged lack of culture and education of a rural society that formed the backbone of large-scale immigration to Madrid and Barcelona in the early twentieth century. These concerns about mass society were inflected with ideas drawn from crowd psychology, social hygienism and degeneration theories. Commentators advocated abstention from blaspheming through self-control in order to safeguard the linguistic and moral health of society from pollution. Denouncing blasphemy thus fixed the urban masses as a focus of anxiety and cast the working classes as an abject other, even if the right to blaspheme was acknowledged.

Blasphemy was therefore a cultural construct deployed by commentators critical of the state of Spain in the early twentieth century. But blasphemy was also a tangible act of speech and its opponents founded their criticism in a claim to capture the sound of the streets. How the urban masses *spoke* was therefore the object of anxiety. Petitions to civil governors and mayors for

¹⁰¹ See Cueva, *Clericales*; Louzao Villar, *Soldados*; Inmaculada Blasco, “Identidad en movimiento: la acción de las ‘católicas’ en España (1856–1913),” *Historia y política* 37 (2017): 27–56.

¹⁰² A summary of this period in Javier Moreno Luzón, *Modernizing the Nation: Spain during the Reign of Alfonso XIII, 1902–1931* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), chs. 1 and 2.

Matthew Kerry

anti-blasphemy campaigns were rooted in the experience of both the urban soundscape and anticlerical agitation. The sound of blasphemy is particularly important in the context of the Tragic Week. Blasphemy functioned as a disinhibiting cry that facilitated violence. Blasphemy was also the nightmarish assertion of anti-religious identity that heralded the use of physical force. The deafening din of the anticlerical mob – a menacing, all-encompassing soundscape that included blasphemous yelling and sacrilegious bell-ringing that violated the rhythms and sound of liturgy – was also a form of sonic violence that assaulted the ears, provoking anguish in priests and religious fleeing the scene and providing acoustic confirmation of a world turned upside down.