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Blasphemy

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As a religious term blasphemy means speech injurious to God and derogatory to His divine majesty. To blaspheme is to come short of the faith and reverence due to God by intentional and contemptuous speech. Though the term is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is doubtful whether it has the same force in Hinduism. From the Christian point of view, the *Vedanta* ideal of identity between the Absolute and the individual self is open to the charge of blasphemy. The enthusiastic language of some of the *Vedantists* like *Vivekananda* exposes the *Vedanta* ideal to such criticism. But it should be borne in mind that the *Vedantists* are not primarily thinking of ethical completeness but of an identity in Being, above the ethical level. Nevertheless, the identity conception for which the *Vedanta* is so famous is peculiarly disastrous to the claim of ethics in human life. Some of the frivolous episodes of the *Puranas* and the *Epics* expose popular Hinduism to the charge of blasphemy. But there are exceptions. In the *Gita*, *Arjuna* says to *Krishna*, 'If in my mirth I showed no reverence to thee while playing or resting, while sitting or eating, while alone, O eternal Lord, or in the presence of others, I implore thee who art infinite to pardon me.' (XI: 42.) Another instance is provided by the story of *Prahlada* whose father was slain for his blasphemous deeds and utterances against God. It is generally true that in the comprehensive system of Hinduism the sin of blasphemy is noticed wherever the personality and the majesty of the deity are stressed.

In Islam blasphemy occurs in connection with the doctrine of the unity of God (*Tauhid*). The excessive influence of this doctrine is such that the offence of associating a partner with God is considered an unpardonable sin (*Shirk*). 'Verily God will not forgive the union of other gods with Himself. But other than this will He forgive to whom He pleaseth. And he who uniteth gods with God hath devised great wickedness.' (Sura 4:51.) Thus the Trinitarian conception of God is blasphemous to Islam because Allah is He who has no partner (*la sharik*), and cannot share His glory with another. The blasphemy (*Shirk*) against God is defined to be of four kinds: viz. (1) that of ascribing knowledge to others than God (*Shirk'ul ilm*), i.e., to ascribe power to soothsayers; (2) that of ascribing powers to others than God (*Shirk'ul tasrriif*), i.e. to suppose that God so esteems the rank of any one as to pardon his sin on account of it; (3) that of offering worship to created things (*Shirk'ul ibadat*), i.e. prostration before any created being with the idea of worshipping it or 'associating in worship'; (4) that of performance of ceremonies which imply reliance on others than God (*Shirk'ul adat*), i.e. to swear by the name of the Prophet, of *Ali*, of the

Imams, or of *Pirs* is to give them honour due to God alone. It can therefore be readily seen that the dread sin of *Shirk* is rooted in the zeal for the unity of God, though the unity stressed is mathematical unity.

Old Testament

What Islam failed to grasp adequately is declared clearly in the Old Testament where blasphemy is always a sin against the character of the One, Holy, Living God. In the Old Testament to blaspheme is to sin in word or deed in impious rebellion against God. It is a grievous sin opposed to praising or hallowing God's name. The book of Leviticus contains the grim story of a half-Israelite blasphemer who met his death by stoning, at the hands of the congregation of Israel. 'He that blasphemeth the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death.' (Lev. 24:16.) In Judaism as in Islam the use of the word 'blasphemy' is influenced by the Old Testament idea of God of which 'the Holy One of Israel' may be regarded as the best summary. The revealed character of God is such that it evokes response in man in the form of praise, and obedience to His will. The opposite of such response is defiant hostility to God in speech or action derogatory to His majesty and power. Among Israel the breaking of Sabbath, neglect of circumcision, and idolatry were considered blasphemous as they constituted acts of rebellion against Jehovah.

The specific nature of the commandment 'thou shalt have none other gods but me' puts idolatry, crude or subtle, into the category of blasphemy. Therefore we come very near to committing this gravest of sins when we seek to find our happiness in some created object, however good. All welfare schemes and plans which have not got as their ultimate aim the setting of man in his proper relationship to the living God come dangerously near to the setting up of idols in the midst of the people. As S. Ignatius Loyola says, 'Man was created to praise and worship and serve God. . . . And the other things on the face of the earth were created for man's sake, that they might help him in following out the end for which he was created. . . . Hence it follows that man should make use of creatures so far as they help him toward this end, and should withdraw or abstain from them in so far as they are a hindrance to that end.' (Spiritual Exercises.)

Therefore it follows that profession of loyalty to God on the one hand, and an idolatrous attitude to created things on the other is like going through life with a squint eye instead of a single eye.

Taking the name of God in vain, as in swearing and frivolous quoting of scripture is blasphemous because God's name should be invoked only for adoration and prayer. We are bidden to hallow God's name and ascribe honour to Him. A frivolous attitude to God which is rooted in the contempt of the deity is the very negation of religious belief. It is impossible for a servant of God to tolerate among his fellows either swearing, or frivolous talk about God.

New Testament

In the New Testament we find a certain application of the Old Testament ideas of blasphemy to the conduct of our Lord. Jesus was

condemned by contemporary Judaism as a blasphemer and handed over to the Roman authorities for execution. While healing the paralytic Jesus declared that his sins were forgiven. His words, 'My son, thy sins are forgiven' were interpreted as blasphemy, for in ascribing to Himself the prerogative which belonged to God alone Jesus made Himself equal with God. Again, the Gospel tradition is unanimous that Jesus was in the habit of breaking Sabbath and that the Jews considered it blasphemous. In the discourse attached to the healing of the cripple at the pool of Bethesda, S. John explains the implications of Jesus' customary violation of the Sabbath law. Jesus defends His action by referring to the analogy of the father-son relationship. The implication of His saying, 'My father worketh even until now, and I work' seems to be that since Jesus is the Son of God, His work is the work of God Himself. The Jews recognized the vastness of the claim which lay behind the saying, and judge it to be blasphemy which it is their duty to punish with death. Later, when another attempt was made to stone Him, He interrupts them by making an appeal to His works of mercy. 'For which of these works' He says, 'do you stone me?' They perceive that these works were not isolated acts of charity but proceed from a claim which they regard as blasphemous. Finally, during His trial Jesus tacitly admits that He is soon to be elevated to the right hand of God. The claim of Jesus to be the Messiah in this sense, i.e. to be seated on the right hand of God was blasphemous. Hence the High Priest declares Him to be worthy of death. So Augustine observes that the Jews detected in the strange utterances of Jesus a clear claim to deity which the Arians for all their intellectual acumen failed to grasp. They understood Jesus as teaching a dangerous form of idolatry which was blasphemous. Similarly S. Stephen suffers the death penalty for the utterance, 'I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'.

Sin against the Holy Ghost

Of the various forms of blasphemy the most serious, and the one which concerns us seriously is the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. This unforgivable sin is mentioned in the New Testament in connection with the Beelzebub controversy. 'Verily I say unto you, all their sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men and their blasphemies wherewith so ever they shall blaspheme: but whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin: because they said he hath an unclean spirit.' (Mark 3: 28-30.) The Marcan form of this saying is valuable for the illuminating note of explanation at the end, 'because they said he hath an unclean spirit'. At His baptism Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit; and in the power of the Spirit He proclaimed the arrival of the rule of God among men. The miracles of healing which He performed were characterized by a unique moral quality in that they set men free from the power of the evil. These and other miracles were the expression of the working of the Holy Spirit through Him. They were the signs of the arrival of the Messianic era. The Scribes and the Pharisees had seen the healing power of God blaze in their eyes like the sun; they looked it full in the face and said it was the spirit of the devil. The maligning of the Son of Man in this way may be due to defective understanding of Him in His

humiliation with the mists of flesh about Him. Blasphemous utterances such as 'He is a glutton and winebibber' may be pardonable as caused by ignorance. But not so with the charge that the power behind the acts of healing was the devil. The charge that Jesus had Beelzebub was directed against the Spirit of God who pervaded and controlled the person of Jesus Christ. It was not a case of defective understanding but a deliberate defiance of God. In that the Pharisees and the Scribes ascribed to the devil what was manifestly the work of God's Holy Spirit, it was a wilful blaspheming of the good and Holy Spirit of God.

To us who hold firmly to the doctrine of the universality of the forgiveness of sins this saying of our Lord presents two difficulties: (1) 'hath never forgiveness'; and (2) 'but is guilty of an eternal sin'. The words 'hath never forgiveness' are not easy to reconcile with the revealed character of our Lord. Forgiveness which means the setting aside of every obstacle to fellowship requires the simultaneous and costly action of the two parties concerned in order that it may become operative. The injured party must put away the wrong done to him and treat the other person as if he had never wronged. Similarly, the offender on his part must through contrition and godly sorrow readily accept the gift of forgiveness. A readiness to own the sin, true contrition, and a firm resolve to turn away from it, constitute the proper conditions for appropriating forgiveness. How can all this be accomplished in the sinner unless God the Holy Spirit moves him inwardly, teaching his conscience, and gaining control over his will? As we are endowed with free-will it is possible for us in the wilfulness of our perverted nature to reject the whole testimony of the Holy Spirit, and hold that the truth to which He points is untruth. Freedom of will implies unlimited freedom to commit sin and to remain in the sinful state. The very concept of freedom involves the possibility of its misuse. The stubborn, conscious unwillingness to fulfil the conditions of pardon can put one in a state where forgiveness is not possible.

In the expression 'but is guilty of an eternal sin', the term 'eternal sin' is not easy to understand. Eternal sin is not that which lasts for ever, but rather a sin which has in it a living power of evil, the bounds of which cannot be determined. The quality of eternity is not so much in its everlastingness but in its apartness from time. The concept of eternal sin may be made clear by comparison with eternal life. Eternal life may be described as a life of the Sabbath rest of God, beyond the reach of the power of temptation, and in joyous fellowship with God. Eternal sin denotes the possibility of misusing our human freedom by refusing to respond to the workings of the Holy Spirit in our soul, and thus hardening our hearts and wills to His entreaties. The evil possibilities of such a state of existence are endless. We may go so far in sinning that we become insensitive to the salvation provided by the Incarnation. 'It is the worst and most deadly of all sins because it is the rejection of God's purpose and denial of His nature; it is the betrayal of the cause of humanity, and is spiritual suicide.'¹

Thus blasphemy is the greatest sin because it is the climax of unbelief. It contains the weight of unbelief as well as the perversion of will. In Moral Theology it is listed as a mortal

¹ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*.

sin; and is not unrelated to what S. John calls 'a sin unto death'. (1 John 5: 16, 17.) Here we cannot say for certain whether S. John is referring to certain specific acts of sin or to a habitual state of mind which is characterized by sin. Every act of sin *may* lead to spiritual death just as every case of sickness *may* end fatally. But sin unto death is not *an act* of sin however heinous, but *a state* or habit of sin wilfully chosen and persisted in. It is constant and deliberate opposition to God. In so far as it springs from a heart which wilfully and contemptuously rejects the testimony of the Holy Ghost it may be identified with the sin against the Holy Ghost. The 'sin unto death' contains the suggestion that it looks in the direction of death and finally results in the death of the soul.

The Teaching of Moral Theologians

What makes the sin against the Holy Ghost a mortal sin according to the Moral Theologians? The early Fathers including Athanasius, Ambrose and Chrysostom say that sin against the Holy Ghost is literally to utter blasphemy against the third person of the Trinity. But they do not say why it is an unforgivable sin. The view of S. Augustine meets this objection. He holds that blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is final impenitence, i.e., when a man perseveres in mortal sin until death, we say that he has sinned against the Holy Ghost. In such circumstances sinfulness pervades the whole of man's conscious and unconscious life vitiating his reason and will till death overtakes him. Thus the man does not give himself a chance to be forgiven. It is further argued that goodness is appropriated to the Holy Ghost as power is appropriated to the Father, and wisdom to the Son. Hence when a man sins through the weakness of the flesh he is said to sin against the Father; and when he sins in ignorance he is said to sin against the Son; and when he sins through malice, i.e., by choosing evil and saying 'evil be thou my good' he is said to sin against the Holy Ghost. But this seems to introduce artificial distinctions into acts of sin. Therefore it is perhaps more helpful to think of the Holy Spirit as the love of the Father and of the Son, and through whom forgiveness is effected. By continued impenitence we deprive ourselves of the means of forgiveness afforded by the Holy Spirit.

The teaching of S. Thomas Aquinas is but a slight adaptation of, and yet a great improvement on the view of S. Augustine. The sin against the Holy Ghost according to him is not merely continued impenitence but that persistence in sin which arises from a refusal to make use of the divine aid of grace. Such contemptuous ignoring of the succour of the Holy Ghost against temptation and sin is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. It is due to our failure to invoke and call to our aid the almighty Father that we succumb to the sins of the weakness of our mortal nature. Since the Son is the eternal Wisdom, sins committed in ignorance are looked upon as sins against the Son, e.g., calling Jesus a glutton and winebibber. But deliberate and persistent continuance in sin is the sin against the Holy Ghost, for the Spirit is goodness and sanctification.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

God the Holy Spirit is constantly sowing the seeds of holiness in us. In our struggle against sin and temptation the Holy Spirit comes to our

aid by instilling in us the spirit of holy fear. By virtue of this divine aid we recognize the infinite claims of God upon our obedience, and worship. We are restrained from sin by the thought of the holiness of God and His sure judgements. But when we refuse to take note of the divine judgement we deprive ourselves of the assistance of the Holy Spirit in this form. This is presumption and contempt of the action of the Holy Spirit in the soul as the teacher of godly fear and reverence. In the opposite direction, the Holy Spirit assists us by delivering us from despair which follows from failure in moral and spiritual life. He does this by making us aware of the mercy of God and His readiness to forgive. But when we ignore or disbelieve the promises of God declared in the scriptures and allow ourselves to fall into despair we sin against the Holy Spirit.

The spirit of knowledge is another form by which the Holy Spirit aids us. He teaches our soul that man is created in the image, and for the glory, of God. When this abiding truth of religion is accepted, it acts as a deterrent against our mortgaging of our life to sin. But many of us either reject or bypass this truth concerning ourselves. Some of us therefore wilfully choose to remain unbelievers. This deliberate infidelity is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost who is Himself the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness.

The Holy Spirit works in us as the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. He gently points to us what hurt sin causes to the loving nature of God, and what lawlessness it produces in our own lives. The ministry of the Spirit is calculated to rouse us to penitence on the one hand, and restrain us from new acts of sin, on the other. But obstinate determination not to think or do anything which might lead to a change of mind and heart and a longing for forgiveness, is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Thus the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit may take the form of presumption, or despair, or unbelief, or irreligion, or obstinacy.

Finally, why is the sin against the Holy Ghost not forgiven? Mainly because it is unforgivable. It is unforgivable in respect of the punishment it deserves, and the guilt it involves. With regard to the former it may be said that there is no excuse for such sin. It is sin par excellence committed haughtily. With regard to the latter, blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is unforgivable much in the same way as a disease is incurable, when for instance, it has so debilitated the patient as to create a revulsion to any eating or drinking, including medicine. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit consists in the refusal of the very aids of the Holy Ghost by which forgiveness is made possible. One arrives at this alarming state of spiritual life as a result of repeated acts of violence against the Holy Spirit. We grieve the Holy Spirit by broken pledges of loyalty. The next stage is that we resist the ministrations of the Spirit in our soul by our wilful choice of something evil; and finally we quench the Spirit by final impenitence. The suffrages of the Litany, and the *precés* enshrined in the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church constantly warn us about this danger.

O God, make clean our hearts within us ;
And take not thy Holy Spirit from us.