

# Position Paper on Blasphemy (March 1992)

## FRANKY SCHAEFFER, PLEASE SHUT UP!

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by Gary North

*And the son of an Israelitish woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the children of Israel: and this son of the Israelitish woman and a man of Israel strove together in the camp; And the Israelitish woman's son blasphemed the name of the LORD, saying, I have cursed the LORD. And they brought him unto Moses: (and his mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan:) And they put him in ward, that the mind of the LORD might be shewed them. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death (Lev. 24:10-16).*

### The Crime of Blasphemy

Blasphemy is a specific crime. Under the Mosaic economy, God required a specific civil sanction: death by stoning. Blasphemy was a very serious business. Falsely to accuse someone of blasphemy was itself a capital crime, for the penalty of false witness was to suffer the civil sanction that would have been applied to one's victim – a very sensible law (Deut. 19:15-21). Keep this fact in mind as you read this report. God does not view capital crimes lightly.

The Israelites in the wilderness period faced a problem: What should be done with a public blasphemer? The context of his blasphemy was a fight. He had uttered his curse against God in the midst of a physical struggle with an Israelite. This context points to the nature of blasphemy: a verbal assault on God as part of an assault against a representative of God. In effect, his act had publicly challenged God and His representatives to do something about it. The blasphemer had announced by his curses that neither God nor God's people possess lawful authority in history.

God's required civil sanction against blasphemy is clear from His answer to Moses' inquiry: "Bring forth him that hath cursed without [outside] the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him" (Lev. 24:14). This verbal assault had been an act of covenantal rebellion, meaning treason. It had been a public challenge to the legitimacy of the social order. The legitimacy of the covenanted social order had to be defended by the State. The proper civil sanction, God insisted, was public stoning. As in the other all capital crimes, the witnesses had to cast the first stones: "The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you" (Deut. 17:7).

No society in the West enforces the blasphemy statute in modern times, or even thinks about it. The modern world, including the modern Christian world, takes offense against the very idea of negative sanctions imposed by God, whether Mosaic, historical, or eternal.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the fundamental issue of blasphemy is the covenantally binding character of the respective sanctions: verbal sanctions against God, civil sanctions against blasphemers, and divine sanctions against societies that ignore these sanctions.

In the humanist West, religious differences are assumed

**T**he crime of blasphemy was a capital crime under the Old Covenant. It was taken very seriously; there are few references to any incident of blasphemy in the Old Testament.

Today, it is not taken seriously at all. This is understandable. There are almost no capital crimes remaining on the law books of Western nations, and only a tiny handful of criminals are ever executed for violating even these few. Christians today would never think of suggesting that blasphemy is a capital offense; they seem almost embarrassed that it ever was. Furthermore, covenant-breakers are unconcerned about it, since they say they believe that there is no God for man to curse anyway, or at least none who cares what men say or do, so cursing is merely a form of verbal expression. No crime here!

Yet at the same time, we find Christians who accuse each other of blasphemy. They refuse to define the word in terms of the Old Covenant, since this would raise some very embarrassing questions, such as the validity of biblical law in defining capital crimes and civil sanctions. But they nevertheless publicly accuse their theological opponents of having committed the crime. The latest example, though surely not the last, is Franky Schaeffer's tirade against Oral Roberts, Christian fund-raising, and the Christian Booksellers Association. Now that he has abandoned Protestantism to join the Greek Orthodox Church, he feels confident in linking American fundamentalists with a man who really is biblically blasphemous: Andres Serrano.

Before we get to the details of Franky's latest performance – his famous "angry young man" routine – we need to consider what constitutes blasphemy. It is not something that should be taken lightly or defined vaguely.

1. At a meeting in May, 1989, a majority of a group of 385 neo-evangelical theologians of the National Association of Evangelicals voted against the doctrine of eternal punishment. They proclaimed instead the Seventh-Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness doctrine of "conditionalism" or soul-sleep. See *World* (June 3, 1989).

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to irrelevant to the proper functioning of a society's legal order. Religious pluralism is assumed to be the ethically proper form of the civil covenant.<sup>2</sup> In such a judicial setting, the Mosaic law prohibiting blasphemy is not taken seriously. It has been annulled somehow, although Christian critics of the blasphemy law rarely specify exactly why or on what New Testament basis. Rarely do they discuss the nature of the crime or its impact on the social order. They need to pay attention to the Jewish legal historian and U.S. Constitution specialist, Leonard W. Levy, who has correctly identified the nature of the crime of blasphemy: treason against God.<sup>3</sup> This is no longer regarded as a crime. As Levy writes: "In the twentieth century, scorning God, even reviling Him, T. S. Eliot reflected, is merely a breach of good taste, not of deep-seated faith."<sup>4</sup> A breach of etiquette is hardly seen as a crime.

Levy correctly observes that with the advent of the Christian political order, blasphemy was defined very broadly, encompassing "not only verbal abuse or denial of Christianity but even the expression of a difference of opinion about it."<sup>5</sup> It was equated with heresy. This was an illegitimate application of the biblical blasphemy law, for blasphemy is a verbal assault on God's ethical character, not an intellectual proposition about His nature. It is a public curse, not an intellectual error. Its context in Leviticus 24 is that of physical crimes: murder, physical assault, and killing a neighbor's animal.

### "Neither Blasphemy Nor Treason!"

Whenever and wherever the doctrine of a personal God or gods is regarded as irrelevant to the legal order, blasphemy is assumed to offer no threat to the integrity or survival of the social order. It steadily loses its status as a crime. Virtually no one in the West today believes that there is a personal God who brings predictable negative corporate sanctions in history against those societies that tolerate blasphemy. This includes those who identify themselves as Christians.

The biblical justification of the blasphemy law is the threat of God's negative sanctions against the covenanted society that refuses to uphold His integrity. When men lose faith in a God who brings predictable negative corporate sanctions in history, they also lose interest in enforcing the law against blasphemy. When Christians reject the legitimacy of a biblically covenanted civil order, they no longer expect God's judgments in history. The problem is, all Western societies until two centuries ago were covenanted to the God of the Bible, i.e., under His sanctions: **by oath consigned**. They are still under the threat of those sanctions.

Blasphemy is cursing: a verbal attack on God, comparable to assault. Blasphemy calls down on God some sort of implicit negative sanction for having misrepresented Himself. Blasphemy is the opposite of the positive sanction: "Bless God." The classic example of blasphemy in the Bible is the statement by Job's wife: "Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9b). The two events are associated: cursing God and death.

It is almost universally assumed today that God's name needs no civil protection. God is not regarded as a person in the legal order. He therefore is entitled to no judicial protection. This means that men should not be threatened by the State for cursing God, i.e., publicly saying that the God of the Bible is a liar, or a cheat, or some other kind of reprobate being, and therefore deserving of contempt.

Treason against God is considered judicially irrelevant. Treason against the State is regarded as serious, but concern over even this form of treason has faded in recent decades. Treasonous acts that would have led to execution in 1950 today result in life imprisonment with no possibility of parole, which means parole will be possible a decade later. There is a judicial reason for this: wars fought by the United States after World War II have not been formally declared wars. The U.S. Congress has not formally declared war, which legally is the only basis of war. With no formally declared enemy, it has been difficult to prosecute treason. Conservatives could pin "Hanoi Jane" on Jane Fonda for her visits to North Vietnam and her praise of Vietnamese Communism, but because the U.S. Congress had never declared war against North Vietnam, she was never legally a traitor. (Neither were captured U.S. airmen legally military prisoners of war. They were tortured without legal appeal.)

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, it is likely that another round of reduced sanctions for treason will result: the West's primary enemy has disappeared. But treason is an inescapable concept. It is correlative to the concept of final sovereignty. Where there is an acknowledged final sovereignty, there will always be laws against treason. It is only during temporary periods in which final sovereignty is not widely agreed upon that we see the relaxation of the treason laws.

### Blasphemous Art: Tax-Supported

The crime of blasphemy is clearly verbal. This raises the issue of communication in general. Is the expression of blasphemy confined to verbal or written documents? Or can it be expressed symbolically?

Consider the piece of so-called art known as the "Piss Christ." It is a photograph – not an actual handicraft – of a crucifix immersed in urine. It created a sensation in 1989, and great opposition from American conservatives, when it was displayed at a North Carolina art museum. The artist was Andres Serrano. The photo was part of a series that included the "Piss Pope" and the "Piss God."<sup>6</sup>

It turns out that part of the funding for this art came from the United States government. Serrano had received \$15,000 from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), a tax-funded organization. The NEA in 1989 received over \$170 million from the federal government. When U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, a senator from the state of North Carolina, protested this use of taxpayer money, he was vilified by the liberal news media. In retaliation, the NEA gave \$20,000 to MARS Artspace in Phoenix, Arizona, to help fund an exhibit called "Piss Helms": a photo of Senator Helms in a jar of urine.<sup>7</sup>

Biblically speaking, the Piss Christ photograph is blasphemous; the Piss Helms is not. Both are repugnant. Both are attacks against lawful authority. One is treason against God; the other is a vicious political statement of contempt. That either should be displayed publicly is an outrage. But we must distinguish the two; the first is a capital crime before God, as defined by His word; the second is not. Both, however, are obscene. And both are morally revolutionary.

### Revolutionary Art: Tax-Supported

The NEA had also funded Robert Mapplethorpe, a homosexual photographer who had died of AIDS in early 1989, before his sadomasochistic photographs appeared in several art exhibits later in the year. Also included in the exhibit was a photograph of little a girl's genitals and another of a man

2. Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

3. Leonard W. Levy, *Treason Against God: A History of the Offense of Blasphemy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981). Schocken Books is a Jewish publishing house.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 3. He cites Eliot's *After Strange Gods* (1934), pp. 55-57.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

6. "The Cultural Politics of Controversial Art," *Insight* (July 17, 1989).

7. Letter sent by Donald E. Wildmon of the American Family Association: March 10, 1990.

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with a bullwhip up his rectum. These photographs appeared at exhibits in Philadelphia and Chicago, but when they were scheduled for Washington, D.C., conservative U.S. congressman (and Ph.D. in economics) Richard Armev protested. Armev and a hundred other congressmen complained in writing to the NEA. Washington's Corcoran Museum canceled the show in June. The NEA had given the gallery \$300,000 in 1988.<sup>8</sup> Three months later, the museum issued a public apology, not for having scheduled the exhibit, but for having cancelled it.<sup>9</sup>

Pressure was imposed on the NEA by a New York state senator who was on the NEA council. He wanted the organization to ratify an anti-obscenity pledge that artists receiving money from the NEA not indulge in obscene art or acts. The NEA defied the public; its advisory body voted overwhelmingly, 17 to 2, to reject any such restriction.<sup>10</sup>

There is an old phrase, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." After the story of federal funding through the NEA hit the news media, a variation appeared in a newspaper cartoon, "The Lockhorns," in which the character is staring at a framed canvas filled with paint splotches. "I don't know much about art, but somebody is getting away with murder." In an insightful essay, "The Art of Revolution," which appeared in the conservative magazine *Chronicles* (June, 1990), editor Thomas Fleming identified the political issue: "Most Americans don't know much about art, but they do know what they don't like, namely blasphemy, pornography, and perversion."

Fleming recognized the revolutionary implications and goals of such art. "Violent revolution and pacifism, tribalism and universalism are celebrated with a passionate pluralism that can embrace everything but loyalty and restraint. It is a misleading picture, because the writers of these manifestos are for the most part quiet little drudges addicted to prescription drugs and nonviolent (i.e., safe) protest." Then why do they get the funding from the State? **Because the political regime is itself perverse.** "American radicals are, in a literal sense, the loyal opposition, because they support the cultural and moral goals of the regime: social dissolution, decay of community, and the sense of helplessness and anomie that encourages decadency."

Fleming made an important observation: from the era of World War I, a writer or painter has had two paths open to him: "a profitable career as a capitalist artist or a comfortable sinecure as artist-rebel." To become an artist-rebel means "taking on the government as patron; university jobs, major grants, tax-subsidized publications, exhibitions, and lecture tours. All that is required of you is to parrot the lies of the regime: the American family is a sick institution, Western man is racist and sexist, Christianity has poisoned the water and killed off the whales, etc., etc. The solution to each of these crises is more money for more social agencies, more money to fight racism and pollution, and - do not forget - more money for 'the Arts'. . . ."

It is this decline of the arts and rise of government funding that marks the decadence of a social order that is in self-conscious rebellion to God. That the blasphemy law is not enforced, or even discussed, in such an era is to be expected. Such an era cannot survive for long. It may suffer a revolution, or it may experience regeneration, but it will not survive for long.

### "Kid Schaeffer" vs. "Fundamentalist Blasphemers"

Into this atmosphere of accelerating moral crisis and cultural decadence - signs of the end of humanist civilization<sup>11</sup> - comes Franky Schaeffer. ("Have Rhetoric. Will Travel.") Once again, Franky has launched an attack on rotten standards - not Serrano's, not Mapplethorpe's, but Christian fund-raising and retailing.

The issue, he says, is blasphemy. Specifically, the issue is blasphemous art. What constitutes blasphemous art in Franky's eyes? Not merely sadomasochism. Not merely the "Piss Christ." We must, he insists, also include the Christian Booksellers Association! He tells us that Mapplethorpe and Serrano are less offensive to him than the Christian Booksellers Association is, for they are not hypocrites.

I would say the [cross of Christ in a] jar of urine, the "Piss Christ," is no more blasphemous than most religious television that so-called Christian organizations support. The idea of sending Oral Roberts ten dollars because he has told me God will bless me if I donate money to him is certainly just as much heresy and blasphemy as putting a crucifix in a jar of urine.

The debasement of the Christian ideal is being carried on just as much by so-called conservative Christians in this country as any homosexual artist I have ever met. If I had to choose between them, I would prefer the honesty of the overtly anti-Christian art.

For example, consider the commercialization of such groups as the Christian Booksellers Association whose trade fairs resemble nothing so much as Reno, Nevada, and Las Vegas, in their Tinsel Town quality.

What of the T-shirts hanging in most Christian bookstores with caricatures of Christ's hands holding a beer mug and underneath "This blood's for you?" The Christian who wants to clean up the image of Christ in the arts might start by picketing his local religious bookstore before he troubles himself over what Andres Serrano and Mapplethorpe are doing.<sup>12</sup>

Franky has now moved from his carefully cultivated role as "the angry young Protestant rebel with a cause" to "the angry, no longer young, ex-Protestant rebel with a whine." He says, "If I had to choose between them, I would prefer the honesty of the overtly anti-Christian art." Honesty? Bullwhips in tight places? He no doubt thinks he is being artistically authentic. In fact, he has become a buffoon. It is just as T. S. Eliot warned in 1934: **blasphemy is considered merely a matter of taste.**

Franky's criticisms reveal no awareness on his part that blasphemy constitutes a self-consciously revolutionary assault against God. His remarks display no sense of an impending cultural crisis, and no understanding of the judicial character of Christian theology. There is also no sense of propriety in this theological drifter's pathetic attempts at artistic relevance. His criticisms are fatuous. (Or are they flutent? In Franky's case, the two are difficult to distinguish.)

Franky does not understand the nature of the artistic crisis. It is not the fundamentalists' lack of artistic sensibility that constitutes the artistic crisis of the West today; the problem is treason against God. So, he prefers Mapplethorpe to Oral Roberts. Well, I prefer the fundamentalists' lack of taste to the self-proclaimed authority and expertise of a theologically

8. "Cowed Corcoran," *Economist* (June 24, 1989).

9. "Corcoran Gallery Is to Apologize For Mapplethorpe Cancellation," *New York Times* (Sept. 19, 1989).

10. "Arts panel opposes anti-obscenity oath," *Dallas Morning News* (Aug. 4, 1990).

11. Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age: The Social and Cultural Outlook* (New York: Dutton, 1941); *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: Dutton, 1942). Sorokin was the founder of Harvard University's sociology department.

12. *Rutherford Institute Journal* (Jan. 1992), p. 9. This is the publication of the Rutherford Institute, a Christian public interest law firm that his father had helped get started.

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impaired, narrowly educated, artistically mediocre, R-rated teenage violence movie-producing hack like Franky Schaeffer. The fundamentalists do not put on artistic airs; for almost two decades, Franky Schaeffer has. And air is all that remains. Flatulence.

Franky adopted a specific marketing plan for over a decade. It worked as long as his father was alive. He cultivated a specific pose – the angry young man – but after his father died, he started coming off as a whiny kid. Today, he is an aging “kid emeritus.” Still, his tantrums continue. He has now slandered the very industry that he did his best to cash in on for ten years: Christian publishing. My guess is that his book royalties have run out. So, he publicly bites the hand that no longer feeds him. But his latest tirade goes farther than mere slander. This time, he has violated the ninth commandment.

He suggests that fundamentalist fund-raising and advertising are as blasphemous as Serrano’s art, thereby identifying his total ignorance of both the ninth commandment and social order. Artistic treason against God is being committed daily, at government expense, and Franky Schaeffer worries about Christian T-shirts. The stakes are much higher than he supposes. So is the seriousness of his accusation. Artistic license does not include making false accusations based on loose definitions of a crime so vile that it required death by stoning under the Old Covenant. This man has become a false witness.

To accuse Oral Roberts and the Christian Booksellers Association of blasphemy is an outrage. Blasphemy is a crime: a public cursing of God. Yet Franky tosses around this accusation as if blasphemy were merely a question of taste, which is all he thinks it is. He poses as an arbitrator of good taste. Fundamentalism offends his good taste. What good taste? **Franky Schaeffer’s taste is in his mouth.** *Wired to Kill*, his R-rated teenage violence movie, was a disaster, both artistically and financially. It flopped because almost nobody went to see it. The film received scathing reviews by Christian film critics for its needless bloodshed and its lack of any Christian theme. Christian film critic Ted Baehr wrote: “So, in the end, this is a humanistic film about humanistic despair, showing no way out, no alternative. . . . Stay away from *Wired to Kill* unless you want to weep at how an opportunity for Christian filmmakers was thrown away.”<sup>13</sup>

### Theological Schizophrenia

Franky’s problem is theological. So was his father’s. Neither Francis Schaeffer nor Franky ever resolved the immense contradiction in their attempt to create an intellectual defense of Christian activism while simultaneously denying (1) the standards of biblical law and (2) the possibility of cultural victory for Christians in history. Theirs was an exclusively negative critique. They ridiculed the idea of the myth of moral neutrality on the question of abortion, and then went on to proclaim political pluralism – the myth of political neutrality – as the only valid temporal Christian solution to the dilemma of judicial standards. They also stayed discreetly quiet about the role of the institutional Church and the sacraments. For instance, Francis Schaeffer’s pamphlet defending infant baptism never appeared in the so-called *Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*. He was a Presbyterian minister whose published works hid this fact. When it came to book sales, both Schaeffers preferred ecclesiastical neutrality, right down to the question of the sacraments: ecclesiology as *adiaphora* (things not crucial to the faith).

The father died in the summer of 1984 without suggesting any resolution to the theological dilemma that his writings had created. Within months, this contradiction overwhelmed the son. In the fall of 1984, Franky cancelled all his future Christian audience speaking engagements, and he disbanded his own *Christian Activist* tabloid newspaper a few months later. He sold the tabloid’s mailing list and then disappeared from the evangelical scene. For a while, anyway. Franky simply could not sustain the theological battle without the inspiring presence of his father and without biblical law.

He goes away periodically, but he refuses to stay away. This is our problem. He has nothing positive to show for the last fifteen years of his on-again, off-again tantrums, nothing of quality to bring to the table, no published theory of Christian aesthetics, no plan of action, and no money. But he reappears periodically to perform his routine, which can be best described as whining for artistic relevance. Each performance gets more frivolous, and each one is directed not at the increasingly decadent humanist culture of our day, but at the tentative steps of evangelicals to respond, a century late, to the enormous threat of a now visibly debauched humanism. Ironically, Franky’s father was the primary public literary figure in the appearance of the Christian cultural resistance movement. But Franky spends his time these days battling what he regards as the Philistines of fundamentalism rather than the Assyrians of humanism. Fundamentalists do not meet his standards, he tells us. Not his theological standards – he has none to speak of – but his artistic standards.

This, from a washed-up producer-director of an R-rated teenage violence film. “Physician, heal thyself!”

### Freddy and Franky

There is a stupid horror movie series, enormously profitable, called *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The character of the series, Freddy Krueger, is like Dracula: he keeps rising from the dead. He has a shriveled up face and wears gloves with long metal blades. The advertising for each sequel announces, “He’s back!” Freddy Krueger reminds me of Franky Schaeffer. We think he has gone, but he keeps coming back.

I think of Freddy’s long, blade-like fingers. I think of Franky, always ready to point the finger. Yet when I visualize Franky as Freddy, it is always with his “pointing finger” firmly implanted in his right nostril. “Look at me, look at me, everyone; see how outrageous I can be this week!” No matter whose reputation suffers.

There comes a time for Christian social commentators to discuss theology. Franky refuses. There also comes a time for Christians to grow up. Franky refuses. For years, Franky Schaeffer has been playing the role of Young Turk. He is not aging gracefully.

Francis Schaeffer was a serious man who devoted his life to evangelism. His son has devoted his life to whining. Even when he is on the right side of an issue, he whines. Francis Schaeffer was a self-taught, self-disciplined scholar, not a Young Turk with bad manners. I do not recall that he ever called a fellow Christian a blasphemer.

Franky Schaeffer has capitalized on his father’s name and reputation for over fifteen years, squandering a valuable legacy. He has little spiritual or intellectual capital remaining. It is time for him to go out and look for a job.

In the 1960’s, liberal talk show host David Suskind bored America weekly with his five-hour interview shows on late-night television. A humorist wrote a song about him: “David Suskind, Please Shut Up.” Someone needs to write one for Franky Schaeffer. It needn’t be funny.

13. Ted Baehr, *The Movie & Video Guide for Christian Families* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Sons, 1987), p. 213.