



Center for  
Religious Studies

CENTRAL  
EUROPEAN  
UNIVERSITY

# WHITHER BLASPHEMY

## ON THE RESILIENCE OF AN IDEA, PAST AND PRESENT

### A CRS DOCTORAL MASTERCLASS

**JUNE 2, 2021 | WEDNESDAY | 9:30 A.M. – 4:30 P.M. | ON-LINE EVENT**

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION | **Michael Ignatieff**, President and Rector, CEU

CHAIR | **Jean-Louis Fabiani**, Director, Center for Religious Studies, CEU



*The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter by Max Ernst (1926)*

From Andres Serrano's photograph titled *Immersion. Piss-Christ*, a portrait of Jesus Christ made of urine to Charlie Hebdo's caricatures of the Muslim prophet [or prophet of Islam] Muhammad, blasphemy poses the conundrum of the multiple ways by which religion might be, and in practice is, regulated in diverse societies formally or informally. Located at the junction of law and religion and of norms and practices, blasphemy has a history entangled with the history of state organs and institutions of religion, with a reach into the realm of mentalities and sentiments. In recent years the issue of blasphemy has become more salient to some secular states than hitherto, not least with the growing incidence and pressures of multiculturalist notions of tolerance, and the insertion of incommensurable otherness into the middle of the debate. Controversies and confrontations involving blasphemy, pacific as well as violent, verbal as well as bodily, have become more insistent. How does contemporary blasphemy differ from the various historical examples available for comparison? To what extent does the idea emerge from existing social relations today? Is there any sense in talking about blasphemy today as a general term rather than considering its evocations in very specific settings?

This masterclass features experts who will cast a variety of perspectives upon the questions at hand, offering insight on how blasphemy might be considered, addressed, and dealt with both as a topic for academic study and research and a matter for public policy. They will offer historical, conceptual, normative and political terms of reference that can inform a scholar's approaches to the complex issues presented here.

## Keynote I. | **Aziz Al-Azmeh**, University Professor of History

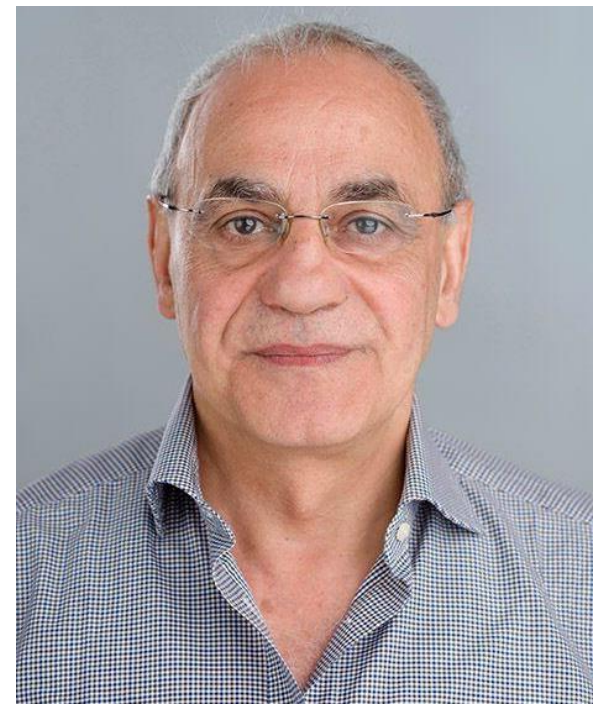
Central European University

**POST-COLONIAL BLASPHEMY**

**10 A.M. – CET**

**ABSTRACT** | Is blasphemy a vestigial phenomenon in modern societies? Does the recent public salience of blasphemy emerge from specific cultural proclivities, or from postcolonialist notions of politics and of rights? The reactions of some Muslim groups to visual and literary depictions of Muhammad have called up these and other questions. Controversy has broadened to the legitimacy of the modern age, and to whether there might not be a natural right to obscurantism that requires special indulgence or perhaps legal protection. This talk will try to make sense of this situation with discussions of the past and the present, will try to restore the balance of public arguments by considering the persuasion of blasphemers, and will query the aptitude of the notion of blasphemy.

**BIO** | Aziz Al-Azmeh joined CEU in 2002, where he is now University Professor Emeritus. He has been the recipient of an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship and held fellowships at the Institutes for Advanced Study in Berlin, Uppsala and Budapest, at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, the Käte Hamburger Kolleg in Bochum, and the Rockefeller Foundation Center for Scholars in Bellagio. He has been a visiting professor at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Paris), Columbia, Yale, Berkeley, Georgetown, and the Aga Khan University (London). His most recent books in English are *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press) and *Secularism in the Arab World:*



## Keynote II. | **David Nash**, Professor of European Studies Oxford Brookes University

**BLASPHEMY'S HISTORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: ENABLING A  
DISJOINTED HISTORY TO INFORM THE PRESENT AND ITS PROBLEMS**

**2 P.M. - CET**

**ABSTRACT** | This Keynote lecture will begin by identifying the leading theoretical approaches to the history of blasphemy noting their origins and preoccupations and how these have shaped the historiography of the subject and its perception in the wider world. At its core this lecture will ask what the discoveries of historians have to say to a contemporary world where blasphemy and laws surrounding it remain an objective reality. This is also a world which is increasingly divided about the utility of laws which, on the one hand, concern the control of free expression and, on the other, are shaped in the direction of protecting of religious beliefs.

**BIO** | David Nash is Professor of History at Oxford Brookes University's School of History, Philosophy and Culture. He is Director of its involvement in the SOLON project, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and an editor of the journal *Cultural and Social History*. He has written on blasphemy, secular world views and secularisation for over 30 years. He has given advice on blasphemy legislation to governments in the UK, Australia, Ireland as well as the European Commission. His seminal work on the subject, *Blasphemy in the Christian World* (OUP, 2007) is widely referenced in the field.

## PROGRAM

### 9:30 – 10:00 / WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Michael Ignatieff, President and Rector, CEU

Jean-Louis Fabiani, Director, Center for Religious Studies, CEU

### 10:00 – 11:00 / OPENING KEYNOTE LECTURE I

Aziz Al-Azmeh, University Professor, Department of History, CEU

*Post-colonial Blasphemy*

### 11:15– 12:30 / OPENING PANEL DISCUSSION AND Q&A

Moderator: Nadia Al-Bagdadi, Professor, Department of History, CEU and Director, IAS Budapest

Panelists: A panel of three doctoral students will be selected from among the workshop participants and announced closer to date.

### 14:00 - 15:00 / AFTERNOON KEYNOTE LECTURE II

David Nash, Professor, School of History, Philosophy and Culture, Oxford Brookes University and Director, Center for Inquiry, London

*Blasphemy's History in the Contemporary World: Enabling a disjointed history to inform the present and its problems*

### 15:15 – 16:30 / AFTERNOON PANEL DISCUSSION AND Q&A

Moderator: Jean-Louis Fabiani, Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, CEU and CRS Director

Panelists: A panel of three doctoral students will be selected from among the workshop participants and announced closer to date.

*This is an internal event for CEU Religious Studies faculty and students.*

*CRS is accepting applications for participation from external parties. Doctoral candidates from partner institutions are encouraged to apply.*

*Please send your letter of interest to [religion@ceu.edu](mailto:religion@ceu.edu)*