

Blasphemy and Free Speech in Islam

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What is blasphemy?

Blasphemy is defined as an act of insulting, showing contempt or lack of reverence for the Prophet Mohammad, his family, the Qur'an and other religious writings. The Qur'an does not prescribe any physical punishment for blasphemy nor does it authorize humans to punish blasphemers. While condemning blasphemy on moral and ethical grounds, the Qur'an advises Muslims to temporarily disassociate themselves from the blasphemer's company.

Contrary to the commonly held belief that Blasphemy is a crime, Islam grants humans total freedom of speech and expression. It does however discourage indecent behavior, indecent speech, or the hurting the sensitivities of other people. Five Qur'anic verses refer to blasphemy¹ and none specifies any physical punishment for the blasphemer. One hadith explains how the Holy Prophet led a blasphemer's funeral prayers and even gave his shirt to enshroud the blasphemer's body. He did this despite being reminded by Umar,² one of his close companions, that God had decreed that he will not accept even the Prophet's intercession for a blasphemer even if the Prophet prayed 70 times for his forgiveness. The Prophet responded that he will pray for the blasphemer's forgiveness more than 70 times and then led his funeral prayer.³

Contrary to the above Qur'anic affirmations and the Prophet's practice referenced above, many Muslim countries have laws to punish blasphemy with death.

The radicals' definitions of Blasphemy are essential tools to subjugate Muslims, suppress intellectual freedom, quell dissent, and eliminate any challenge to their religious innovations under the guise of Islam.

Radicals legitimize their "authority" by either ignoring or misrepresenting Qur'anic injunctions and relying on misinterpreted hadiths (prophet's exhortations), fatwas (religious edicts), and legislative sharia. Excellent research by Arafat Mazhar documents how blasphemy was transformed from no crime to crime in Pakistan.⁴ He reviewed more than 200 books of the dominant Muslim sect in Pakistan spanning from the 7th to the 20th century and was able to identify instances where criminalization of blasphemy occurred over time due to political expediency.

Blasphemy – as we see it

Blasphemy is not a crime under Islam or under the US Law. Communicating opinions and ideas is a fundamental human right is part of the Bill of Rights and is protected by the First Constitutional

¹ Ch 4 v 141; Ch 4 v 157; Ch 6 v 109; Ch 18 v 6; and Ch 63 v 9

² Caliph Umar, was one of the most powerful and influential Muslim caliphs in history. A senior companion of the prophet Muhammad, he succeeded Abu Bakr as the second caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate on 23 August 634.

³ Bukhari II, Kitab Al-Janaiz p 121 and ibid, Bab-al-Kafn, p 96-7

⁴ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/blasphemy-the-untold-story-pakistans-law>

Amendment. The US Law prohibits making any law respecting an establishment of religion, impeding the free exercise of religion, abridging the freedom of speech, infringing on the freedom of the press, interfering with the right to peaceably assemble or prohibiting the petitioning for a governmental redress of grievances are not punishable offences. Similarly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights laws acknowledge this freedom of expression. Islam upholds freedom of expression.

Accusations of Blasphemy have repeatedly been used by radicals to usurp people's freedom of choice and expression. Several free thinking Muslims and people of other faiths have been declared blasphemers and killed around the world. Several people have been murdered by vigilantes or jailed for blasphemy in many Muslim-majority countries. Minorities have been falsely charged with Blasphemy to settle personal scores or for grabbing their property.

Blasphemy – as the radicals see it

Blasphemy is an important pillar of the Islamists' goal of establishing an Islamic State. They consider Blasphemy a capital crime as it gives them total control over people's freedom of expression. Radicals are thus free to propagate their rhetoric and force people to accept it as factual. One example of propagating falsehood by curbing free expression is the Islamists' position that a Muslims' loyalty belongs to the Islamic State and not to the nation state they live in. While acknowledging the Prophet's example of forgiving a blasphemer, the Islamists' refuse to follow this example; they take the convoluted position saying that while the Prophet could forgive the blasphemer during his lifetime, no Muslim has the authority to forgive the blasphemer after the Prophet's death! Islamists claim to follow the Prophet's examples but do so selectively to promote their ideology! This hypocrisy must stop.

Islamists do not want Muslims to think critically and challenge their indefensible positions; thus, their opposition to secular education. Challenging the Islamists' "un-Islamic" position will deflate their propaganda and expose their falsehood. Thus Islamists will not cede their monopoly over people's freedom of expression.

This defective doctrine of Blasphemy, engineered by the radicals and revived in the recent past, have become effective tools for suppressing the freedom of expression which is a fundamental rights accorded to every citizen. Not only are these against the First Amendment to the US Constitution, these are also against the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the rights granted by the religion of Islam.