



## The Problem of Blasphemy Laws

31.03.2014 | Rabbi Reuven Firestone

**Last week I was in Pakistan. What was a Jew doing in Pakistan, you might ask? Many of my own friends begged me not to go. “A Jew in Pakistan?” they asked. “There are no Jews living in Pakistan. Shi`ites and Christians and Baha’is and Ahmadis are all in trouble for their lives in Pakistan. Why do you want to go there? You will be taken hostage. You will be killed!”**

As you can see, they were wrong. Instead of being taken hostage or killed I was welcomed. I taught a class of traditional Muslim women from the International Islamic University in Islamabad about Jewish mysticism, and a class in a university in Lahore about Jewish theology and attitudes toward the Land of Israel. Not only did I teach on my visit last week to Pakistan. I also learned. I learned from Muslim scholars and from simple worshippers in mosques and Sufi shrines.

And I learned something very important from one man, a Muslim religious scholar who also knows Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, and who studies the Talmud. He is now my teacher as well. His name is Dr. Allama Abul-Fateh Chishti. He taught me something very important about blasphemy and religious intolerance, which I will soon share with you.

In most of the world before the modern period, intolerance was a virtue. I am talking about what might be understood as the positive side to chauvinism or, in Arabic, *ta`a`ub* – bias, prejudice. Being intolerant meant being firm in one’s commitment. It meant being resolved and resolute - *??zim* in Arabic, or the term *th?bit*. It meant being faithful to the Truth of God.

As a positive attribute, this intolerance meant that one would not tolerate the lies and inventions of people who spoke something other than the truth.

According to the logic of religious intolerance, because there is only one God there can be only one Truth. If we were to worship many gods, we might mistakenly believe in different truths, each associated with a different god or goddess. This is false because there can be only one great God, the one and only creator God of the world and the universe. And that one great God is magnificent. God is all-knowing. God is merciful. God does not lie, and God does not give conflicting messages to different communities of people. Therefore, there cannot be a multitude of truths, but only one *real* Truth.

The problem, however, is that in real life people have different perspectives. And many of those people with perspectives that differ from our own are just as intelligent, educated and wise as we are.

But never mind, say the religiously intolerant. Don’t pay attention. Our position is honorable, principled, and correct. It is worthy of great praise because it describes absolute loyalty to what we know are God’s demands. It proves fidelity to the divine imperative. It proves devotion to God’s essential Truth.

So consider this scene. One day, three great and wise men meet together, each with his own righteous version of religious intolerance. These are the greatest theologians of their generation, and each represents a different religious tradition. They meet together on a hill overlooking a great

valley. In the valley are the greatest scientists, artists, and soldiers of these great civilizations, separated into three armies facing one another on the battlefield. All the wealth and all the strength of each religious civilization are ready and devoted entirely to its particular view of truth. Each theologian and his army believes that he is right, and each believes that God is only with him. Each is strong. Each is resolute. Each is proud. They are ready to battle to the death and destruction of the others – and also the self – in order to demonstrate their absolute loyalty to God. Is this something that God would wish?

But which of these three great civilizations represents the *real* truth? Who is really living out God's commands?

The three great religious leaders have much to argue about. They argue about which scripture is most true to the divine will. They argue about which kind of prayer is most authentic and is therefore heeded by God. They argue about which law represents God's real desires. They would agree about none of these, because they are each righteously intolerant.

But there is one key issue about which they could all agree, one central answer that they could all approve, and on this they could all find accord: "the truth is mine." Only mine!

Where does that lead us? Nowhere! Or perhaps better said, it leads either to nowhere or to destruction, especially if each religious leader is supported by his government and his armies.

In the pre-modern world, most people lived among their own kind and did not mix much with other people. They routinely heard the same consistent message again and again. When we only speak with people who think like we do, we only receive affirmation of the same perspective. It is like a massage: the more we get, the better we feel. And because we are rarely challenged, we feel confident that we are right.

But we can never really know that we are right.

We can only have faith in our position. We cannot prove it. If we could "prove" it, then everybody would agree, by definition. But if there is anything that people agree to disagree about, it is about religion.

What I am describing here – intolerance in religion – defines a kind of arrogance and overbearing pride that actually goes against every religion. Religious intolerance is actually a very primitive view, the recourse of fools. I can only pity them for their foolishness.

How do we *know* that we know the truth? We argue that we know it from reason. And we argue that we know religious truth from divine revelation.

But there exist other scriptures besides our own. And while one can argue that the same basic message is found in all of them, they are each substantially different. While much is shared, much is different. The fact is that we cannot agree, and we cannot convince one another that our position is the only correct position. So why not simply allow everyone to practice their religion – and preach their religion – in freedom?

It seems simple, but it is not. It is very difficult.

Why? Because religious freedom means not only the free *practice* of religion. It also requires the

free *expression* of religious ideas in public. That means allowing religious mission in a free and open manner. I am speaking now as a Jew, who does not practice religious mission. Jews are very uncomfortable with the practice of religious mission because historically it has been used harshly against us. But true religious freedom means not only the free practice of religion. It also requires the free expression of religion and religious ideas in public.

Why are people so uncomfortable with complete religious freedom?

I believe there are two reasons. One is the lack of religious self-confidence. The other is the fear of blasphemy. They are closely related.

I begin with self-confidence. If I were not confident in myself I would often feel insulted, even when nobody is intending to insult me.

If I am confident in my religion, I will not consider a misunderstanding of my religion – or even a critique of my religion – to be an insult. Truly, I do not care if others believe that my religion is wrong, or even false. I have deep faith in my religion, whatever other people may think or write or say. We need to teach deeper religious self-confidence in order to live in a world of religious freedom.

The more difficult issue is the problem of blasphemy, and it is the horrors of blasphemy that I learned from my teacher Dr. Abul-Fateh. What exactly is blasphemy? It is an act interpreted as insulting God or religion. Blasphemy is an act of cursing God, or showing contempt and disrespect toward something considered religious, such as a religious object or place of worship.

I agree that doing these things is wrong, unethical, even wicked. But I do not believe that they should be forbidden. Let us consider. Can God be offended by someone's insult? Can anybody have the power to hurt God through a curse? Can religion feel pain from an insult. Does religion need to exact vengeance against someone who curses it?

We may be offended. We may be insulted. But I have enough confidence not to be terribly upset by such silliness.

There is a difference, however, between the emotional injury of blasphemy and the physical injury of defacement or destruction. Physical damage to any person based on religious motive or any other kind of motive must be forbidden. And physical damage to any religious institution must also be forbidden. That includes not only burning or bombing, but any kind of physical damage such as spray-painting.

Physical injury of religious bodies, human or material, must always be forbidden. But free and open discourse about religion must not, even when it results in something that you may call blasphemy.

This is the reason:

One religion's blasphemy is often another religion's central doctrine or belief. How can religious creed be outlawed? For example:

A Jew who hears a Muslim claim that the Torah has been corrupted can consider that claim to be blasphemy.

A Christian who hears a Jew or Muslim say that Jesus Christ is not the son of God can consider that claim to be blasphemy.

And a Muslim who hears a Jew or Christian find fault with Prophet Muhammad can consider that

claim to be blasphemy.

Can a law which forbids such statements ever solve the problem of blasphemy? Of course not! Why not? Because each of these blasphemous claims is part of a religious creed.

According to the Qur'an and according to all expressions of Islam, the Torah and the Christian Bible have been corrupted through human (read Christian and Jewish) distortion, known as *ta'rif*. I do not need to cite the Qur'an to prove this (Q.2:59, 75-77, 140; 3:77-79, 187; 4:46; 5:13-15, 41, etc.). This claim is not only insulting, it is blasphemous to Jews and Christians.

I don't need to tell you that it is theological doctrine in both Judaism and Islam that Jesus is not the incarnation of God. That viewpoint is official blasphemy according to Christianity.

And of course, everybody knows that Jews and Christians cannot accept the prophethood of Muhammad. This is religious doctrine. It is a requirement of Jews and Christians. But it is not only insulting, is considered blasphemous to Muslims.

In each of these cases, what appears blasphemous to one religion is religious creed to another. To consider a core principle of a religion to be blasphemy is itself a kind of blasphemy!

True freedom of religion requires that there be no blasphemy law. Blasphemy law is, by definition, an enemy of religious freedom. We can demand respect of other religions, but this demand for respect is an issue of education – not legislation.

Blasphemy laws do not protect religions. They persecute religions.

So I urge the United Nations and all international and national bodies to condemn all legislation defined in common parlance as “blasphemy law.” Laws of blasphemy are perhaps the most horrific barrier to religious freedom.

Presented at the Doha Implementation Meeting for Istanbul Process 16/18, 24 March, 2014, co-hosted by DICID (Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue) OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) and ISNA (Islamic Society of North America). With kind permission by the author.