

Islam on Blasphemy vs. Muslims on Blasphemy

Arif Humayun

The Qur'anic teaching on blasphemy is in direct conflict with the general Muslims' practice of this doctrine. While the Qur'an condemns blasphemy on moral and ethical grounds the Muslims' practice of killing the blasphemer – as justifiable punishment – is contrary to Islamic teachings. Similarly, capital punishment for blasphemy, as legislated in several Muslim countries, is contrary to Qur'anic teachings. It is important to understand that blasphemy is neither a pillar nor an article of faith of Islam; it is thus imperative that the Muslims' reaction to blasphemy be consistent with the Qur'anic teachings and the Holy Prophet's practices. This is the only way for them to serve in cause of Islam.

The divergence between the Qur'anic teachings and the Holy Prophet practices and the current Muslim practice when dealing with blasphemy will be highlighted in this paper. The Muslim's violent response to events of blasphemy not only results in loss of human rights, it brings Islam into disrepute and disturbs interfaith harmony which is essential for a peaceful environment.

As mentioned above, Islam strongly condemns blasphemy on both moral and ethical grounds but it **does not** prescribe any physical punishment nor authorizes humans to penalize the blasphemer. While prohibiting indecent behavior and indecent speech, or hurting the sensitivity of other peoples, the Qur'an **does not** advocate any punishment for blasphemy in this world nor vests such authority in any person or institution.

Freedom of speech is vital for human dignity. No religion is worthy of any consideration unless it addresses itself to the restoration and protection of human dignity. Freedom of speech is particularly important for Muslims for the propagation of and the removal of misconceptions about Islam. Contrary to the politicized clergy's rhetoric, Islam **does not** deny freedom of speech and expression. On the contrary, it upholds this principle in a unique and unprecedented manner.

Perhaps, no prophet of God was more blasphemed, maligned, insulted and abused during his life-time than Prophet Muhammad¹ himself. He and his followers were subjected to verbal invective and physical harassment of the harshest form in Mecca after which he and his

¹ Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him" – a customary blessing invoked by Muslims after the Prophet's name. To be read as such in this paper

followers migrated to Medina. Returning to Mecca as a triumphant leader, with thousands of followers; the city surrendered without a fight and its citizens welcomed him. Much to the amazement of the Meccans, the Prophet forgave their atrocities and announced a general pardon. This was the Prophet's general attitude towards his enemies and blasphemous opponents. All Muslims claim to accept the Prophet as a perfect exemplar; yet those who justify or sympathize with the killing of blasphemers have chosen to place their personal convictions above that of the Prophet's and the scripture.

This dangerous trend of religious intolerance is widespread throughout the Muslim world. It is thus critically important for Muslims to understand the Qur'anic teachings of peace and compassion and reject any terrorist acts that are justified under the guise of Islam. Such clear understanding may empower people – Muslims and non-Muslims – to convincingly condemn any killing in the name of the Holy Prophet and deny the perpetrators any chance to conceal their heinous crimes behind the Islamic façade.

This confusion in Muslim practice apparently comes from the misinterpretation by mediaeval scholars and some jurists that the hadith² provide a basis for a death sentence for blasphemy. The fundamental rule is that Qur'an being the primary source overrules secondary sources – hadith and Sunnah – if they are in conflict. Obviously, this important rule has been disregarded in the Muslims' practice. The confusion between the four major Sunni and one Shi'a schools of interpretation is summarized below:

Hanafi – view blasphemy as synonymous with apostasy, and therefore, accepts the repentance of apostates. Those who refuse to repent, their punishment is death if the blasphemer is a Muslim man, and if the blasphemer is a woman, she must be imprisoned with coercion (beating) till she repents and returns to Islam.³ If a non-Muslim commits blasphemy, his punishment must be a *tazir* (discretionary, can be death, arrest, caning, etc).^{4,5}

Maliki – view blasphemy as an offense distinct from, and more severe than apostasy. Death is mandatory in cases of blasphemy for Muslim men, and repentance is not accepted. For women, death is not the punishment suggested, but she is arrested and punished till she repents and

² Sahih al-Bukhari, 3:45:687, Sahih al-Bukhari, 5:59:369

³ Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi (983), Mukhtalaf al-Riwayah, vol. 3, pp. 1298–1299

⁴ Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tahawi (933), Mukhtasar Ikhtilaf al-Ulama, vol. 3, p. 504

⁵ P Smith (2003), Speak No Evil: Apostasy, Blasphemy and Heresy in Malaysian Syariah Law, UC Davis Journal Int'l Law & Policy, 10, pp. 357-373;

returns to Islam or dies in custody.⁶ A non-Muslim who commits blasphemy against Islam must be punished; however, the blasphemer can escape punishment by converting and becoming a devout Muslim.⁷

Hanbali – view blasphemy as an offense distinct from, and more severe than apostasy. Death is mandatory in cases of blasphemy, for both Muslim men and women, and repentance is not accepted.⁸

Shafi'i – recognizes blasphemy as a separate offense from apostasy, but accepts the repentance of blasphemers. If the blasphemer does not repent, the punishment is death.^{9,10}

Ja'fari (Shia) – views blasphemy against Islam, the Prophet, or any of the Imams, to be punishable with death, if the blasphemer is a Muslim.¹¹ In case the blasphemer is a non-Muslim, he is given a chance to convert to Islam, or else killed.¹²

My research of the works of several scholars with extensive knowledge of the Qur'an has failed to identify a single verse which declares blasphemy a crime punishable. This poses an implicit challenge to those who support capital punishment for blasphemy to produce scriptural evidence for their stance. The research found five specific instances where blasphemy has been mentioned in the Qur'an. The first is a general description of blasphemy against God and the prescribed action for the believers:

He has already revealed to you in the Book that, when you hear the Signs of Allah being denied and mocked at, sit not with them until they engage in a talk other than that; for

⁶ D Jordan (2003), Dark Ages of Islam: Ijtihad, Apostasy and Human Rights in Contemporary Jurisprudence, The. Wash. And Lee Race and Ethnic Anc. Law Journal, Vol 9, p 55-74

⁷ Carl Ernst (2005), "Blasphemy: Islamic Concept", Encyclopedia of Religion (Editor: Lindsay Jones), Vol 2, Macmillan Reference, ISBN 0-02-865735-7

⁸ Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed (2004), Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam, Ashgate Publishing, ISBN 978-0754630838

⁹ L Wiederhold L, Blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (sabb al-rasul, sabb al-sahabah) : The introduction of the topic into Shafi'i legal literature, Jrnl of Sem Studies, Oxford University Press, 42(1), pp. 39-70

¹⁰ P Smith (2003), Speak No Evil: Apostasy, Blasphemy and Heresy in Malaysian Syariah Law, UC Davis Journal Int'l Law & Policy, 10, pp. 357-373

¹¹ Ayatullah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (1992), Minhaj al-Salihin, vol. 2, pp. 43-45

¹² Ali ibn al-Hussein al-Murtada (1044), Al-Intisar, pp. 480-481

*in that case you would be like them. Surely, Allah will assemble the hypocrites and the disbelievers in Hell, all together.*¹³

*When thou sees those who engage in vain discourse concerning Our Signs, then turn thou away from them until they engage in a discourse other than that. And if Satan cause thee to forget, then sit not after recollection, with the unjust people.*¹⁴

The approved response for Muslims against blasphemy is to temporarily disassociate themselves from the blasphemer(s) by staging a walkout from an assembly where religious values are being mocked and ridiculed. Registering the protest peacefully will send a strong message to the blasphemer that vane speech will not be appreciated and that action could cost them their friendships. Interestingly, this broad directive covers all religions and does not specifically mention Islam. The Qur'an also asserts that the boycott should be temporary and should last only for the duration during which the act of blasphemy is being committed. No mention of any human punishment or authorization to humans to carry out any punishment is made in these verses.

The second mention of blasphemy is broader, where, in addition to God, blasphemy against idols or any real or imaginary objects of worship of other religions are also prohibited:

*Revile not those whom they call upon beside Allah, lest they, out of spite, revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus unto every people have We caused their doing seem fair. Then unto their Lord is their return; and He will inform them what they used to do.*¹⁵

Directly addressing Muslims, this verse prohibits them from blaspheming idols or any object of worship used by followers of other faiths. The reason for this prohibition is very logical – if Muslims blaspheme or ridicule the objects of worship used by followers of other faiths, then they may, as retaliation, blaspheme against God. Interestingly, blasphemy against God and idols is mentioned on equal terms to signify to the Muslims that they should be sensitive to and hold sacred the traditions of other faiths. It is important to note again that no physical punishment is prescribed in this directive. I am reminded of the Taliban's destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan in 2001 in spite of the international outcry against that act of

¹³ Quran Ch 4, v 141

¹⁴ Quran Ch 6, v 69

¹⁵ Qur'an Ch 6, v 109

unfounded piety. According to the above Qur'anic verse, they had no religious justification for that action.

The third mention is an event of blasphemy against the Prophet where someone referred to the prophet in derogatory terms:

*They say, 'If we return to Medina, the most exalted will, surely, drive out therefrom the most mean,' while true honor belongs to Allah and to His Messenger and the believers; but the hypocrites know not.*¹⁶

The verse above refers to the comments made by Abdullah bin Ubayy bin Salul. This person is also known in the history of Islam as the Chief of Hypocrites. While returning from an expedition, he declared that after returning to Medina, the noblest (referring to himself) would expel the meanest (referring to the Prophet) from among the Medinites. The Prophet's companions clearly understood that this insult was directed towards him; tempers naturally ran high and the companions wanted to kill the blasphemer. The extent of the indignation and rage could be estimated by the fact that the blasphemer's son sought the Prophet's permission to kill his father arguing that if anyone else did so, he might entertain the thought of seeking revenge against his father's killer in the future.¹⁷ The Prophet not only refused to grant the son's request, but also forbade his companions from punishing the blasphemer who, as already stated, is referred to as the chief of hypocrites.¹⁸

The Prophet dealt with this blasphemer with mercy and compassion. When Abdullah bin Ubayy – the blasphemer – died a natural death in Medina, after having lived in peace, the Prophet gave his shirt to Ubhay's son to enshroud his father's body for burial—a singular act of blessing for every Muslim. This act of generosity surprised everyone. Moreover, his decision to lead Ubayy's funeral prayers stunned everyone because the Muslims felt that the Prophet had already shown enough compassion and mercy on the blasphemer by forgiving him. They felt that the Prophet should not lead his funeral prayer. Umar, a close companions and the second caliph, advised him against the idea of leading the blasphemer's funeral service; reinforcing his arguments to sway the Prophet's decision, Umar reminded him of the Qur'anic verse in which reference is made of some known hypocrites on whose behalf God would not accept even the

¹⁶ Qur'an Ch 63, v 9

¹⁷ For centuries, the Arabs were accustomed to take revenge at even the smallest insult hurled at them or their close relative. Perhaps, this custom was in the son's mind.

¹⁸ Narrated by Ibn Ishaq: Al-Seera tun Nabawiyya by Ibn Hashim part III, p 155

Prophet's personal intercession; according to that verse, God would not forgive them even if he prayed for them (the hypocrites) seventy times.¹⁹ The Prophet responded: "I know better; if God would not forgive him even if I seek forgiveness seventy times, I would seek forgiveness for him more than seventy times". He then led the funeral prayer.²⁰ This real life example from the Prophet's life should be an eye opener for those who kill and terrorize people under the false pretext to safeguard his honor.

The other two mentions of blasphemers in the Qur'an are the doubters of Mary's chastity after Jesus' birth²¹ and those who assert God having a son.²² In neither case does the Qur'an prescribe any punishment nor does it authorize any person or institution the right to do so.

Rather than outright condemnation of the differing viewpoint, the Qur'an seeks evidence from those who claim monopoly over heavens and declare that only their adherents would enter paradise,²³ or those who associate partners with God,²⁴ or those who claim superiority of their scripture over the Qur'an.²⁵ It goes on to assert that God will select representatives from all faiths as witnesses and seek proof to demonstrate His claims.²⁶ This bold and peaceful conflict resolution methodology should serve as a guiding principle for every person, especially Muslims, who must consider this as a religious obligation.

This dangerous trend of religious intolerance among Muslims is expanding around the world. It is thus important for Muslims to first understand the Qur'anic teachings of peace and compassion and reject any terrorist acts that are justified under the guise of Islam. Such clear understanding may empower people – Muslims and non-Muslims – to convincingly condemn such atrocity and deny the perpetrators any chance to conceal their heinous crimes behind the Islamic façade.

¹⁹ The number seventy should not be taken literally; in Arab usage, it indicates a large number

²⁰ Bukhari II, kitab Al-Janaiz p 21 and ibid Bab-al-Kafn pp 96-97²⁰

²¹ Qur'an Ch 4, v 157

²² Qur'an Ch 18, v 6

²³ Quran Ch 2, v 112

²⁴ Quran Ch 21, v 23

²⁵ Quran Ch 37, v 157-158

²⁶ Quran Ch 28, v 76