

Good News

'...And give good news to those who do good (to others)' – Holy Quran 22:37

November 2018

A Publication of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, South Africa Volume 09 No. 11

Does Islam Consider 'Blasphemy' a Forgivable Sin or a Crime Punishable by Death?

By Ebrahim Mohamed

It is with great relief that a Pakistani Appellate Court acquitted a Christian lady, Asia Bibi of blasphemy, after she spent eight years on death row for allegedly insulting the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him –pbuh). The frantic calls for her execution by ultra conservative 'mullah¹-led' factions have attracted worldwide attention that resulted in protestations from human rights groups across the world. In conclusion the Appeal Court Judge said:

Blasphemy is a serious offence but the insult of the appellant's (Asia Bibi's) religion and religious sensibilities by the complainant party and then mixing truth with falsehood in the name of the

Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) was also not short of being blasphemous. It is ironical that in the Arabic language the appellant's name Asia means 'sinful' but in the circumstances of the present case she appears to be a person, in the words of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "**more sinned against than sinning.**"²

Even after this acquittal, the hardliners from among the mullahs and their fanatical followers vowed not to give up and wants her sentence reviewed, threatening violent protests.

This incident has thus once again brought into focus the questionable legitimacy of the controversial Pakistani 'blasphemy' law that, by the way, finds its origin in British colonialism and not in Islamic tradition. In fact, there is nothing in the Holy Quran or in the *Sunna*³ that suggest corporal punishment, let alone the death penalty, for blasphemy.⁴ On

² Pakistan Criminal Appeal No. 39-L of 2015, Judgement dd 8.10.2018, page 55

³ Teachings and practical example of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

⁴ The action or offence of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; profane talk – Online Dictionary

¹ Muslim Theologian from Indo-Pakistan

the contrary, all indications are that as far as Islam is concerned, it is a matter of conscience to be dealt with by Almighty Allah and not by human agencies. Of-course, a country could always make legislative provision to address such an offence by means of civil suits in the same way as acts of ‘defamation’ or ‘hate speech’ are treated in most countries across the world. But to treat ‘blasphemy’ as a ‘criminal offence punishable by death’ and then desperately try to justify its legitimacy based on Islamic tradition **is completely off the mark** – and this is what this article will set out to prove with reference to the Holy Quran and the teachings and practical example of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

Such extreme behaviours as we have witnessed in this instance by Muslims be they Pakistani, Indian, Arabic or any other nationality, it is now common knowledge, are generally driven by blind patriotism, culture, and/or ethnicity that are more often than not incompatible with the broader cosmopolitan values and teachings of Islam. These days, it is regrettable to see an increasing gap between being ‘Muslim’ in the true sense of the word and ‘Islam’. And we will prove this point with reference to the Asia Bibi case by showing that the common theme in the Holy Quran and *Sunna*, on which Islamic values are based, strongly advocate ***patience, tolerance and forgiveness***’ as the primary and only responses expected of a Muslim when dealing with specific instances of blasphemy.

The British not the Muslims Criminalized Blasphemy in India

In a BBC program entitled *What are Pakistan’s blasphemy Law?*⁵ some interesting observations with regard to the origin and involvement of the blasphemy law in Pakistan are recorded and I quote (emphases are mine):

‘The offences relating to religion were first codified by India's British rulers in 1860, and **were expanded in 1927. Pakistan inherited these laws when it came into existence after the partition of India in 1947.**’

‘Between 1980 and 1986, a number of clauses were added to the laws by the military government of General Zia-ul Haq. He wanted to "Islamicise" them and also legally to separate the Ahmadi community, declared non-Muslim in 1973, from the main body of Pakistan's overwhelmingly Muslim population.’

‘In 1982, another clause prescribed life imprisonment for "wilful" desecration of the Koran, the Muslim holy book. In 1986, a separate clause was inserted to punish blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad and the penalty recommended was "death, or imprisonment for life". – unquote.

Of notable interest is the fact that in England and Wales a law dealing with blasphemy was only abolished in July 2008

⁵ *What are Pakistan’s blasphemy Laws?* 6 Nov. 2014 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12621225>

and in Ireland steps towards its abolition are still in progress.

‘Death’ for blasphemers in Bible not Quran

There is no theological premise for the execution of blasphemers to be found in the Holy Quran, but we do find such a provision in Mosaic Law in the ‘Bible’.

The Bible:

Anyone who **blasphemes** the name of the LORD **is to be put to death**. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death. – Leviticus 24:16

Then Moses spoke to the Israelites, and they took the **blasphemer** outside the camp and stoned him. The Israelites did as the LORD commanded Moses. –Leviticus 24:23

Ironically, Jesus, much like Asia Bibi, a follower of his, was also wrongly convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death according to

Mosaic Law:

You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think? They all condemned him (Jesus) **as worthy of death**. – Mark 14:64

We are not stoning you (Jesus) for any good work, they replied, but for **blasphemy**, because you, a mere man, claim to be God. – John 10:33

If we now probe Islamic sources (i.e. the Holy Quran and *Sunna*) we will find that the

Pakistani⁶ blasphemy law as amended in the 80’s to include the death penalty, is closely linked to the **Jewish Mosaic Law**, without any basis whatsoever in Islamic tradition.

The Holy Quran

The language of the Holy Quran and the utterances of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) with regard to the expected response of a Muslim to blasphemous offences are the total opposite of the harsh, punitive measures we come across in the Bible and which the Pakistanis under the dictator Zia ul Haqq had adopted in the 80’s.

The Holy Quran gives the following instructions to the Muslims (all emphases that of the author):

You will certainly **hear much abuse** from the **followers of previous books** and from the idol-worshipping people. And if **you are patient and keep your duty** – this is surely a matter of great resolution. -3:186

The action of Pakistani authorities and the behaviour of the ultra conservative ‘Mullahs’ and their fanatical followers towards Asia Bibi, *a follower of a previous book*, fly directly in the face of this crystal clear Quranic injunction that calls on Muslims to **keep their duty to Allah by being ‘patient’** when seeking a **resolution** to matters involving abusive utterances. There is nothing in the Quranic injunction here calling for the execution or even jailing of the offenders, and one may well argue that for any Muslim

⁶ As well as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen etc. that have a similar law

claiming to be a devoted follower of Muhammad (pbuh) to defy the clear commandments from Almighty Allah would be tantamount to blasphemy itself. As hinted above by the judge in this case, the accusers it would seem are more culpable of blasphemy than the accused. This verse alone should have settled once and for all the ‘blasphemy punishment’ debate plaguing Pakistani and other Muslim law-makers.

This reminds me what Jesus (on whom be peace) said about the Pharisee law-makers of his time:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—**justice, mercy and faithfulness.** You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. —Matthew 23:23.24

How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take **the** speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see **the plank** in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take **the plank** out of your eye, and **then** you will see clearly to remove **the** speck from your brother’s eye. — Luke 6:42

This is indeed the age of the Muslim Messiah because we now see the same behaviours of ‘pettiness, hypocrisy and injustice in the name of faith’ among Muslim

law-makers and theologians, that were so rife among the Jewish ‘teachers of the law and the Pharisees’ lambasted by the Jewish Messiah, Jesus son of Mary.

The Holy Quran, in similar vein, further states:

Obey not the disbelievers and the hypocrites and disregard their hurtful talk -33:48

Note the toned down mood and character of the Quranic command ‘*disregard their hurtful talk*’ as compared to the vicious tone of the Pakistani authorities’ ‘*arrest, convict, and kill*’ on hearing ‘**hurtful talk**’, the alleged sin Asia Bibi was wrongly sentenced to death for.

The question Muslims across the world should ask themselves is: Who should be followed? Should we yield to the dictates of imperfect, mortal law-makers or heed the commandments of our Lord, God Almighty, Who is free of all errors?

The Holy Quran continues and teaches an even greater degree of tolerance when it says:

And when you hear Allah’s messages **disbelieved in and mocked at, do not sit with them until they enter into some other discourse** – 4:140

And **bear patiently** what they say and **forsake them with a becoming withdrawal (i.e. in a manner that is decent and polite)** – 73:10

All these passages deal with cases where the religion is **abused and mocked** as opposed to facing mere criticisms. But here again there is no call for the death penalty as we find in the Mosaic and Pakistani Laws. On the contrary, a Muslim, even in these ‘painful’ circumstances, is required to simply withdraw very politely from such abusive company **‘until they (the offenders) enter into some other discourse.’** This tells us that the Holy Quran does not demand of us to resort to any kind of hostile retaliation but actually encourages the offended parties to carry on social relations with the perpetrators when they are not engaged in such abusive discussions. Most notable is the emphasis on decent, polite behaviour even in these displeasing circumstances.

What better guidance is out there than this, we may well ask ourselves, particularly in diverse societies where social interdependence is the order of the day; and what better way to arrest the increasing menace of misplaced Islamophobia?

It is indeed sad to see how far removed the explosive, near maniacal response of some Pakistanis to the acquittal of Asia Bibi, is from the sublime Quranic guidance calling for tolerance and patience such as:

‘... ***hasten to forgiveness***’ 3:133

and to

‘***restrain anger and pardon men***’ - 3:134.

Surely this is what those Pakistani mullahs should be teaching their followers if they wish them to honour the legacy of Muhammad (pbuh). Do they not read the same Quran?

The Sunna - Practice and Teachings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

About the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Almighty God says:

‘And We have sent thee (Muhammad) **as a mercy to the nations.**’ - 21:107.

This begs the question, if Muhammad (pbuh) came as a ‘**mercy**’ to the nations, most of who are not Muslim, would he have condoned behaviours that are clearly contrary to the teachings of the Holy Quran as highlighted above? Nay! For it would indeed be tantamount to blasphemy to even think that the noble Messenger of Allah (pbuh) would have done so, because we know that he lived religiously by the Holy Quran. Besides, his closest companion, his wife Aisha, testifying to this fact, it is also confirmed in the Holy Quran thus:

‘Say: I follow only that which is revealed to me from my Lord’ – 7:203

Now if we consider that for years the Holy Prophet (pbuh) suffered the most offensive verbal abuse and physical threats to his life by the Quraish; yet at the conquest of Makkah he took hold of the two sides of the gate of the Ka’bah and said to the Quraish: ‘How do you think I should treat you?’ They said: ‘We hope for good, a noble brother and the son of a noble brother.’ Then he said: ‘I say as my brother Joseph said: **“No reproof be against**

you this day.”⁷ The much revered Prophet and Messenger of Almighty Allah did not line up his opponents to be executed when he was in a position of power to do so. On the contrary, it is reported about him that:

The Messenger of Allah and his Companions **used to forgive the idolaters and the followers of previous books, as Allah had commanded them, and they used to show patience on hearing hurtful words.**⁸

And, it is reported that the Holy Prophet (pbuh) said:

The Muslim who mixes with the people and **bears patiently their hurtful words, is better** than one who does not mix with people and does not show patience under their abuse.⁹

Another incident of note depicting the Holy Prophet’s forgiving and merciful nature was that involving Suhayl ibn Amr, an inveterate enemy from the Quraish tribe. Suhayl was a skilful orator, a talent he repeatedly used to verbally malign the Holy Prophet (pbuh). When he was captured at the

⁷ *Al Tafsir al Kabir* (Commentary of the Holy Quran) – by Imam Fakhr al Din Razi (re: *Sura Yusuf* Chapter 12: Verse 92)

⁸ Bukhari, ‘*Book of Commentary on the Quran*’ chapter 16 under *sura* 3. Muhsin Khan translation

⁹ Mishkat ul Masabih, ‘*Book on Good Manners*’, chapter ‘Gentleness, modesty and good behaviour’, reported from Tirmidhi and Ibn Maja.

Battle of Badr, Hazrat Umar sought permission from the Holy Prophet (pbuh) to pull out his front teeth so he would not be able to use his oratory skills against the Prophet any more. The Holy Prophet immediately responded:

Certainly not! I will not mutilate anyone, for Allah would mutilate me even though I am His Prophet.¹⁰

Once some Jews greeted the Prophet *assamu alaikum* meaning ‘death be upon you’ instead of *assalamu alaikum* ‘peace be upon you.’ Aisha, his wife, on hearing this, replied: ‘And upon you be death and curse.’ The Holy Prophet told her:

Be calm, Aisha. You should be kind and lenient and beware of using harsh and bad language.¹¹

In Conclusion

The overwhelming evidence from the Holy Quran and *Sunna*, presented above, is sufficient to conclude beyond any reasonable doubt that acts of blasphemy, mockery, hurtful or abusive speeches, although a serious sin punishable by Almighty Allah as He alone pleases, are certainly NOT punishable by death by human authorities as we have painfully witnessed in the case of Asia Bibi of Pakistan.

In fact, the best way for a Muslim to respond to any form of abusive language, besides bearing the provocation with patience

¹⁰ Haykal, MH: *The Life of Muhammad*

¹¹ Bukhari, *Book of Good Manners*

and ‘overlooking’ and ‘forgiving’, would be to refute all allegations by presenting the true picture of Islam to the world with solid arguments and excellent examples of good manners and behaviours as called for in the Holy Quran:

Call to the way of thy Lord with
wisdom and goodly exhortation
**and argue with them in the best
manner - 16:125**



**We strongly condemn all acts of aggression
and terror including all violations of basic
human rights specifically those carried out
in the name of Religion or State!**

The Good News
Editor : Ebrahim Mohamed
Contact Details: P.O. Box 13744
Goodwood Cape Town South Africa 7463
Email:: emuhaled@mweb.co.za