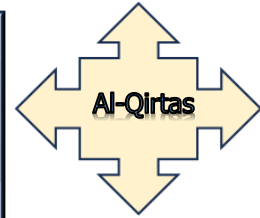


The Challenge of Blasphemy for Muslims in Western Societies



Dr. Mufti Muhammad Iltimas  
Khan

Lecturer Department of Islamiyat University of  
Peshawar

**Abstract**

The notion of blasphemy is faced with a profound challenge for the majority of Muslims in the Western democracy. Consistently, the freedom of speech is embraced, and sometimes blasphemy is included, by Western democracies who glorify the concept. However, this is not the case with the Muslims who prize their Prophets and holy writings, offending them being a big no-no. Addressing this undertone is the focus topic of this writing but not limited to, its strength over the spirit and emotional influence as they are the perceived enemies of Islam are the topics to be discussed. It deals with that, analyzing all legal structure of freedom of speech in Western culture, which ensure open and transparent discussion in society. The paper will deal with the concreteness of the blasphemy-related disputes and the Muslim community's situation, describing examples of such controversies. Besides that, it suggests one of the approaches to this issue is the role of interfaith dialogue and education in the case of mutually beneficial relationship establishment and development of the mutual understanding. This is the case when dialogue will be ongoing activity of people.

**Keywords:** blasphemy, Western democracy, freedom of speech, Muslim community, interfaith dialogue.

**Introduction**

The concept of blasphemy in the Islamic context is any sort of act or statement that is intended to throw garlic or insults to Allah, Prophet Muhammad or it may quarrel key Islamic convictions and symbols (Rahman, 2004). It plays a vital role in Islam because, as it is mentioned in hadith, many scholars of this religion consider apostasy to be a grave sin and a person who does that might face severe punishments either during this worldly life or in the next one (Esposito, 2010). The meaning of blasphemy regarded as abusing Islamic faith and this leads to the strong emotional reactions among Muslims and in turn social upheaval is created and let the sect regret on the actions of that committed (Esposito 2010). As a pivotal and core concept of the western countries, freedom of speech means that one is allowed to express his/her beliefs and ideas without government's censorship or interference (Mill, 1859). It is perceived as a central function for

democratic progress, the creation of intellectual diversity, and the undermining of the existing norms, rules, and elites (Mill, 1859).

When it comes to modern societies of the West, the fundamental right of an individual to articulate their thoughts, free from any sort of censorship or oppression, is protected by the constitutional law and is perceived as the ultimate manifestation of one's freedom and autonomy (Mendel, 2019). Such as, the right of freedom of expression can in a great number of times be the subject of debates and controversies arising which more often than not infringe on sensitive religious values. (Mendel, 2019). The clash between the concepts of freedom of speech and Muslim sensitiveness for what "blasphemy" means in the Western world emphasizes the friction of cultural issues and schooling (Khosrokhavar, 2005). Equally, freedom of speech as the fundamental right could become an offense in the eyes of Islam once it is discerned that certain ideas or opinions are blasphemous in nature turning the community of Muslims against that person and themselves (Khosrokhavar, 2005). The conflict illustrates how critical is to make this compromise between safeguarding the individual rights and being sensitive to pray's beliefs (Khosrokhavar, 2005). This also raises the concerns over the boundaries of free speech in diverse societies and the roles to be played by those exercising the right (Esposito, 2010).

### **Understanding Blasphemy in Islam**

The understanding of blasphemy in Islam has developed with time as the meaning of the Quran and the rest of the religious material had changed through time (Brockopp, 2000). In Islamic system of justice (jurisprudence), blasphemy means insulting, disrespecting, or undermining the belief in Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, or any other fundamental Islamic doctrine and symbols (An-Na'im, 2008). The Qur'an and Hadith stress the gravity of disrespect to Islamic teachings. This means that one should refrain from committing acts of sacrilege or disrespect against the teachings of Islam. (Rahman, 2004). Blasphemy is a very grave offense to the Holy Quran, as the ruling is based on the application of particular verses of the Holy Quran, as per the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The consequence for this offense varies in accordance with the severity of the blasphemy. Without freedom of religion and belief as a human right, it is impossible to secure respect for religious harmony and diversity (An-Na'im, 2015).

In the liberal democracy, the freedom to believe and practice religion extends to the freedom of expression and belief in liberal democracy while doing so without being persecuted

and being discriminated. As for this right, a balance must be found between respecting the religious sensitivities of individuals and groups and guaranteeing the very sanctity of worst forms of blasphemy (An-Na'im, 2015). Therefore, the exercise of freedom as religion does not end at itself nor absolute but also may be regulated to save public order, health, or morals (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Expression of all kinds especially the freedom to do and say whatever you desire is not always possible in harmony with the respect of religious beliefs and sensitivities and the process of striking a balance is a complex task and calls for the consideration of competing interests and values in a multi-cultural society (An-Na'im, 2015).

### **Navigating the Tension**

The legal universe concerning freedom of expression in the West has its own specifics in different countries and states, however, proper expression as a fundamental right like law is always protected (Fenwick, 2019). Blasphemy laws, the old rules which prohibited utterances about religious beliefs that some people might consider offensive, have been replaced by free speech or have fallen into disrespect in most Western democracies (Fenwick, 2019). The United States and most European countries are free speech champions and do not have any specific law against blasphemy. They do so to make their public sphere open to widespread debate, distinct from the overly religious views (Fenwick, 2019). It is the case that certain states like the Ireland for instance repealed obsolete laws of blasphemy in the recent years to be consistent with modern standards of free speech (Ivers, 2020). Although the need for blasphemy laws has gotten rather outdated, the legal shape of hate speech and incitement to violence, including punishment, is still considered, aiming to enable both privacy and society needs being addressed.

A contribution to the freedom of speech must be regarded as that fundamental condition of society for both free intellectual discussion and making a place for creative artist expression (Mill, 1859). It empowers people to have the options of voice, clarify and even challenge the dark spots of current norms and provides a safe place for open dialogue and discussion. The existence of this freedom is essential for every democratic state, as it permits its people to discuss essential issues in the public discourse, it makes them critically monitor their governments, and use the platforms they have to bring social change (Mill, 1859). Also, it lends its help in practicing art works, which gives artists all the liberty to handle sensitive or controversial topics and expression of themselves without any restrictions (Kendall 2005). Hence, through securing freedom of

expression, Western culture became a place of great ideal growth being full of intellectual diversity and innovation.

The issue of free speech values is, undeniably, not free from concern as for incitement to hate and the potentially development of violence (Waldron, 2012). Hate speech, which is aggressively expressed to cause hatred and prejudice on individuals and groups on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity or other protected singularities is not included in freedom of speech laws of Western democracies (Waldron, 2012). For instance, genocide denial, which means they might try to minimize or justifying mass killings that took place in the past, is something that is locked up. This restriction is designed to reconcile the freedom of speech and the want to prevent damage and maintain the equilibrium (Waldron, 2012). While the line between tolerated speech and harmful speech can be complicated, spoliation could ensue or inequality against vulnerable groups can be precipitated, but to differentiate this and do what is urgently needed usually requires all things being considered, context, intention, and impact (Waldron, 2012).

### **The Role of Interfaith Dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue and collaboration constitute one of the key instruments to bridge gaps between Muslim communities and Western societies thus engendering harmony, peace and establishing prosperity (Küng, 2013). People of different faiths may participate in effective and respectful conversation. They can learn about others' religious systems by overcoming stereotypes, erasing misunderstandings, and developing common respect, and admiration for one's religion. Interfaith projects offer communities a forum where Muslims and non-Muslims sit down together, share stories, work as team and eventually realize common goals as indicated by scholars, including promoting social justice, combating prejudice and challenging shared issues (Patel, 2012). These cooperation programs attain the desired effect of unified and consolidated nations where respect and tolerance of all citizens is considered. In other to facilitate accessibility to communication and education as well as a diversity of opinions and sensitivities, it is equally imperative to create room for both individual and institutional interactions (Patel, 2012). Educational facilities, media companies and community associations can have the most impact on this matter by organizing debates, running events of different faiths and arranging intercultural events (Najjar, 2016).

Also, boosting cultural literacy and religious literacy can play a big role in deepening one's aptitude towards forming empathy and understanding towards people who see life from different perspectives (Najjar, 2016). Through the introduction of the studies about the faiths and outreach programs in schools by communities, societies can create the environment of respect, tolerance, and appreciation for diversity of faiths (Küng, 2013). Ensuring that people are tolerant and respecting religious beliefs leads to peaceful and stable community for community living (Jehangir, 2012). The essential ingredient of any society building efforts is respecting individuals and their beliefs. They must be treated as equals as such differences only enrich the society (Esposito and Mogahed, 2007). Societies through governments, civic organizations as well as religious bodies should work together to be able to initiate policies and programs that upholds religious freedoms. Through promoting the advancement of tolerance and respect, the societies are in a better position to nurture the culture of inclusiveness whereby people who belong to different religious backgrounds feel safe, and they can belong anywhere.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the intricacies of the relationship between freedom of speech and religious sensitivities stress the complexity in dealing with this issue which is always dynamic. The confrontation of these two deeply-ingrained principles means that complex multicultural societies in which many different beliefs and values dwell together will necessarily have to deal with certain intricacies. However, free speech which is the basic tenet of democracy, and therefore it means the freedom of thought as well as it allows the social disputation and the artistic expression, can harm feelings or religious believes and it should be limited to that end as well. One must be aware of the fact that any individual may express his or her opinion for the personal interests without using his or her rights to bully the others by violating their religious freedoms. In conclusion, continuing with regular dialogues and absorbing the worldviews of various communities is critical for such achievements. Therefore, by valuing tolerance, empathy and cultural knowledge societies can find a new balance that recognize people's freedom of expression and the religious matters as well. In line with such endeavors, communities free of rifts, rich in diversity and unified, can be made, where each individual regardless of their background is highly appreciated and respected amidst others.

## References

- An-Na'im, A. (2008). "Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a." Harvard University Press.
- An-Na'im, A. (2015). "Religious Freedom under the African Human Rights System: Problems and Prospects." Routledge.
- Baderin, M. A. (2012). "Blasphemy, Islamophobia, and Human Rights in the Muslim World." *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 16(2), 181-205.
- Brockopp, J. E. (2000). "Islamic Ethics of Life: Abortion, War, and Euthanasia." University of South Carolina Press.
- Esposito, J. L. (2010). "The Future of Islam." Oxford University Press.
- Esposito, J. L., & Mogahed, D. (2007). "Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think." Gallup Press.
- Fenwick, H. (2019). "Blasphemy Law in the United States: A History." Oxford University Press.
- Ivers, J. (2020). "Ireland's Blasphemy Laws: A Historical Overview." *Irish Journal of Legal Studies*, 10(1), 45-62.
- Kendall, G. (2005). "Freedom of Speech and Artistic Expression: A Comparative Analysis." Cambridge University Press.
- Mill, J. S. (1859). "On Liberty." John W. Parker and Son.
- Waldron, J. (2012). "The Harm in Hate Speech." Harvard University Press.
- Khosrokhavar, F. (2005). "Islam in Prison: Muslim and National Identity in French Prisons." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37(3), 369-390.
- Küng, H. (2013). "Islam: Past, Present and Future." Oneworld Publications.
- Mendel, T. (2019). "Freedom of Expression: A Comparative Study." University of Minnesota Press.
- Mill, J. S. (1859). "On Liberty." John W. Parker and Son.

Najjar, F. M. (2016). "The Role of Education in Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and Understanding." *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 41(1), 65-79.

Patel, E. (2012). "Interfaith Leadership: A Primer." Beacon Press.

Rahman, F. (2004). "The Concept of Blasphemy in Islam." *The Muslim World*, 94(2), 180-199