

Do the Quran and Prophetic teaching support blasphemy laws?

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MENU

Quran indicates that God has sent many prophets to different parts of the world at different times. Nearly all these prophets were abused, mocked,

and treated with disrespect. Hundreds of verses reveal that prophets were treated as blasphemers and called liars, possessed fabricators, and foolish men. Though the prophets were treated with disrespect and abuse, God never mentioned in the Quran that the blasphemers should be punished by death. In fact, prophets showed kindness towards their accusers. Our Prophet's life is a good example of such behavior. However, God clearly says that he will dispense the ultimate judgment. (40:24), (7:66). (15:6), (16:101), (36:30)

Quran did not recommend any physical punishment of incarceration or death to the perpetrators. This clearly shows that abuse of the Prophet' is not a subject of corporal punishment. The perpetrators will be judged by God, and the believers are asked to convey the message of God to them about their wrongdoing or avoid their company. The Quran also commands the believer not to use abusive language directed against non-believers. "And do not abuse those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest exceeding the limits they should abuse Allah out of ignorance. A peaceful persuasion is recommended to reform the person concerned rather than trying to punish them. "Thus, we have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them about what they used to do." (6:108)

Quranic Verses do not recommend capital punishment for Blasphemy.

Quranic Verses about Blasphemy with No Mention of Punishment in This World

1. He punished these people, annihilated them, and destroyed them as they did not take the truth seriously (36:30). This clearly indicates that the abuse of prophets is punished by God.

2. He has instructed you in the scripture that: if you hear GOD's revelations being mocked and ridiculed, you shall not sit with them unless they delve into another subject. Otherwise, you will be as guilty as they are. GOD will gather the hypocrites and the disbelievers together in Hell (4:140).

3. Quran also mentioned: ...but indeed, they uttered blasphemy, if they repent, it will be best for them; but if they turn back (to their evil ways), Allah will (himself) punish them... (Quran 9:74).

There is no mention that a Muslim government must punish people who commit blasphemy. They will be punished by God in the afterlife.

4. And have patience with what they say, and leave them with noble (dignity) (Surah 73:10).

5. If you see those who mock our revelations, you shall avoid them until they delve into another subject. If the devil causes you to forget, then, as soon as you remember, do not sit with such evil people. (6:68)

6. Their just requital is Hell, in return for their disbelief and for mocking My revelations and My messengers. (18:106)

7. The sinful works they had earned will be shown to them, and the very things they used to mock will come back to haunt them. (39:48)

8. The evils of their works will become evident to them, and the very things they mocked will come back and haunt them. (45:33)

9. O you who believe, do not befriend those among the recipients of previous scripture who mock and ridicule your religion, nor shall you befriend the disbelievers. You shall revere GOD if you are really believers. (5:57)

10. If you see those who mock our revelations, you shall avoid them until they delve into another subject. If the devil causes you to forget, then, as soon as you remember, do not sit with such evil people. (6:68)

11. The sinful works they had earned will be shown to them, and the very things they used to mock will come back to haunt them. (39:48)

12. The evils of their works will become evident to them, and the very things they mocked will come back and haunt them. (45:33)

All these verses guide us to leave blasphemers alone, not associate with them, show them dignity, and hope they will repent. If they don't repent, God will punish them in the hereafter.

There are two verses in the Quran (Surah Ahzab 33:60:61) that are often used as an indication of capital punishment for blasphemers. The verses

(33:60-61) clearly mention the punishment for hypocrites. They were to be executed for committing treason against the state, not for blasphemy. Hypocrites who committed blasphemy against Islam and the prophet Muhammad pretend to be Muslims, but their manners and morals are anti-Islamic. They seek to cause disorder and fitna (mischief).

Maulana Yusuf Ali, in his Quran commentary, mentions that they were not just blasphemers but were also committing treason and that their punishment should be death.

Kamali, Chairman of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, examined the concept of fitnah, a word that appears in both the Quran and the hadith (prophetic tradition) in a variety of contexts and with seemingly various meanings. He found that the dominant meaning of fitnah in the Quran is “seditious speech that attacks a government's legitimacy and denies believers the right to practice their faith.”

In other words, interpretations of classical Islamic law stipulated death as a punishment when apostasy and or blasphemy were combined with treason and rebellion against the state, not for blasphemy alone. Maulana Maududi, who supported capital punishment for blasphemy, did not call these people blasphemers but rather scandal mongers. Therefore, capital punishment is only mentioned in one verse for hypocrites who become a threat to Islam.

The other verse often quoted as a possible basis of capital punishment for blasphemy is: “The punishment of those who fight against God and His Prophet or create disorder in the territory is that they are executed in an exemplary manner or be crucified or have their hands and feet cut off

from opposite sides or be banished. This disgrace is theirs in the world, and in the Hereafter, severe retribution shall they have, except those who repent before you overpower them. So [do not exceed in severity with them and] know well that Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.” (5:33-34)

Sentences of punishment mentioned in the verse are to be given only if the offender persists in blasphemy defiantly or resorts to disruption or disorder (fights against God and/or the Prophet Muhammed). If the accused pleads not guilty or gives an excuse to explain his attitude and shows no volition for persistence, he cannot, in any sense of the word, be indicted for blasphemy, and those who have repented shall not be given these sentences.

According to the above mentioned Quranic commandments, capital punishment can only be given in two cases: first, if a person murders another and, second, if he disrupts law and order in a country and, as such, becomes a threat to the life, property, and the honor of people. The blasphemy law in its present state is against the Quran and hadith.

One also needs to consider this verse in surat Maida related to killing an innocent person: “Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land, it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved mankind entirely.” (5:32)

Quran emphasizes the importance of tolerance, forgiveness, and mercy. Forgiving enhances our tolerance for each other and convinces the

perpetrator that Islam is a peaceful religion, which further helps to leave a positive imprint on Muslims around the world.

Prophetic Guidelines

If blasphemy were punishable by death in Islam, then the Prophet would have been the first one to order the killing of hundreds of his foes who later became his closest companions. The old woman who used to throw garbage on the Prophet was visited by him when he did not see her throwing it anymore to learn that she was not well. When Suhail bin Amr, a poet who composed poetry blaspheming the Prophet, was taken as a prisoner of war after the battle of Badr, the Prophet asked his companions to show kindness to him. Once, the Prophet was asked if he wanted someone to kill the chief hypocrite Abd Allah b. Ubayy, and he responded, “No! It will be said that Muhammad kills his companions.”

Some scholars often cite the execution of the Jewish poet Ka‘b ibn al-Ashraf to justify the death sentence, disregarding the fact that he was killed for treason, not blasphemy. The prophet made a distinction between blasphemy and treachery. While treachery against the state and people was dealt with harshly by the state, blasphemy was never considered a justifiable reason for any punishment.

When Prophet was stoned in Taif and blood was oozing from his feet, angel Gabriel came to give him comfort and offered to bring the mountain down on the people; his response was not to take revenge with them because one day, their progeny may become believers in the one almighty God.

While negotiating the Hudaibiyah Treaty, the Makkah delegation asked Muhammad (pbuh) not to sign his name as the “Prophet of God.” He did so, reminding the upset companions that an angry response is counterproductive, for even the worst offenders could become friends by humility and gentle treatment. He forgave his archenemy Abu Sufiyan and his wife Hind, who freed a slave to kill and then mutilate Hamza, the Prophet’s uncle.

A Jew passed by Allah's Apostle and said, “As-Samu 'Alaika.” Allah's Apostle said in reply, “We 'Alaika.” Allah's Apostle then said to his companions, “Do you know what he (the Jew) has said? He said, ‘As-Samu ‘Alaika.’” They said, “O Allah's Apostle! Shall we kill him?” The Prophet said, “No. When the people of the Book greet you, say: ‘Wa 'Alaikum.’”(Bukhari 9-84, No 60)

A group of Jews asked permission to visit the Prophet (and when they were admitted), they said, “As-Samu 'Alaika (Death be upon you).” I said (to them), “But death and the curse of Allah be upon you!” The Prophet said, “O 'Aisha! Allah is kind and lenient and likes that one should be kind and lenient in all matters.” I said, “Haven't you heard what they said?” He said, “I said (to them), ‘Wa 'Alaikum (and upon you).’” (Volume 9: 84, Number 61)

There were some non-believers who used abusive language against the Prophet. The Prophet of Islam never suggested any legal punishment for those persons. He simply directed them to one of his companions, Hassan bin Thabit al-Ansari, who would respond to their blasphemous statements and remove their misunderstanding by means of an argument.

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A Jew complained to the Prophet that he was slapped by a Muslim. On questioning the Muslim, “Why did you slap him?” he replied, “O Prophet of God, while I was passing by the Jew, I heard him say, ‘By Him Who chose Moses above all the human beings.’ So, I said, ‘Even above Muhammad?’ I became furious and slapped him.” When the Jew said that the Prophet Moses was the superior prophet, it was a kind of derogatory remark against the Prophet Muhammad. Prophet responded to the Muslim, “Do not give me preference over other prophets. On the Day of Judgment, all people will be struck unconscious, and I will be the first to regain consciousness. Behold! There I will see Moses [already] holding on to one of the pillars of God’s throne. I will wonder whether he became conscious before me, or if he was exempted altogether [from becoming unconscious], because of his becoming unconscious [previously] at the Mount Tur [on the earth].” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith no. 6917)

Once when the Prophet was in Makkah, somebody directly addressed him as Muzammam. Muhammad means praiseworthy while Muzammam means the condemned one. This was a blasphemous remark. The Prophet simply smiled and said nothing to that person because he knew that those kinds of words were not going to become history. He avoided and ignored the person who referred to him with these words.

Throughout his life, the Prophet PBUH has shown ‘Tolerance and Forgiveness’ through his actions and speech. When he started preaching Islam, many disbelievers became his enemies, and he had to face many hardships. He showed great patience and tolerance but also prayed for their guidance in return.

What We Have Learned from Our Prophet's Life

Prophet's life reflects the teachings of the Quran. To show love for the Prophet, one must follow his footsteps and guidance. There is example after example to prove that the Prophet never resorted to violence against those who were showing utter disrespect to him or God.

Whenever the Prophet was insulted, he responded with calmness and answered hate with love and hostility with graciousness, the Prophet forgave even his most sworn enemies. He was always courteous to his enemies and those who pretended to be allies. He knew that some of the pseudo allies would participate in congregational prayer. He was fully aware of their hypocrisy but never confronted them.

Uplifting the stature of the Prophet (PBUH) requires the follower to follow his pathway as he intended. The barbarism committed in the name of our Prophet, to whom we all call with respect and devotion, "RAHMAT UL LIL ALAMEEN" (The one who was sent as a symbol of mercy for the worlds) is contradictory to his ideals. We all know that Islam stands against merciless killings and capital punishment for persons committing blasphemy. So finally, as reiterated earlier, the abolishment of the laws regarding blasphemy at the earliest is one of the best ways for us to preserve the dignity and grandeur of the Prophet (for Namooos e Resalat -the sanctity of Prophethood) and ISLAM.

Aslam Abdullah stated, "Muslim theology must clean itself from the violence that some scholars have tried to justify and promote in the name of God." The blasphemy laws formulated in classical Islamic legal writings could apply only to a Muslim society of earlier times, and

Muslim scholars of the 21st century must challenge the theology of blasphemy and ensure that violence is not a solution to any problem.”

The current blasphemy laws and the Muslim reactions to blasphemy laws have resulted in a profound negative effect on Muslims and Islam. It has also resulted in an increase in blasphemy acts and tarnishing the name of Islam. We need to find many other democratic ways to express our reaction and resentment without resorting to violence.

We need to seriously consider the blasphemy laws and their applicability in the 21st century. We need to pay serious attention to many modern Muslim scholars who suggest that these laws are not applicable today, and I would seriously request all our scholars to consider making changes or even abolishing these laws.

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