

Everyone is a Blasphemer

by Herb Silverman



More than a third of the world's countries have blasphemy laws that ban criticism of religious beliefs, symbols, and figures. In several countries the penalty is death. Blasphemy laws supply a false legitimacy to those who commit acts of murder and terrorism. Think **Salman Rushdie** (pictured left). Not only do blasphemy laws harm atheists and humanists, but also any dissident or minority faith.

Surprisingly, a number of predominately Christian countries still have blasphemy laws on their books, including Australia, Austria, Brazil, Finland, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. However, these blasphemy laws are rarely enforced. Not so in countries where Islam is the state religion or where Muslims are a majority. For example, in Afghanistan penalties for blasphemy may include execution by hanging.

There is a death penalty for blasphemy in Pakistan as well as in Saudi Arabia. In Iran the law against blasphemy includes criticizing the Islamic government, insulting Islam, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards.

In Kuwait there is a "family values" penalty for insulting "God, the Holy Quran, Prophets, the Noble Companions of Prophet Muhammad, Wives of the Prophet, or persons who are part of the Prophet's family."

I'm certainly no fan of that old time religion, but I do prefer in some ways the old-time blasphemy laws to a newer version that purports to be more tolerant. The old kind only criminalizes critiques of the one True religion, with a capital "T."

A new kind not only criminalizes critiques of the one True religion but also criminalizes critiques of any religion, as in Bangladesh, where there are penalties for hurting the sentiments of the followers of any religion or its venerable figures. In Egypt it is illegal to ridicule or insult a heavenly religion or a sect following it.

Even rhetoric under the guise of sensitivity, such as hurting religious feelings, can stifle opposition and be made illegal. The European Court of Human Rights has asserted a universal "right to respect for religious feelings," while the United Nations has condemned anything that could be categorized as "advocacy of religious hatred."

Freedom of expression must include the right to criticize any belief, whether religious, political, or otherwise. Without this essential liberty dissent can be suppressed and silenced by labeling it as "defamation" or "blasphemy." I think people should be treated with respect, but ideas are not people. We must be allowed to criticize or mock bad ideas (including religion) without fear of legal consequences.

The Bible and Quran both contain ridiculous passages and reasonable passages. People can quote portions of their "holy" books to support loving their neighbor or killing their (infidel) neighbor. Both books give justifications for theological terrorism, including genocide, holy wars, slavery, misogyny, and death for crimes like blasphemy, homosexuality, and worshipping the wrong god or even the right god in the wrong way.

Thomas Aquinas said:

"Blasphemy is the most grievous sin because it is committed directly against God. It's more grievous than murder, which is a sin against one's neighbor."

Blasphemy laws supposedly protect an omniscient and all-powerful deity from having its feelings hurt. It is not an imaginary deity whose feelings get hurt by blasphemy, just the feelings of religious leaders who believe they have the right to control what others say.

If a religion considers certain words to be blasphemy or a sin, their leaders are free to sanction their own members, including kicking them out of that religion. The problem occurs when they feel they can take action against those outside their faith.

Those of us who point out that emperors of all religions have no clothes are considered blasphemous by any standard. But what about people who are required by their religion to blaspheme against other religions? Those who take the Christian bible literally blaspheme against Jews when they recite Mathew 27:25:

"The blood of Jesus will be on all Jews and on their children."

Those who endorse the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods but Yahweh," are blaspheming against people who promote Jesus, Allah, or one of the 7,000 other god candidates. In fact, I'm blaspheming against Orthodox Jews by violating the Third Commandment, taking the Lord's name in vain. Technically, I should write G-d instead of God.

By such criteria, we are all blasphemers. But wait, there's an out! You are only guilty of blasphemy when thin-skinned religionists display bad manners. The "crime" of blasphemy has little to do with what you say and lots to do with how others feel about what you say or write. Religious leaders who claim to speak for God may become so insulted and outraged that they want you silenced and punished. In other words, those who are opposed to free speech determine what is blasphemy.

Who among us believes that every Sunday people literally eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus Christ, that the angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to a magic stone that helped him translate gold plates from Egyptian hieroglyphics into English, and that the Quran was given to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel? Some may believe one of these stories, but nobody believes all three. Everyone thinks at least two of these three religious stories are foolish. Speaking of foolish, I've often been given a biblical explanation for why I'm foolish, quoting Psalm 14:1:

"The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."

In actuality, I use my brain, not my heart, to reach that conclusion.

I'm not upset when people call me foolish, but I would be upset were someone punished for telling me what they believed to be true. We support the right of people to give what they view as constructive criticism. Atheists don't insist on the right not to be insulted, just on the right to be treated as others.

Many great scientific advances were once thought to be heresy (think evolution). Several new religions sprang from

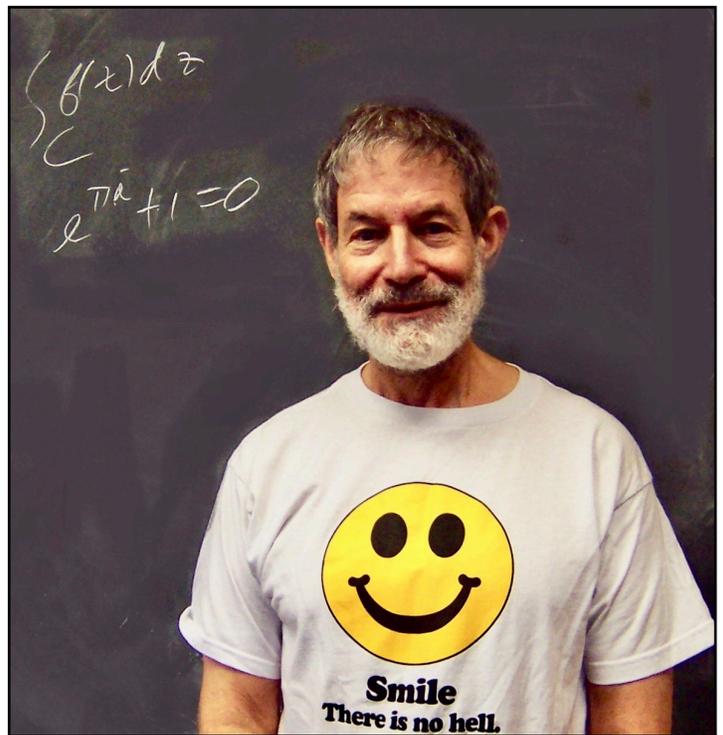
blaspheming old religions, questioning or criticizing the “sacred.” The dominant religion in this country was a protest religion, reflected in its name, Protestant. If I said we would be better off if we had no sacred cows, that could be construed as blasphemy against the Hindu religion. And if I said “blasphemy is a victimless crime,” well that, too, could be considered blasphemous.

So what can we do about blasphemy laws? Consider participating in the well-established “International Blasphemy Rights Day,” observed every September 30th, which is the anniversary date of the mass violence over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Such “blasphemy” angered Muslims around the world, many of whom expressed disapproval by participating in violent protests, riots, and sometimes murder.

September 30th is a day to show solidarity with those who challenge oppressive laws, social prohibitions, and prevailing religious beliefs. The day was established by the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in 2009 to reassert our commitment to defending the right to question and criticize religious claims. We want to help atheists, religious minorities, and dissidents here and abroad who are persecuted for challenging religious norms and authorities.

CFI’s “Secular Rescue” program provides emergency assistance to those courageous writers, bloggers, publishers, and activists who face threats due to their beliefs or expressions regarding religion. The program helps individuals and families find safety and peace so they can continue their work and move on with their lives. For more information and details about this CFI program, please visit the following link:

<https://secular-rescue.org>



Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Designating “The Freethought Society” as your chosen AmazonSmile benefits recipient, automatically increases the organization’s funds. The AmazonSmile benefits apply to all Amazon purchases.

House Bill 6720 Signed Into Law by President Biden

(A Congressional Bill to Endorse a Washington, D.C. monument to honor Thomas Paine)

Under the leadership of Congressman **Jamie Raskin** (D-Maryland) and Congresswoman **Victoria Spartz** (R-Indiana), House Bill 6720 was included in the 2022 Omnibus Package.

In late December, the package was passed by both the House and Senate. President Biden signed the bill into law on December 27, 2022. The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) will now begin working with the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission (NCMAC) on advancing the project with a goal of unveiling the monument in 2026, which would coincide with the 250-year anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence.

NCMAC was formed by Public Law to advise the Secretary of the Interior and the General Services Administration on policy and procedures for the establishment of commemorative works in the District of Columbia. NCMAC also serves as a source of information for people or groups seeking to develop and install memorials in Washington, D.C. and its environs.

NCMAC examines memorial proposals for conformance to the Commemorative Works Act, receives public comments, and makes recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior as well as to Members and Committees of Congress. TPMA looks forward to working with NCMAC members as sites are reviewed and a memorial design is developed.



Thomas Paine was one the greatest political writers and philosophers of the Revolutionary era. He was a Founding Father, veteran, and patriot far ahead of his time. He galvanized the American public to support the Revolution with his pamphlet *Common Sense*, which spelled out the case for independence from Great Britain. Thomas Paine served in the Continental Army, designed and patented a revolutionary design in single-span bridge technology, helped to establish the nation’s oldest and most honored abolition society, and advocated for old-age pensions, public education, and much more.

A friend to humanity and a foe to tyrants Thomas Paine championed the rights of the “common” people, and believed emphatically in the dignity and rights of all humans, which drove him to challenge the divine rights of kings, forever changing the course of history.

TPMA seeks to memorialize Thomas Paine in a way befitting his central role in the founding of the United States of America, as well as his worldwide call for liberty, justice, and equality.

Recognition of this important milestone will make the Sunday, January 29, 2023 Thomas Paine Birthdate Proclamation Celebration Zoom event even more joyous. Event details can be found at the following Zoom registration page: bit.ly/PaineProclamation