

Defending Christ and the Prophet

Free Speech vs Blasphemy



HAVING BEEN RAISED a Roman Catholic I continue to be fascinated by Catholic kitsch. I have a plaster effigy of the Virgin next to my computer – it amuses friends, especially when I insist that the machine has never gone wrong since She’s come to watch over it. This rather mild ridicule of the Queen of Heaven, might upset some believers, particularly those folk who often annoy the Catholic clergy by claiming that such effigies actually cry or bleed at moments of intense feeling. Well, I can assure my local chap, His Excellency Bishop John of Salford that there’s no need to appoint a *postulator* to investigate miracles in my flat, because there haven’t been any. My Virgin

has remained entirely inert since the day I bought her at St Mary's.

Now the Roman church believe some very odd things like the virtual presence of Christ several times a week at the mass – indeed the poor chap is so present that his flesh and blood are actually eaten as wafers of bread and drunk as wine. This is as miraculous as Mary getting pregnant without artificial insemination or fucking anybody. Still the Catholics are not alone with barmy assertions; they're quite widespread amongst Christians of all sorts.

Now blasphemy can have very wide definitions and lead to calls for all sorts of prohibitions and punishments, but it was Christ himself that caused a lot of confusion by saying:

Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: Because they said he hath an unclean spirit.

Holy Bible: Mark 3: 28-30: Authorized King James Version 1611.

There are arcane discussions and learned opinions concerning blasphemies against the Holy Ghost in the here and now, but it is clear that according to Christ we can, on the whole, forgive blasphemies. However, this doesn't appear to be the case amongst those who want to ban and proscribe speech and images they find offensive. They want to defend the absurdities and improbable assertions of many religious texts.

Some of these absurdities were brilliantly captured in 1979 by the Monty Python team with their movie, *The Life of Brian*, which made us laugh at Brian who was mistaken for the Messiah from his birth to The Crucifixion. Their picture prompted ludicrous attacks by conservative Christians most notable for their smug certainties. Three years earlier Mary

Whitehouse, the Christian morality campaigner, brought a case against Denis Lemon, publisher of *Gay News*, for 'Blasphemous Libel'.

Lemon's crime was to publish a poem which suggested that Jesus Christ had had sex with a number of men. Lemon was fined and received a prison sentence (suspended). A subsequent appeal against the sentence for 'Blasphemous Libel' was lost in the House of Lords when Lord Scarman suggested widening the offence to cover religions other than Christianity because the irreligious might "cause grave offence to the religious feelings of some of their fellow citizens . . .".

Despite this in 1984 Depeche Mode was able to sing:

I don't want to start any blasphemous rumours
 But I think that God's got a sick sense of humour
 And when I die, I expect to find Him laughing

Some might even object to John Lennon's anodyne song, *Imagine*. After all, it does speculate upon a world without the Deity: no hell or heaven, "Above us, only sky". In the field of Heavy Metal there are of course numerous Satanic and blasphemous images and lyrics that cause "Grave offence" to 'religious feelings'.

The most offended people in recent decades however, have not been Christians, but the devotees of the Prophet Mohammed. The recitation brought to Mohammed by the Angel Gabriel from God is preserved in the *Quran*. It is said to be the final revelation of the final religion. Consequently, it is perfect in every particular, and cannot be corrected or altered in any way whatsoever. Indeed, casting any doubt on the text of the *Quran*, or on the verity of Mohammed's recollection of the angel's recitation is regarded by most Muslims as blasphemous. There are, of course, differences of opinion on how severe the punishments for blasphemy should be, but on the whole Muslims do agree that bans and prohibitions should be imposed on blasphemers.

In some countries blasphemers against Muhammed and his Book are punished by law, but over the last forty or fifty years, Islamists have punished blasphemy world-wide with arbitrary 'executions', and terrorist murders. It matters not whether the offenders are Muslims or not, the Islamists apply their *de facto* law of blasphemy to us all. Consequently, specific blasphemy laws have proved unnecessary in the suppression of free speech in respect of Muhammed's person, the *Quran*, or anything else to do with Islam. Killings have had the effect of silencing virtually all criticism of the beliefs of Muslims.

In Britain the suppression of ridicule, condemnation, or criticism of Islam, was reinforced in 2018 by the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims [APPG], when they published their report, *Islamophobia Defined: the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia*. This document, ostensibly aimed at strengthening social cohesion, is in fact a blasphemy law in disguise. It says:

Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.

The characterisation of Islamophobia as "a type of racism" is important. Although, Islam arose in the seventh century amongst Arabs, it has not been confined to any particular race for at least a thousand years. So, to define 'Islamophobia' "as a type of racism" is merely meant to signify how reprehensible it is. Calling Islamophobia "racism" is intended to have the same effect as calling political opponents fascists or Nazis. It is a catch-all which insists that any criticism of Islam as beyond the pale.

This move by the APPG is aimed at policing criticism of Islam across the board. As Anna Soubry and Wes Streeting explained in their foreword to the report:

We hope our working definition will be adopted by Government, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and principally, British Muslim communities who have been central to this enterprise and whose valuable contributions have significantly shaped our thinking on this subject.

These hopes have been realised. Their “working definition” has been broadly adopted by a plethora of political parties, charities, local councils, colleges, schools, institutions and organisations of all kinds. Consequently, criticising “Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”, like opposing Islamic dress codes for women, for example, is no longer Kosher so to speak.

While the work of the APPG does not have the force of law it is intended ratify the suppression of free speech regarding Islam, and Muslims in general. What the devotees of the Prophet believe and do are sacrosanct. Therefore, they are beyond critique.

This is the crux of the argument for laws which protect religion from ridicule or criticism. In England and Wales, the crime of “blasphemous libel” was abolished in 2008, but ridicule or criticism of religious belief are again being deemed unlawful in a multiplicity of ways.

Prime Minister, Kier Starmer, argued in Parliament late last year that, “sacred texts” should not be “desecrated”, because “acts of desecration are awful.” He was responding to a question from Tahir Ali, the MP for Hall Green and Moseley, who argued:

As November marks Islamophobia Awareness month, it is vital the Government takes clear and memorable steps to prevent acts that fuel hatred in society.

Tahir Ali was calling for the passage of a new blasphemy law, and he appears to have the full support of the Prime Minister.

Now, this frontal attack on the freedom of speech is peculiar, because God clearly needs no such

protection. We all know that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent – all powerful, all knowing, and is everywhere all at once. Indeed, he threw Adam and Eve out of the Garden for knowing too much – God will tolerate no rivals, and needs no laws to protect Him.

So, blasphemy laws are aimed at the defence of religion and religious institutions, rather than God. Imams and priests of all sorts seek protection from offense, ridicule and criticism in order to sustain the loyalty of the faithful to the revelations they hold dear. Their texts, like *The Bible*, and *The Quran*, must not be desecrated by expressions of doubt or criticism. They seek protection for God's Words, Instructions, and Prohibitions, even though the faithful know, by definition, that the Deity needs no protection. This is the contradiction at the heart of laws enforcing strict obedience desired by intolerant devotees.

However, God is *jealous*, and will tolerate no disagreement or rivals, so it is understandable that staunch believers think they are doing God's Work by imitating his absolute intolerance. Those who want to suppress ridicule and criticism of God and His sacred goings-on merely wish to enforce the strictures prescribed by the Lord above, here on earth.

Now, although we do not have blasphemy laws at the moment, the actions of Islamists, mosque leaders, and the activities of the College of Policing, established in 2012, along with the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group have had a chilling effect on freedom of speech. Taken together with the development of the concept of "Hate Crime", these measures have led to the widespread suppression free of speech.

In this respect the role of the police has become increasingly important. The College of Policing tells us that:

The primary role of the police is to prevent harm.

Now, I rather naively thought that the primary role of the police was to prevent *crime*. But no, this has been broadened to the concept of *harm*. They explain that the police have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation.

This has led in due course to the anticipation of future-crimes, which need to be headed off by police forces recording tens of thousands of “Non-Crime Hate Incidents” each year. They explain:

An “incident” is “a single distinct event or occurrence which disturbs an individual, group or community’s quality of life or causes them concern”.

This gives police support and protection to those who wish to suppress ridicule or criticism of religion. Because, religious communities must be protected from anything that “disturbs” or “causes them concern”.

Quite apart from the absurdity of attempting to ban anything that might *disturb* or cause *concern* the sinister idea of Non-Crime incidents, which must be logged and recorded by police, takes us into the realm of what was once science fiction. In 1956 Philip K. Dick published his novella, *The Minority Report*. This was made into a movie in 2002; in the story “pre-crimes” are logged and prevented *before* the crime occurs.

Now, our police are concerned with monitoring and recording hate incidents *before* they become crimes. These pre-crimes concern race, disability, transgenderism, sexual orientation, and religion. But the role of blasphemy in this process cannot be overstated, because for most people, ‘freedom of speech’ is a political abstraction that means very little in

conflicts about upsetting opinions, which are simply thought of as rudeness.

Most people think there is no good reason for annoying and outraging people. It is widely thought, that we should not go around offending people. This is particularly the case with heartfelt religious opinions which it is often said everybody should respect.

These sentiments can appear thoroughly reasonable, even, laudable. However, step-by-step, since the report of The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in February 1999, Parliament, the police, and the great-and-the-good, have been framing policies and laws which undermine freedom of speech. They have constantly argued that “consideration should be given to upholding the fundamental right to free expression” while they’ve simultaneously (perhaps, with the best of intentions), whittled away at our freedoms.

No doubt their concern to maintain social cohesion and prevent widespread social strife has led fearful politicians of all stripes down the road of attempting to *cancel a better world into existence*.

This has not worked, and will not work.

The British state, in ordering the police to prioritise *harm* over *crime*, then merging the College of Policing’s concept of *harm* with *hate*, and finally rolling both together into Non-Crime Hate Incidents is unwittingly moving towards the destruction of democracy. Democracy depends upon freedom of expression - freedom of speech, publication, and assembly. There is no good alternative to arguing out our disagreements in public. The suppression of opinion, will merely result in spontaneous riots, outbursts, and mounting disorder.