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Burning the Koran

Islamic blasphemy versus free speech.

Pastor Terry Jones's atrocious plan to burn Korans at his Florida church on September 11 is perceived by Muslims not only as offensive, but also as a deliberate act of blasphemy. Such blasphemy is punished by imprisonment or even execution today by the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and many other key members of the Saudi-based Organization of Islamic States (OIC). The definition of the crime is amorphous, often depending on the sensibilities of the particular group holding religious or political power. It usually proscribes far more than disrespectful treatment of God, the Koran, or the prophet Mohammad, and varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Since Feb. 14, 1989, when Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced Salman Rushdie a blasphemer and ordered his murder, the OIC lobbied Western governments to repress ridicule and critique of Islam, and dissent within Islam, in ways analogous to the repression already existing in many of its own countries. For example, in the United Nations, the OIC has for over a decade successfully sponsored annual resolutions calling for the creation of an international crime against "defamation" of Islam. This demand that Western governments use state power to coerce compliance by their own citizens with Islamic blasphemy strictures is therefore relatively new.

The campaign has already made significant inroads through lawsuits, diplomacy, economic boycotts, and, at times, lethal force and intimidation — all of which are contributing to a broad chilling effect on speech concerning Islam. Western Europe, Canada, and Australia have reacted to this demand largely ad hoc; they are beginning to deploy racial and religious hate-speech bans to serve as proxies for Muslim blasphemy laws.

Politician Geert Wilders is now on trial in the Netherlands for his statements, and for his film *Fitna*, in which he sharply critiques the Koran and calls on Muslims to destroy it. In Germany, a man was recently convicted for the sacrilegious treatment of the word "Koran," not the Islamic sacred text itself. Since the mid-1990s, prosecutors in Finland, Canada, and the Netherlands have trawled the websites of anti-immigration advocates looking for anti-Islamic comments.

In France, Canada, Norway, and Italy, publishers, editors, and authors — such as NRO contributor Mark Steyn — have been tried for inciting religious hostility and insulting religious sensibilities with their critiques of Islam and Muslim immigration. Despite France's *laïcité* system of strict separation of religion and politics, animal-rights activist and national icon Brigitte Bardot has been convicted and fined five times under hate-speech laws for denouncing Islamic slaughter practices and making other derogatory statements concerning Islamic practices. Austria is currently prosecuting a criminal case against a citizen who, after living in Iran and Libya, gave a lecture to a political party in Vienna on “jihad” that was harshly critical.

In this regard, the United States is an exception, with its strong protections of free speech under the First Amendment. In the United States, neither blasphemy nor hate speech are violations of the law. (“Hate crimes” simply provide for enhanced penalties when traditional crimes are directed against certain protected groups.)

As applied in OIC states, blasphemy rules can touch on every area of human endeavor. At stake are the freedoms of religion and expression that lie at the heart of our liberal democracy.

Furthermore, within Islam itself, compliance with these demands would tip the balance in favor of fundamentalists and extremists, since reformers would be attacked for their views even in the relative safe haven of the West. The late Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid warned that such efforts “play directly into the hands of fundamentalists, who wish to avoid all criticism of their attempts to narrow the scope of discourse regarding Islam, and to inter 1.3 billion Muslims in a narrow, suffocating chamber of dogmatism.”

If Islam, and Islam alone, were to be protected by the state from critique, an illiberal interpretation of Islam would attain a *de facto* privileged status in the United States. Conversely, should Christianity, Judaism, and other religions also benefit from such state protection, fundamental individual freedoms would be essentially negated.

Pastor Terry Jones's Koran-burning spectacle potentially holds the danger of hurting the war effort, General Petraeus has warned. Jones should be criticized, denounced, and urged — but not coerced — to give up his insensitive publicity stunt.

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