



How Apostasy  
& Blasphemy  
Codes are  
**silenced**

Choking  
Freedom  
Worldwide

Paul Marshall & Nina Shea

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# Silenced

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*How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are  
Choking Freedom Worldwide*

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PAUL MARSHALL AND NINA SHEA

*with a Foreword by*

KYAI HAJI ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

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# FOREWORD

## God Needs No Defense

KYAI HAJI ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

As K.H. Mustofa Bisri<sup>1</sup> wrote in his poem *Allahu Akbar*: “If all of the 6 billion human inhabitants of this earth, which is no greater than a speck of dust, were blasphemous... or pious... it would not have the slightest effect upon His greatness.”

Omnipotent, and existing as absolute and eternal Truth, nothing could possibly threaten God. And as *ar-Rahman* (the Merciful) and *ar-Rahim* (the Compassionate), God has no enemies. Those who claim to defend God, Islam or the Prophet are thus either deluding themselves, or manipulating religion for their own mundane and political purposes, as we witnessed in the carefully manufactured outrage that swept the Muslim world several years ago, claiming hundreds of lives, in response to cartoons published in Denmark. Those who presume to fully grasp God’s will, and dare to impose their own limited understanding of this upon others, are essentially equating themselves with God, and unwittingly engaged in blasphemy.

As Muslims, rather than harshly condemn others’ speech or beliefs, and employing threats or violence to constrain these, we should ask: why is there so little freedom of expression, and religion, in the so-called Muslim world? Exactly whose interests are served by laws such as Section 295-C of the Pakistani legal code, “Defiling the Name of Muhammad,” which mandates the death penalty for “blasphemy,” which Pakistan’s Federal Shari’a Court has effectively defined as:

“reviling or insulting the Prophet in writing or speech; speaking profanely or contemptuously about him or his family; attacking the Prophet’s dignity and honor in an abusive manner; vilifying him or making an ugly face when his name is mentioned; showing enmity or hatred towards him, his family, his companions, and the Muslims;

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1. Descended from a long line of charismatic religious leaders, Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri heads the Raudlatuth Tholibin Islamic boarding school in Rembang, Central Java. Widely revered as a religious scholar, poet, novelist, painter and Muslim intellectual, K.H. Mustofa Bisri has strongly influenced the Nahdlatul Ulama’s social, educational and religious development over the past thirty years.

accusing, or slandering the Prophet and his family, including spreading evil reports about him or his family; defaming the Prophet; refusing the Prophet's jurisdiction or judgment in any manner; rejecting the Sunnah; showing disrespect, contempt for or rejection of the rights of Allah and His Prophet or rebelling against Allah and His Prophet."<sup>2</sup>

Rather than serve to protect God, Islam or Muhammad, such deliberately vague and repressive laws merely empower those with a worldly (i.e., political) agenda, and act as a "sword of Damocles" threatening not only religious minorities, but the right of mainstream Muslims to speak freely about their own religion without being threatened by the wrath of fundamentalists – exercised through the power of government or mobs – whose claims of "defending religion" are little more than a pretext for self-aggrandizement.

No objective observer can deny that Pakistani society – like so many others in the Muslim world – has undergone a process of coarsening under the influence of such laws, in tandem with the rise of religious extremism and the loss of true spirituality, without which the profound meaning and purpose of Islam remain veiled from human understanding.

The renowned Qur'anic injunction, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256), anticipated Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>3</sup> by over 13 centuries, and should serve as an inspiration to Muslim societies today, guiding them on the path to religious freedom and tolerance.

In its original Qur'anic sense, the word *shari'a* refers to "the way," the path to God, and not to formally codified Islamic law, which only emerged in the centuries following Muhammad's death. In examining the issue of blasphemy and apostasy laws, it is thus vital that we differentiate between the Qur'an – from which much of the raw material for producing Islamic law is derived – and the law itself. For while its revelatory inspiration is divine, Islamic law is man-made and thus subject to human interpretation and revision.

For example, punishment for apostasy is merely the legacy of historical circumstances and political calculations stretching back to the early days of Islam, when apostasy generally coincided with desertion from the Caliph's army and/or rejection of his authority, and thus constituted treason or rebellion. The embedding (i.e., codification) of harsh punishments for apostasy into Islamic law must be recognized as an historical and political by-product of these circumstances framed in accordance with human calculations and expediency, rather than assuming that Islam, and *shari'a*, must forever dictate punishment for changing one's religion.

The historical development and use of the term *shari'a* to refer to Islamic law often leads those unfamiliar with this history to conflate man-made law with its revelatory inspiration, and to thereby

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2. Mohammad Asrar Madani, *Verdict of Islamic Law on Blasphemy and Apostasy*. Lahore, Pakistan: Idara-e-Islamiyat, 1994.

3. "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

elevate the products of human understanding – which are necessarily conditioned by space and time – to the status of Divine.

*Shari'a*, properly understood, expresses and embodies perennial values. Islamic law, on the other hand, is the product of *ijtihad* (interpretation) which depends on circumstances (*al-hukm yadur ma'a al-'illah wujudan wa 'adaman*) and needs to be continuously reviewed in accordance with ever-changing circumstances, to prevent Islamic law from becoming out of date, rigid and non-correlative – not only with Muslims' contemporary lives and conditions, but also with the underlying perennial values of *shari'a* itself.

Throughout Islamic history, many of the greatest *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) scholars have also been deeply grounded in the traditions of *tassawuf*, or Islamic mysticism, and recognized the need to balance the letter with the spirit of the law. The profoundly humanistic and spiritual nature of Sufi Islam facilitated the accommodation of different social and cultural practices as Islam spread from its birthplace in the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant, North Africa, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, Persia, Central and South Asia, and the East Indies archipelago. By many estimates, a majority of the Muslim population in most of these regions still practice a form of religious piety either directly or indirectly derived from Sufism. And the greatness of traditional Islamic art and architecture – from the wonders of Fes and Grenada, to Istanbul, Isfahan, Samarkand and Agra – bears testimony to the long line of Sufi masters, guilds and individual artists who strove to ennoble matter, so as to transform our man-made environment into “the veritable counterpart of nature, a mosaic of ‘Divine portents’ revealing everywhere the handiwork of man as God’s vice-regent.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the greatness of classical Islamic civilization – which incorporated a humane and cosmopolitan universalism – stemmed largely from the intellectual and spiritual maturity that grew from the amalgamation of Arab, Greek, Jewish, Christian and Persian influences. That is why I wept upon seeing Ibn Rushd’s commentary on the *Nicomachian Ethics* lovingly preserved and displayed, during a visit some years ago to Fes, Morocco. For if not for Aristotle and his great treatise, I might have become a Muslim fundamentalist myself.

Among the various factors which have contributed to the long decline of Arab and Muslim civilizations in general, and greatly hindered their participation in the development of the modern world, was the triumph of normative religious constraints, which ultimately defeated the classical tradition of Islamic humanism. Absorption of “alien” influences – particularly in the realm of speculative thought, and the creation of individual, rational and independent sciences not constrained by religious scholasticism – was defeated by internal control mechanisms exercised by religious and governmental authorities, thus paralyzing Muslim societies.

These same tendencies are still on display in our contemporary world, not least in the form of severe blasphemy and apostasy laws that narrow the bounds of acceptable discourse in the Islamic world, and prevent most Muslims from thinking “outside the box” not only about religion, but about vast spheres of life, literature, science and culture in general.

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4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Persia, Bridge of Turquoise*, 1975, New York Graphic Society.

## Religious Understanding is a Process

Anyone who is sincere in understanding his or her faith necessarily undergoes a process of constant evolution in that understanding, as experience and insights give rise to new perceptions of the truth. For as God states in the Qur'an: "We will display Our Signs upon the horizon, and within themselves (humanity), until it is clear to them that God is the Truth (*al-Haqq*) (41:53).

Nothing that exists is self-sufficient, other than God. All living things are interdependent, and owe their very existence to God. Yet because God's creatures exist within time and space, their perceptions of truth and reality differ from one to the next, conditioned by their personal knowledge and experience.

As referenced above, Islam views the world and whatever information we may obtain from it, as signs leading to knowledge of God. Muslim scholars traditionally classify three stages of knowledge: *first*, the science of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqin*), which is inferential and concerns knowledge commonly held to be true, whether by scientists, intellectuals or ulama themselves. *Second*, the vision of certainty (*'ain al-yaqin*) represents a higher level of truth than the first. At this stage, one directly witnesses that information about an objective phenomenon is indeed true and accurate. *Third* is the truth or reality of certainty (*haqq al-yaqin*), i.e., truth which reaches the level of perfection through direct personal experience, as exemplified by a saint's mystical communion with God.

The fact that the Qur'an refers to God as "the Truth" is highly significant. If human knowledge is to attain this level of Truth, religious freedom is vital. Indeed, the search for Truth (i.e., the search for God) – whether employing the intellect, emotions or various forms of spiritual practice – should be allowed a free and broad range. For without freedom, the individual soul cannot attain absolute Truth... which is, by Its very nature, unconditional Freedom itself.

Intellectual and emotional efforts are mere preludes in the search for Truth. One's goal as a Muslim should be to completely surrender oneself (*islâm*) to the absolute Truth and Reality of God, rather than to mere intellectual or emotional concepts regarding the ultimate Truth. Without freedom, humans can only attain a self-satisfied and illusory grasp of the truth, rather than genuine Truth Itself (*haqq al-haqiqi*).

The spiritual aptitude of any given individual necessarily plays a key role in his or her ability to attain the Truth, while the particular expression of Truth apprehended by one person may differ from that of the next. Islam honors and values these differences, and religious freedom itself, recognizing that each human being comprehends God in accord with his or her own native abilities and propensities, as expressed in the *Hadith Qudsi*<sup>5</sup> "Ana 'inda zann 'abdi bi," – "I am as my servant thinks I am." Of course, one's efforts to know God (*mujahadah*, from the same root as *jihad*) should be genuine and sincere (*ikhlas*), leading to a state of self-transcendence. In such a state, humans experience God's ineffable Presence and their own annihilation. Muslim fundamentalists often reject this

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5. Muslims regard *Hadith Qudsi* as the words of God, repeated by Muhammad and recorded on the condition of an *isnad* (chain of verification by witness(es) who heard Muhammad say the hadith).

notion, because of their shallow grasp of religion and lack of spiritual experience. For them, God must be understood as completely transcendent (*tanziḥ*) and far beyond the reach of humanity, with no hope for anyone to experience God's Presence. Such views are mistaken, for as the Qur'an itself states: "Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115).

Nothing can restrict the Absolute Truth. Sufism – whose purpose is to bring Muslims to the third stage of knowledge, i.e., the truth and reality of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) – emphasizes the value of freedom and diversity, both as reflections of God's will and purpose, and to prevent the inadvertent or deliberate conflation of human understanding (which is inherently limited and subject to error) with the Divine. Faith (*īmān*) and surrender to God (*islām*) on a purely intellectual level are not enough. Rather, a Muslim should continuously strive (*mujahadah*) to experience the actual Presence of God (*iḥsan*). For without experiencing God's Presence, a Muslim's religious practice remains on a purely theoretical level; *islām* has not yet become an experiential reality.

Sanctions against freedom of religious inquiry and expression act to halt the developmental process of religious understanding dead in its tracks – conflating the sanctioning authority's current, limited grasp of the truth with ultimate Truth itself, and thereby transforming religion from a path to the Divine into a "divinized" goal, whose features and confines are generally dictated by those with an all-too-human agenda of earthly power and control.

We can see this process at work in attempts by the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC), the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Council on Human Rights to restrict freedom of expression and institute a legally-binding global ban on any perceived criticism of Islam, to prevent so-called "defamation of religion." Whether motivated by sincere concern for humanity, or political calculation, such efforts are woefully misguided and 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.

While hostility towards Islam and Muslims is a legitimate and vital concern, we must recognize that a major cause of such hostility is the behavior of certain Muslims themselves, who propagate a harsh, repressive, supremacist and often violent understanding of Islam, which tends to aggravate and confirm non-Muslims' worst fears and prejudices about Islam and Muslims in general.

Rather than legally stifle criticism and debate – which will only encourage Muslim fundamentalists in their efforts to impose a spiritually void, harsh and monolithic understanding of Islam upon all the world – Western authorities should instead firmly defend freedom of expression, not only in their own nations, but globally, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>6</sup>

Those who are humble and strive to live in genuine submission to God (i.e., *islām*), do not claim to be perfect in their understanding of the Truth. Rather, they are content to live in peace with others, whose paths and views may differ.

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6. "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Defending freedom of expression is by no means synonymous with *personally* countenancing or encouraging disrespect towards others' religious beliefs, but it does imply greater faith in the judgment of God, than of man. Beyond the daily headlines of chaos and violence, the vast majority of the world's Muslims continue to express their admiration of Muhammad by seeking to emulate the peaceful and tolerant example of his life which they have been taught, without behaving violently in response to those who despise the Prophet, or proclaim the supremacy of their own limited understanding of the Truth. Such Muslims live in accordance with the Qur'anic verse which states, "And the servants of (Allah) the Most Gracious are those who walk in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say 'Peace'" (25:63).

*The late Abdurrahman Wahid was President of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, and head of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization. An outspoken critic of radical Islam, he has been recognized by members of all religions throughout the world for his defense of religious and ethnic minorities and promotion of religious liberty for all. Among the many positions he has held are cofounder and senior advisor of LibForAll, which generously arranged for his forward to this book.*

# Renewing Qur'anic Studies in the Contemporary World

NASR HAMID ABU-ZAYD

## Introductory Remarks

The events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist violence have stimulated tremendous interest, and concern regarding the socio-political and intellectual conditions of the Muslim world, and how they impact the West. Yet, confusion about the “true” nature of Islam, and the threat we are facing remains prevalent among Western policy-makers, journalists and the general public. To a substantial extent, this confusion among Western observers arises from the fact that Muslim fundamentalists deliberately and consistently promote a “reading” of Islam whereby every socio-political issue must be viewed through a suffocatingly narrow theological lens. As a result, all too many analysts in the West have displayed the unfortunate tendency to conflate the religion of Islam with “Muslims” and “the Muslim world,” employing these terms loosely and interchangeably when describing a variety of pathologies that afflict contemporary Muslim societies throughout the world. This, in turn, has the effect of converting socio-political controversies into theological ones, and thereby generating within non-Muslims a profound unease with and mistrust of Islam, and its adherents, as well as a blindness on how to address the problem of Muslim radicalism.

Promoting the notion of a single unified entity called the *ummah* (“the Community of Believers”), Muslim fundamentalists ignore the enormous social, cultural and theological diversity that exists both within, and between, the world’s various Muslim-majority states. Even within the Arab Middle East, Saudi Arabia’s official Wahhabi Islam is highly distinctive, characterized by numerous features completely at odds with the traditional Islam historically practiced by most inhabitants of Mecca, Medina and the wider Arab and Islamic world. The Wahhabis, like other Muslim fundamentalists, propagate the naive concept of an ideal and ahistorical Islam, which is narrowly defined, restrictive, legalistic, monolithic, compulsory and supremacist vis-à-vis not only those of other faiths,

but even the vast majority of Muslims, who remain traditional in their beliefs. This version of Islam is that of the “sword,” as prominently displayed in the flag of Saudi Arabia. The Islam of mercy, compassion and profound spiritual devotion, which regards the world’s cultural and religious diversity as a divine blessing, is far beyond the reach of the fundamentalists’ narrow vision.

Indonesia’s former president, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, rightly identified this “extreme and perverse ideology in the minds of fanatics” – widely propagated throughout the world, with the aid of Arab petrodollars – as the source of a compelling threat not only to the West, but to Muslims and Islam itself: “This crisis of misunderstanding – of Islam by Muslims themselves – is compounded by the failure of governments, people of other faiths, and the majority of well-intentioned Muslims to resist, isolate and discredit this dangerous ideology. The crisis thus afflicts Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with tragic consequences. Failure to understand the true nature of Islam permits the continued radicalization of Muslims world-wide, while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight.”<sup>1</sup>

It is imperative that Muslims and non-Muslims alike free ourselves from the framework of the fundamentalists’ monolithic discourse on Islam. Otherwise, we will either misjudge Islam, by conflating it with the dominant discourse of the radicals – just as Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, in his video *Fitna*, mirrors the ideology of Osama bin Laden – or we will adopt an unrealistic and apologetic stance, de-contextualizing Islam from past and present circumstances, so as to convince ourselves that it is “purely a religion of peace,” divorced from the violence so often committed in its name.

The first view maintains that Islam is evil, dangerous and incapable of being reformed. This “anti-Islam discourse” mirrors and echoes the Islamist viewpoint, which is thus taken for granted as representing the one and only “true” Islam. The second approach is equally unrealistic, presenting Islam as a well-defined ethical, spiritual and purely idealistic a-historical religious phenomenon. The problem with this approach is that it totally ignores the reality on the ground in the Muslim world, where radicals have often succeeded in donning a mantle of religious authenticity, and are rapidly advancing towards their goal of “welding” Islam to their virulent socio-political ideology.

Rather than fall into the trap of either demonizing or idealizing Islam and Muslims in general, we must realistically assess conditions in the Muslim world, and develop a balanced, mature understanding of Islam itself, consistent with the needs of humanity and life in the modern world.

One highly effective way to accomplish these objectives is to reject the fundamentalists’ dogmatic framework and instead locate Islam within its historical context, in order to understand how it emerged, and how it developed within Arabia and other parts of the world. In particular, this requires us to approach the Qur’an, Islam’s foundational scripture, from an objective historical perspective, examining how it was transmitted, propagated, codified and ultimately canonized. Through this process, we can begin to determine the “spheres” and limitations of the meanings it provides, and

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1. Wahid, Abdurrahman. “Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2005, <http://www.libforall.org/news-WSJ-right-islam-vs.-wrong-islam.html>.

thus ascertain its significance within the context of various contemporary societies, free of extremist dogma and the ideology of religious hatred, yet richly imbued with moral and spiritual import.

Such a mature, spiritual and “contextualized” understanding of the Qur’an will displace the fundamentalists’ monolithic and ahistorical worldview. Widely disseminated, it will allow pluralism and tolerance to become the dominant discourse within Muslim societies worldwide. Such an understanding also represents an appropriate way to respond to criticism of Islam, the Qur’an and the Prophet. Intellectually sound responses that convey the spiritual message of Islam should be employed rather than angry rhetoric, which only encourages violence.

### The Sociopolitical and Cultural Contexts

According to Islamic belief, the Qur’an is the speech of God, which conveys the “message” revealed to humans through Muhammad, who was the messenger of God, and human himself. A message represents a communicative link between a speaker and recipient, delivered via a code or linguistic system. Without such a code, messages will not be intelligible to recipients. In the case of the Qur’an, the Arabic language – the human code of the recipient – is the code of communication between the Divine and humans, simply because the Divine code, if any, is unlikely to be comprehended by humans. Besides, the message was not intended for the recipient (Muhammad) alone; rather, it was meant to be transmitted to the recipient’s community and beyond. Therefore, it had to be comprehended by the Arabic-speaking community of Mecca and the Arabian Peninsula in general. “We never sent a messenger but with the language of his people, that he might make it clear for them,” states the Qur’an (14:4).<sup>2</sup>

Since the speaker (God) cannot be the object of scientific study, it is only possible for scholars to approach the message as encoded in the language of the recipient and his community. To accomplish that objective, scholars need all available information about the first recipient, Muhammad, and his surrounding community. In other words, scholars must begin their analysis of the Qur’anic message by studying its contextual reality and 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab culture. “Reality” here refers to the socio-political conditions that encompassed those who were addressed by the Qur’an, including its first recipient, and which framed their lives, thought and actions. Culture includes the conceptual framework embodied in a language, in this case, the language in which the Qur’an is expressed.

To analyze the Qur’anic message by studying its socio-political and cultural reality is to start with empirical facts. The scholarly analysis of such facts can help us to achieve an accurate understanding of the Qur’an, including the realization that the Qur’an is a product of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab culture.

The overarching reality, however, is far more complex than this. While arising within the particular culture of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, the Qur’an was taken to heart by its recipients and in turn produced a *new* culture, imbued with profound spiritual as well as socio-political and cultural dimensions. The

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2. See my lecture, “The Qur’an: God and Man in Communication,” inaugural lecture for the Cleveringa Chair at Leiden University (November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2000) [http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/forum/01\\_1/onderzoek/2.htm](http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/forum/01_1/onderzoek/2.htm).

Qur'an's linguistics exhibit a number of unique characteristics which were widely acknowledged and admired by contemporary Arabs, including some of Muhammad's opponents. From this uniqueness emerged the notion of the absolute "inimitability" - *i'jaz* - of the Qur'an.

Although it is necessary to analyse and interpret the Qur'an within the contextual environment in which it originated, the understanding of the Qur'an possessed by the first and subsequent generations of Muslims should by no means be considered absolute or final. The specific linguistic encoding dynamics of the Qur'an allow an endless process of decoding. In this process, we should not simplify or ignore its contextual socio-political and cultural meaning; in fact, this "meaning" is vital to indicate the direction of any "new" or contemporary message of the text. This direction facilitates our transition from the text's literal "meaning" to its "significance" in any given socio-cultural context, including the present. It also enables the interpreter to correctly and efficiently extract the "historical" and "temporal" elements of the message, which carry no significance in the present context.

In other words, the "deep structure" of the Qur'an must be reconstructed from the surface structure, which was specific to 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab culture. Subsequently, this deep structure must give rise to other, surface structures, including contemporary ones, suitable to successive generations of Muslim society in various regions of the earth. This entails an interpretive diversity - clearly seen throughout Muslim history, particularly as practiced by Sufis, or Islamic mystics - without which the Message would "harden" and degenerate, and the Qur'an would become, as it is now, subject to political and other forms of self-interested manipulation exercised by so-called "guardians" of Islam.

The innovative approach to Qur'anic study that I have long proposed in my various writings<sup>3</sup> on the process of modern Qur'anic interpretation entails the use of traditional exegetical methods *and* modern linguistic methodologies, in addition to the analysis of socio-historical reality and culture. By recognizing the difference between the original contextual "meaning," which is virtually fixed because of its historicity, and the "significance" in a particular socio-cultural context, which is changeable, and furthermore, by realizing that the significance must be strongly related and rationally connected to the meaning, we can produce more valid contemporary interpretations. Of course, any interpretations of the Qur'an produced using such a methodology are not exempt from the reality that *every* interpretation is historically and culturally constructed.

### **Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws Stifle Progress and Hinder Peaceful Coexistence**

In early Islam, there emerged a debate between a rational school of theology known as the Mu` tazial that claimed that the Qur'an is "created" not eternal and other theological schools of thought that

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3. I have more recently pursued my work in this area in conjunction with LibForAll Foundation ([www.libforall.org](http://www.libforall.org)), through its International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS). The International Institute of Qur'anic Studies has its base of operations in Indonesia, where Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid and Dr. Syafi'i Ma'arif - former heads of the world's two largest Muslim organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, with a total of 70 million members - work closely with the IIQS, serving as its patrons and senior advisors.

held that the Qur'an is the "eternal" verbatim speech of God. In the Mu'tazilites' view, an "uncreated" Qur'an is inconsistent with the concept of pure monotheism, *tawhid*, a pivotal concept in Islam. Socio-historical analysis demonstrates that these schools did not hold their respective views in a vacuum; rather, they expressed in religious terminologies the different socio-political positions of their adherents. Eventually, the notion of an "eternal and uncreated" Qur'an became the dominant accepted dogma in Sunni Islam. Unfortunately, the history of this debate is either unknown or ignored by nearly all contemporary Sunni clerics and scholars. Instead, the doctrine of "eternity" is presented as the Truth, while the doctrine of "creation" is denounced as heresy.

As a result, the notion that religious texts, although Divine and revealed by God, are culturally constructed and historically determined is not only rejected by the Muslim establishment, but actively condemned as "apostasy." There is frequently no clear distinction made between heresy, blasphemy and apostasy within the Muslim world. Instead, Islamist radicals deliberately conflate these terms in order to attack any discourse that strays from the narrow bounds of their fundamentalist ideology. Having been at the receiving end of such allegations – and driven from my home in Egypt to exile in the Netherlands – I can state with conviction that charges of apostasy and blasphemy are key weapons in the fundamentalists' arsenal, strategically employed to prevent reform of Muslim societies, and instead confine the world's Muslim population to a bleak, colorless prison of socio-cultural and political conformity. There is little hope of escape from this imprisonment, as long as fundamentalists – and the opportunistic and/or authoritarian regimes that compete with them in a chase to the lowest common denominator of Islam – continue to serve as prison guards and wardens.

Laws penalizing blasphemy and apostasy exist in most Muslim-majority countries throughout the world, and act as a severe constraint upon the use of reason to explore and understand the contemporary significance of the Qur'an's profound message. By forcefully silencing critical inquiry, such laws play directly into the hands of Islamic radicals, who seek to unify and politicize Muslim societies not only against the West, but against the very concept and principles of modern life, such as freedom, justice, human rights and the dignity of man, which are themselves inseparable from the right to freedom of conscience and expression. Perhaps the greatest irony is that these core principles – which lie at the heart of any just and humane society – are deeply embedded in the message of the Qur'an itself, and yet ignored by Islam's most fervent, and violent, "defenders."

For although the Qur'an prescribes no earthly punishment for either blasphemy or apostasy, the historical development of Islamic law has widely, though not universally, prescribed the death penalty as punishment for both. A critical historical study of the Qur'an, *hadith* and *shari`a* would reveal the human origin of these interpretations, and hence their complete inappropriateness within a modern context.

This objective historical approach to studying the foundational elements of Islamic law is fiercely resisted by many clerics and mullahs. Yet it is absolutely vital, if we are to liberate the "deep substance" of the Holy Qur'an's message, which proclaims the Prophet Muhammad (and hence, by implication, Islam itself) to be "a blessing for all creation."

*The late Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd was Academic Director of the International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS), a branch of LibForAll Foundation. He is the author of numerous scholarly works on Islam in both Arabic and English and is known for developing a humanistic interpretation of the Qur'an. Formerly Professor of Arabic Literature at Cairo University, he left when Egypt's highest court ruled that, because of his views, he was an apostate and must be forcibly divorced from his Muslim wife. He also received death threats from Ayman Al Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda. Abu-Zayd held the Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics in the Netherlands and was awarded the Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2005. He died in Cairo on July 5, 2010.*