BLASPHEMY: ISLAMIC CONCEPT

Offering insult (*sabb*) to God, to the prophet Muḥammad, or to any part of the divine revelation is a crime in Islamic

religious law, fully comparable to blasphemy. In the Christian tradition, blasphemy properly denotes mockery or *lèse majesté* of God. There is no exact equivalent to blasphemy in the Islamic tradition, although the Qur’anic phrase "word of infidelity" (*kalimat al-kufr*) comes fairly close. From the viewpoint of Islamic law, blasphemy may be defined as any verbal expression that gives grounds for suspicion of apostasy (*riddah*). In theological terms, blasphemy often overlaps with infidelity (*kufr*), which is the deliberate rejection of God and revelation; in this sense, expressing religious opinions at variance with standard Islamic views could easily be looked upon as blasphemous. Blasphemy can also be seen as the equivalent of heresy (*zandaqah*), a pre-Islamic Persian term used in reference to the revolutionary teachings of Mani and Mazdak; in this sense, it can mean any public expression of teachings deemed dangerous to the state. Thus, in describing the Islamic concept of blasphemy, it is necessary to include not only insulting language directed at God, the Prophet, and the revelation, but also theological positions and even mystical aphorisms that have come under suspicion.

BLASPHEMY IN EARLY ISLAM

During his own lifetime, the prophet Muḥammad (d. 10/632 ce) encountered strong opposition from the leaders of the Arab clans of Mecca when he preached the worship of the one God and attacked the traditional polytheism of the Arabs. Most frequently, this opposition took the form of verbal disputes and abuse, by which the pagan leaders rejected and ridiculed the Qur’anic teachings on the unity of God and the resurrection. Muḥammad’s opponents, moreover, mocked his claim to be an inspired prophet and accused him variously of being possessed, a soothsayer, a magician, a poet, or an unscrupulous power-seeker. From the beginning, as the Qur’ān attests, the blasphemous language of the Prophet’s opponents thus consisted of calling divine revelation a lie (*takdhīb*). Insult to the Prophet was particularly blasphemous, since Muḥammad was the chief medium of that revelation. Among Muḥammad’s opponents the Qur’ān (sūrah 111) singles out Abū Lahab above all as destined to punishment in hellfire; according to traditional accounts, the Qur’ān turns back on Abū Lahab the very words that he had used to curse Muḥammad. The followers of Muḥammad who killed two poets who had written satires on the Prophet evidently considered this kind of mockery to be blasphemy. The Qur’ān stresses the opposition that previous prophets experienced, as in the notable case of the pharaoh who called the revelation to Moses a lie, saying, "I am your highest Lord" (79:24). As a rejection of divine lordship, this saying is usually
considered to be the height of blasphemy. Within the early Islamic community itself, the "hypocrites" (munāfiqūn) uttered blasphemous jests about God and the Prophet (9:65–66). Such mockery constituted infidelity (kufr) after professing faith (īmān) and invalidated whatever good deeds they might have previously performed (5:5).

**BLASPHEMY IN ISLAMIC LAW**

Building upon the descriptions of and pronouncements on blasphemy found in the Qur’ān and the example (sunnah) of the Prophet, the various legal schools have elaborated upon the nature, conditions, and punishments for blasphemy. Jurists describe it as the expression of denigration (istikhfāf), contempt (īḥānah), or scorn (ḥaqārah) for God, the Prophets, the Qur’ān, the angels, or the traditional religious sciences based on revelation. The legal handbooks of the Ḥanafī school, in particular, offer numerous examples of blasphemous sayings, usually classified under the heading of "words of infidelity" (kalimāt al-kufr; see sūrah 9:74). Since most of the classical collections of case-judgments (fatāwā) of this school derive from Iranian and Central Asian jurists of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the blasphemous sayings are usually given not in Arabic but in Persian, which was the spoken language of those regions. The sayings, many of which were doubtless uttered in levity or in the heat of emotion, are generally wisecracking remarks, oaths, and imprecations of an intemperate or irreligious nature. Some examples are borderline cases, which are judged ambiguous or declared innocent. Later works, which include several separate monographs on "words of infidelity," give even larger collections of examples, with special prominence for those remarks that give offense to religious scholars as a class. An insult to religious scholarship is equivalent to rejection of religious knowledge and, hence, gives the lie to divine revelation. Under the same heading, the handbooks also include acts of sacrilege, such as donning the clothing of Jews or Zoroastrians, or participating in non-Islamic religious festivals. To claim that forbidden acts are permitted, or to invoke the name of God while committing sins, is blasphemy. A very small proportion of blasphemous statements (primarily in Ḥanafī texts) concern doctrinal matters, such as the formula used to declare oneself as a faithful worshiper.

Legal authorities agree that the conditions for blasphemy include adulthood, lack of duress, and being of sound mind, and it is immaterial whether the offender is a Muslim or not. Accidental blasphemy is, in general, not excused, although Ḥanafī jurists allow suspicious statements to be construed innocently if a legitimate case can be made for the interpretation. The Mālikī school permits an excuse to be made for one who has converted to Islam from another religion, but otherwise views blasphemy as entailing apostasy (riddah).
The punishment for blasphemy differs somewhat from one school to another. The Ḥanafīyah define blasphematic statements as acts of infidelity (kufr) and strip the blasphemer of all legal rights: his marriage is declared invalid, all religious acts worthless, and all claims to property or inheritance void. The death penalty is a last resort that most authorities try to avoid, especially if some element of accident or doubt is present. Repentance, however, restores all previous rights, although it is necessary to renew marriage. A few cases are mentioned in which a woman uttered blasphemies as a stratagem to annul her marriage, with the intention of repenting later to regain her other rights. The Mālikīyah, treating blasphemy as apostasy, call for immediate execution of the offender; as in cases of apostasy, they do not offer the chance to repent. An exception is made for female blasphemers, who are not to be executed but punished and encouraged to repent. In cases of minor blasphemies, or cases supported by only a single witness, the Mālikīyah prescribe a discretionary punishment in place of the death penalty.

**BLASPHEMY IN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY**

As indicated above, certain doctrinal propositions found their way into the lists of blasphemous statements. One of the earliest credal documents in Islam, the *Fiqh Akbar I* attributed to the jurist Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767), includes two blasphemous statements about the prophets and God and calls them infidelity. But with the development of theological dogma, there was a tendency for scholars to label opposing doctrinal positions as forms of infidelity, even though only highly abstract arguments were involved. The legal consequences of such accusations were quite serious, as noted above, so it was natural that cooler heads insisted on moderating the use of such anathemas in theological debate. The great religious thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) clarified this problem by removing infidelity (and hence blasphemy) from the realm of doctrine altogether. Insisting that infidelity is strictly a legal matter, al-Ghazālī defined it as calling the Prophet a liar in any respect; this is to equate infidelity with blasphemy. He further stipulated that no one who prays toward Mecca and repeats the Muslim confession of faith should be accused of infidelity, unless there is clear proof regarding a matter essential to the faith. In doctrinal terms, there are only three teachings that al-Ghazālī regards as infidelity in this sense. These teachings, all drawn from the works of philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037), are the doctrines that (1) the world is eternal and not God’s creation; (2) God does not know particulars; and (3) the resurrection is not bodily but spiritual. Although al-Ghazālī enumerates many other doctrines that he considers objectionable, these alone appear to contradict the Prophet and divine revelation on essential matters (creation, divine omniscience, and eschatology). Thus teaching these doctrines is a blasphemous
act punishable by death. It is worth noting that the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroës, d. 1198) disputed al-Ghazâlî’s findings on both doctrinal and legal grounds, and later Iranian philosophers, such as Mullâ Šadrâ (d. 1637), certainly upheld similar theses. Although the doctrines of Greek philosophy seem far removed from the scurrilous insults that generally constitute blasphemy, certain of these teachings were potentially in serious conflict with the traditional Islamic understanding of revelation. Insofar as philosophy could be seen as calling the Prophet a liar, it constituted blasphemy.

**BLASPHEMY IN ṢŪFĪ MYSTICISM**

The concept of blasphemy is applied rather differently in the case of mysticism. The growing Ṣūfī movement, which was centered on meditative practices that interiorized the Qurʾān and the ritual prayer, distinguished itself also by creating a technical vocabulary to express the states of mystical experience. Legalists challenged this innovation as a departure from the usage of the Qurʾān. More suspicious still were the ecstatic sayings (shaftîyāt) that uncontrollably burst forth from the mystics. Ṣūfīs such as Abû Yazîd (Bâyazîd) al-Bîstâmî (d. 874) and al-Ḥallâj (executed in 922) were notorious for such sayings as the former’s "Glory be to Me! How great is My Majesty!" and the latter's "I am the Truth." Such proclamations appeared to be pretensions to divinity or prophecy, and readily fell into the category of blasphemy. Other sayings of this type criticized mechanical performance of ritual, made light of the punishments of hell, and, in general, made claims of great audacity.

Since Islamic law did not take formal cognizance of the existence of mystical states, the legal reaction to ecstatic sayings was not systematic. Certain Ṣūfīs, such as Nûrî (d. 907), ‘Ayn al-Quḍât (d. 1131), and the above-mentioned al-Ḥallâj, were put on trial and even executed, but such trials were heavily politicized and did not reflect correct juridical procedure. Contrary to popular opinion, however, Ṣūfīs such as al-Ḥallâj were not executed on account of their utterances; historical accounts reveal a mixture of charges, including radical Shiism, philosophical atheism, pretension to divinity and prophecy, and libertinism. Al-Ḥallâj was formally accused of maintaining the legitimacy of private ritual that could substitute for pilgrimage to Mecca. The Ḥanafî legal textbooks give a few examples of blasphemous statements that savor of mysticism. These generally consist of claims to know the unseen (ghayb), the assertion that only God exists, and the recognition of the omnipresence of God. Authentic ecstatic sayings were far more audacious than these examples cited by the jurists. One of the few jurists to review ecstatic sayings in detail was Ibn al-Jawzî (d. 1200), who severely criticized these utterances in his polemical treatise, *The Devil’s Delusion*. Later jurists frequently criticized the theosophical writings of the Andalusian Ṣūfī Ibn al-ʿArabî (d. 1240) as blasphemous; he drew fire, in particular, for upholding the validity of Pharaoh’s
confession of faith, though it was made even as the waters of the Red Sea fell upon him (10:90). This was not so much a contradiction of the Qurʾān as it was a rejection of the dominant learned opinion. Some authorities attempted a compromise on the subject of ecstatic sayings by considering them the products of intoxication (sukr). As such, they were like the ravings of a madman and hence were not punishable as blasphemy. From this point of view, ecstatic sayings were neither accepted nor condemned. Ṣūfis, on the other hand, maintained that they were symbolic of inner experiences and could only be understood by those who had attained to esoteric knowledge. Legalists were thus incapable of the spiritual exegesis (taʿwil) that alone could provide the correct interpretation of ecstatic sayings. A significant minority of legal scholars accepted this distinction and so excused ecstatic sayings from the charge of blasphemy, on the grounds that they were symbolic.

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