

People in the modern world roll their eyes when they hear the word "blasphemy." This is such an old-fashioned concept: that a person should be prosecuted (and executed) for saying something that seemed "insulting" to religion. But what can one do with Pakistan, a country that supposedly has elections, a parliament, judges, and nuclear weapons? How can such a country execute people who have been accused of saying something "insulting" about Islam? Yet this issue is spurring public debate at this very time, a debate between modernizers and fundamentalists in Parliament.

Pakistan was created in 1947, along with Modern India, upon the British Empire\222s emancipation of both. The founding fathers of modern India and Pakistan were British-educated men who were secular. But Pakistan\222s founder feared that his Muslim-Indian population would be outvoted and possibly persecuted by the Hindu majority of India. He believed that their only protection was to pull as many of India\222s northern Muslims into two sections of a new Muslim state, West and East Pakistan.

Blasphemy came into the English language in the 13th century, and for the first several hundred years of its life had but a single meaning, "the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God." The notion of punishing such words goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus 24:13-16, in which the Lord spoke to Moses demanding that whoever curses his God shall surely be put to death (by stoning). In 1697 the last person hanged for blasphemy in Great Britain was Thomas Aikenhead, 20, in Scotland. From that time forth, punishment was just fining.

Blasphemy laws have had a longer history in Islam, with a renaissance in today\222s phase of Islamic literalism (fundamentalism). As of 2012, 33 countries have some form of blasphemy laws in their legal code, many with mandatory death sentences. Of these, 21 are Muslim-majority nations; the other 12 were in Europe, where these archaic laws were all recently abolished (and had not been enforced for centuries.)

Pakistan, was envisioned by its founding father (General Muhammad Ali Jinnah) as a secular state whose citizens happened to be of Muslim descent. He would be turning over in his grave to see how a nasty form of Islam has eroded the state\222s secular structure. Blasphemy laws have come back with a vengeance, and vengeance is behind most of these prosecutions: people getting even with an enemy, religious bigotry, and greed. At least 1,372 people have been charged under Pakistan\222s blasphemy laws between 1987 and 2016. Of these 730 were Muslims, 501 Ahmedis (a minority sect of Islam), while 205 were Christians and 256 Hindus. The final 10 were of unknown faith because they were murdered by vigilantes before going to court.

The case that went viral is that of a Christian woman, Ayasia Bibi, who brought water to her fellow female workers on a farm. When she took a sip from the jar, the other women were outraged and demanded that she convert to Islam immediately. She refused, and she was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death (it seems that her refusal was interpreted as blasphemy). The supreme court is reviewing this case amidst global outrage. Authorities are often too afraid to release blasphemy prisoners found not guilty because rioters would go after the judges, as well as lynch the released prisoner.

How does a country that has developed nuclear weapons be so socially backward and stupid? The same question applies to the remaining 12 Muslim countries enforcing these, and other dim-witted ideas.

How can it be that in sophisticated Iran, Pakistan\222s neighbor, stoning is still done in rural areas for religious offenses? Even with a nuclear industry, scientific ignorance flourishes. The former chief-of-staff of Iran's armed forces believes that Western spies had used lizards, which could "attract atomic waves," to spy on the country's nuclear program. A team of local environmentalists was arrested for this "crime," accused of using animal studies to spy. Rats, birds, frogs, and other creatures have been apprehended by Iranian spy hunters as "Israeli spies." This makes "Dumb and dumber" look brilliant.

680 words

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