

Comment:**Censorship in the Study of Early Islam****Philip Wood**

Aga Khan university

Abstract

This article argues that an important driver for complaints about anti-Muslim blasphemy has been the political and legal environment of Pakistan. It examines a case where an academic text on early Islam was suppressed because of fears over its reception in Pakistan. It argues that university presses ought to keep open a space where ideas can be critiqued in a non-polemical fashion, but that, in this case, the globalized network in which university presses operate has served to stifle open discussion.

Keywords

Censorship, early Islam, blasphemy, Pakistan, Britain

The recent speech by Naz Shah (Member of Parliament, UK) has highlighted the particular devotion of Muslims to the person of Muhammad:

For me and millions of Muslims across this country and [the] quarter of the world's population that is Muslim too, with each day and each breath, there is not a single thing in the world that we commemorate and honour more than our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)... It's not just a cartoon, and they're not just statues. They represent, symbolise, and mean so much more to us as human beings. (Twitter, @NazShahBfd July 5, 2021)

Shah spoke in the context of the government's legislation to defend statues of prominent figures such as Winston Churchill. While she appeared to defend the need for such legislation to protect the statues of figures such as Churchill because of their role as symbols of national unity, she suggested that there is a hierarchy of values that protects secular figures from recent history but does not protect religious figures from the past from defamation.

I do not intend to express an opinion here on the treatment of statues. But Shah's speech, and the reactions to it, do point to a conflict of expectations on how freedom of speech and historical enquiry should engage with figures from the past who are seen as foundational for religious communities. Can we draw a line between critique and defamation? And do attacks on individuals from the past equal attacks on contemporary individuals and communities that venerate them? In particular, I would like to point out some of the problems that surround the global academic discussion of Islamic history because of the expectations that surround blasphemy laws in Pakistan and its diaspora.

In Britain, many of the arguments that surround the depiction of Muhammad first emerged into the public sphere in the aftermath of the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

The burning of the novel by British Pakistanis in Bradford, and the broad dissemination of these images, highlighted an apparent divergence of values between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain.

The political philosopher Tariq Modood has observed:

Is not the reaction to The Satanic Verses an indication that the honour of the Prophet or the *imani ghairat* [attachment to and love of the faith] is as central to the Muslim psyche as the Holocaust and racial slavery to others? ... Muslims will argue that, historically, vilification of the Prophet and of their faith is central to how the West has expressed hatred for them and has led to violence and expulsion on a large scale. (quoted in Meer 2010, 25)

The Rushdie controversy has been represented as the moment when Muslim South Asians started to be identified (and to identify themselves) as a religious rather than an ethnic other. From this point, they ceased to be “black,” defined by a shared experience of racial discrimination, and started to be “Muslim” (Modood 1989, 157–159; Eade and Garbin 2002; Birt 2009). The events surrounding the Satanic verses controversy certainly gave an impetus to the creation of the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, whose leader, Iqbal Sacranie, would go on to found the Muslim Council of Britain and become a major advisor to the Blair government (Bowen 2014, 88–91).

The dominant response in Britain was to see the book burnings as an indication of Muslims’ refusal to engage in normal political debate. Muslims were accused of displaying an “uncivilized” rejection of public norms of discussion (Schubert 2008). Mohammed Arkoun (1994, 4) has emphasized that “Western” expectations of political engagement are not always as neutral as they appear, and often require minorities to assimilate to majority culture if they wish to make their voices heard. Talal Asad (2009) has argued that European states conveniently forget the Christian origins of their “secular” ideas and of its violent origins (cf. Mahmood 2010; Asad 2003, 169–178). For Tariq Modood (1998; 2013),

religion should be recognized as a part of group membership that the state ought to defend, both through legal exemptions and dedicated media channels, but also through public recognition and celebrations that amount to a redefinition of traditions of secularism.

However, the quotation from Modood above illustrates several issues with these claims for equitable treatment that respects different cultural norms. Using examples from recent scholarship, I argue that, in fact, Islam is treated very differently in public discussion to other religious traditions. This has a number of substantive consequences for the academic study of the history of early Islam and how this is communicated to the wider public.

Imani Ghairat

Modood argues that the love of the religion is as central to the Muslim psyche as the Holocaust is to the Jews or the experience of slavery is to African Americans and Caribbeans. He may well be correct in his assessment of Muslim feeling, and the stereotyping of contemporary Muslims bears many comparisons to the stereotyping of Jews at the start of the 20th century (Meer and Modood, 2009; Døving 2010; Klug 2014; Hafez 2016). The Holocaust and African slavery are moments of suffering that, it can be argued, were inflicted by “the West” and reflect a kind of unredeemed sin within the West, whose culture and economic system generated these tragedies. Implicitly, the collective suffering of Jews and enslaved Africans in the past contributes to their suffering in the present and their continued need for mutual support.

At a practical level, a British Muslim community certainly did come together in response to the Rushdie affair. At this moment it found a voice and created institutions that it had not had hitherto. A sense that Muslims needed to register their political needs collectively underlay the agitation for religion as a census category, which finally occurred in 2001 (Sherif 2011; Field 2014). But the claims that were made about

the past during the Rushdie affair had a very different basis than the Jewish or African cases. While slavery and the Holocaust are undisputed events, which may have enduring effects on psychology, resources, or on social structures, the Muslim claim is not rooted in a moment of past victimhood but in an ongoing threat of vilification of “the Prophet” in the present day.

But what might constitute vilification is ambiguous. It is unclear to me that either the Danish cartoons of 2005 or the Satanic verses sought deliberately to offend all Muslims through the representation of the Prophet. The Satanic Verses is a modernist experiment that is primarily a criticism of Thatcher’s Britain and a reflection on the status of migrants: it is far from clear that Rushdie sought to mock Muhammad (Werbner 1996; Fowler 2000). Some of the cartoons do seem to present Muhammad as a primordial figure that inspires Muslim violence or used anti-Semitic tropes, but others can plausibly read as critiques of contemporary fundamentalists, and their politicized use of religion rather than representations of Muhammad himself, that is, they are images in a Danish anti-clerical tradition (Klausen 2009, 21–22). Some of the cartoons published in the same collection lampooned far-right politicians or portrayed Muslims as victims (Klausen 2009, 14). Jytte Klausen (2009) has argued that Islamists in Muslim majority contexts played an important role in stoking controversy around the cartoons and determining how they would be interpreted. Together, the Rushdie affair and the cartoon controversies stimulated major debates in the United Nations in 2008–9, led by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in which a resolution was passed to combat the defamation of religion and called for laws to protect religions and their symbols (Otterbeck 2011).

Modood observes that Muslim sensitivities are particularly acute in this area because of a past history of European polemic against Muhammad. Muhammad has been depicted as a pagan in league with a demon, as a bloodthirsty conqueror, as a deluded follower of a Christian heretic, and as a sexual maniac or pedophile (Tolan 2002; Said 1995, 68–71).

Such ideas are periodically reused by the European far right, and I think that Modood (2018) is correct to point out that such rhetoric may incite hatred against all Muslims, who are presumed to share the sins of “the founder of Islam.” Muhammad here serves as a metonym for all Muslims, through whom they can all be denigrated.

However, there is another past history that we should use simultaneously to read the Rushdie affair. The burning of the Satanic verses took place in Bradford, a town in northern England whose Muslim population was overwhelmingly from Mirpur in Azad Kashmir. This region is the origin of most Pakistani migrants to Britain and continues to preserve strong links to the former mill towns of northern England. British Pakistanis often send their children “back” to Mirpur for part of their education and marriage between British Pakistanis and relatives in Pakistan remains very common (Bolognani 2011; Shaw 2000; Werbner 2002).

The Pakistani background of many of the participants is an important part of the context for the Rushdie affair. The South Asian origin of the majority of British Muslims at this time is an important point of contrast with most European Muslims, which did not experience a comparable reaction against Rushdie (Modood 1989, 144). And an immediate context for the burning of the Satanic Verses has been located in Bareilvi devotion to the reputation of Muhammad, which has even been considered to be excessive by other Muslims (Modood 1989, 154).

Pakistan inaugurated very strict blasphemy laws some twenty years before the Rushdie affair, which extended colonial-era bans on blasphemy to include defamation of “the Prophet.” These laws had been enforced only very rarely under the Raj or in the first decades following independence, but they were used much more frequently under the rule of the military dictator Zia ul-Haq (Jaffrelot 2015, 323–337; 460–480). Religious minorities such as Christians and Ahmadis were especially vulnerable to accusations of blasphemy, especially in grey areas where differences of religious opinion could be represented as insults to Islam (Wagner 2015).

The blasphemy laws have continued to affect the way that Pakistanis are permitted to express themselves on social media (Asad 2021). The 2016 Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act permits the Pakistan Telecoms Authority to censor material that violates “the glory of Islam” or “public decency and morality.” These laws permit the authority to ban platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook if they refuse to comply with takedown requests, a penalty that has already been used against TikTok (Shahzad 2020). The Asia Internet Coalition, representing Google, Facebook, and Twitter, criticized the Pakistani government for its lack of transparency and commented that “[the new rules] will prevent Pakistani citizens from accessing a free and open internet and shut Pakistan’s digital economy off from the rest of the world.”

The more recent cases of Asia Bibi or Rimsha Masih should remind us that an immediate context for the blasphemy accusations against Rushdie in Britain was the expectations of Pakistanis and British Pakistanis about religious expression. These laws have been disproportionately used against non-Muslims and blasphemy accusations have often stimulated vigilante violence, even before cases are taken to court. There is also an expectation that the accused should self-censor, and that anyone who defended or honored a blasphemer was also guilty of a crime against the collective body of Muslims. British Pakistanis objected that Christians were protected in Britain by (rarely used) blasphemy laws, but the level playing field that they desired was the extension of this law to cover all religions, rather than its elimination (Werbner 1996, 58).

A good illustration of how the Rushdie affair was read as an insult by religious outsiders against all Muslims is provided in Louise Archer’s ethnography of male British Pakistani schoolchildren. She recorded a school environment that was highly polarized, and where community boundaries were expressed in religious terms. One of her interviewees expressed a desire to kill Rushdie “because he took the mick out of our religion [...] all the white guys and Sikhs must have been laughing” (Archer 2003, 53).

Modood is surely correct to see the Rushdie affair as fundamental to British Muslim self-identity, but we do not necessarily use strongly held or vocal sentiment to determine how public discourse is managed. As Andrew March (2011) put it, we can empathize with religious pain without needing to use that pain as a basis for lawmaking. In a similar vein, he argued, the legislation on gay marriage may cause “religious pain” to evangelical Christians: recognition of this collective honor might affect how we discuss the subject, but not ultimately how we legislate about it.

The legal response to the Rushdie affair was to resist the claims of censorship. But at the level of how the topic of early Muslim is researched and how this research is disseminated, the reaction has been to encourage self-censorship and often to allow confessional narratives of early Islam to stand as the only available truth. I argue here that this shows a marked contrast with how other religions are treated. And like the Rushdie affair, I argue that Pakistan, and Pakistanis’ expectations around blasphemy, have played a significant role in determining how this subject is treated in Britain.

Writing the history of early Islam

Muhammad was a mercy sent by God to the entire world... to present him as less than this is blasphemy and it is the responsibility of those who have intelligence to direct the majority away from such contemptuous acts (Letter to New Haven Register, quoted in March 2011, 821).

This letter from an American Muslim illustrates how the idea of vilifying the Prophet might be defined very broadly. Here it is simply an attempt to present him as less than a universal prophet, a position that, if taken literally, would encompass any non-Muslim writing on the subject of Muhammad. One implication might be that only Muslims should write about Muhammad, or perhaps that outsiders might do so if they write as if they are Muslims.

The stakes here are high. There is a huge Arabic historical tradition on the subject of Muhammad. This includes vast collections of hadith and sunna, which describe Muhammad's sayings and actions as prescriptive for all Muslims. It also includes lengthy Arabic biographies (*Sira*, pl. *sirat*), the earliest of which was written in the mid-eighth century. The *Sira* is important because it provides a great deal of Muslims' "common knowledge" about Muhammad and provides the narrative contexts (*asbab al-nuzul*) for the understanding of different parts of the Qur'an.

For many, this body of material determines ideal Muslim behavior and ultimately underpins the premise that Muhammad was a prophet. But it is also the stuff of history, and the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq (at least) forms the main primary source for many histories of Muhammad and early Islam. Works by Montgomery Watt (1961) and Maxime Rodinson (1971), for instance, may have understood Muhammad differently from believing Muslim historians, but they did so using the same source base, which they believed they could interrogate to provide a positivistic history of events. Watt in particular tends to take a sympathetic view of Muhammad: he presents a Muhammad who believes himself divinely inspired and his account continues to be favorably received even in circles that generally dismiss the works of "orientalists."

This tradition of Western historical writing on early Islam mirrors the broader tendency of western orientalists to be trusting of their sources and internalize many of its biases and perspectives. Dietrich Jung (2011) and Sadiq al-Azm (1981) have both observed that the criticisms that Edward Said made against orientalists, of stereotyping "Orientals" as unchanging and unchangeable, could also be levied against Islamists and Arab nationalists, who draw on a similar body of medieval texts to produce idealized representations of Arabs and Muslims. A good illustration of how this bias has worked in practice is the recurrent tendency among western orientalists to dismiss Shi'a sources as biased, as if the Sunni tradition is unbiased and normative (Bashir forthcoming 2022. Important exceptions are Madelung 1997 and Amir-Moezzi 2011).

The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of new trends in approaches to early Islam by western academics. These have included efforts to situate the career of Muhammad and the Qur'anic text into a wider late antique context, where Arabia was influenced by the Roman and Persian empires (Howard-Johnston 2010; al-Azmeh 2014). Others have sought to use the methods developed in critical Biblical studies to investigate the Qur'an as a layered text, composed in multiple contexts with different attitudes to and engagement with Christian and Jewish ideas (Dye 2015; Pohlmann 2012; Segovia 2019).

This kind of revisionism has not been widely adopted in Muslim majority contexts (Daneshgar 2020). Revisionist reconstructions of Muhammad's career have, in some cases, been radically minimalist, and carry implications that are highly skeptical of the use of the hadith to understand Muhammad (in part because the incentives for invention of hadith were so great). None of these revisionist reconstructions have won much acceptance, but they have been much more successful in undermining confidence in the sources used to understand early Islam.

For many Muslims, part of Islam's exceptionalism is the existence of a vast realm of accurate information about the time of Muhammad, in contrast to the dimly known and disputed knowledge of Jewish and Christian prophets and the corruption of their legacies by those who claim to be their followers. In particular an accurate knowledge of "the Prophet" is what legitimates the rulings of the ulama. Statements of doubt in the classical narratives may therefore threaten personal faith, as well as religious authority, even where they are conceived as discussions of history.

Stephen Shoemaker's *The Death of a Prophet*

The controversy surrounding Stephen Shoemaker's *The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (2012) provides a good example of how sensitivities around

this topic can affect the production of academic history. I am grateful to Shoemaker for providing me with his correspondence with Oxford University Press.

Shoemaker is a historian and a student of religion, who started his career working on the history of eastern Christianity, especially on narratives about the Virgin Mary. The *Death of a Prophet* draws on early non-Muslim sources to redate Muhammad's death and argues that Muhammad led the Muslim conquest of Palestine. It is a scholarly work, but it is potentially controversial because it argues that later Muslim authors have altered original accounts.

Shoemaker's book passed an academic peer-review and the author made appropriate corrections. The delegates of the press normally publish books that have been accepted by the relevant section editors. But on this occasion, they became concerned that publication of the book might be too controversial for a Pakistani audience, important because of Oxford University Press's chain of bookshops in Pakistan. "Academic merit" was not the sticking point here, but security, and there was a fear that "mischievous elements" could use the book to cause problems, even if it was not published in Pakistan.

The book was sent out for review a second time, this time to anonymous Pakistani experts in the field (though we cannot tell the nature of this "expertise"). One of the reviewers was critical of Shoemaker's use of sources and his "rigid mindset," but was also adamant that blasphemy should not be a criterion for deciding whether or not the book should be published.

But another reviewer identified Shoemaker's aim as "creating doubts about the Prophet of Islam," employing "unauthentic sources." He observes that the citations "from most of the [seventh-century] Christian material" are blasphemous. He concludes that Oxford University Press should not publish the book "because it falls under the blasphemy code of PPC [Pakistan Penal Code]... because it will hurt the feelings

of Muslims all over the world... [and] because the reader has set in his mind to prove that (1) Early Muslim community believed in the very near end to the world; (2) Prophet Muhammad (PBUH [peace be upon him]) died after invading Palestine but Muslims falsified history.”

Oxford University Press UK responded by refusing to publish Shoemaker’s book, which was then published by the University of Pennsylvania Press and well reviewed. Shoemaker commented that it was hypocritical for Oxford University Press to respond in this way to blasphemy laws in Pakistan when they published historical criticism on the origins of Judaism and Christianity: in his opinion, they should either avoid all such scholarship or close their Pakistani branch.

Though Oxford University Press did not mention the issue in their correspondence, their fears may be intensified by the increased availability of academic books to the general public through torrenting sites such as libgen, or in summary form through sites such as Islamic-awareness.org. One result of this easy availability is that populations who are not familiar with the norms of academic discussion are being exposed to arguments that had occurred hitherto in restricted circles of specialists.

There may indeed be a real danger to Oxford University Press’s staff in Pakistan if religious conservatives used the notoriously vague blasphemy laws as an opportunity to target bookshops as examples of Western cultural intrusion (on these laws see Hashemi 2008). And one might argue that, in the bigger picture, the responsibility for preventing this situation ultimately lies with the Western governments that bankroll Pakistan without requiring greater social and legal reform. Nevertheless, Shoemaker’s point stands that Oxford University Press is not treating all religions equally critically. Nor is it being candid about how engagement in dogmatic environments like Pakistan affects its ability to act as part of a global public sphere that facilitates evidenced dialogue.

The reviewers did not all recommend the suppression of the book’s publication for reasons of blasphemy. There is certainly a willingness

to engage with critical scholarship in some academic circles in Pakistan. But the comments of the last reviewer that seventh-century *primary sources* were blasphemous, and that these contravened the Pakistani law and Muslim public feeling, is highly problematic, especially where international connections mean that this sentiment affects the way that material can be published globally. It also indicates that the reviewer was not making any distinction between Christian material used in the seventh century and contemporary scholarship that analyzed it: to entertain it as a superior statement of events to the traditional Muslim accounts was blasphemous.

Studies of higher education in Pakistan have stressed that a common aim of humanities “research” is to demonstrate the superiority of “Islam” over “the West” and that many pupils outside elite institutions find it very difficult to entertain non-Muslim perspectives on religion or history (Mubarakshoeva 2013, 126–131; also, Durrani and Donne 2009 on the situation in schools). Similar binary arguments underlie the statements of the last reviewer in the Shoemaker case, where source criticism is taken to constitute criticism of the honesty of Muslims in the past, who are the pious forebears of Muslims in the present. Here the truth of the believer cannot be judged according to any criteria that they have not generated themselves: expertise is a monopoly of the orthodox.

In an environment where many Muslims feel victimized by the foreign policies of Western countries, it has been argued that criticism of Muhammad acts as another way of denigrating Muslims. But there is a crucial role for a university press in asserting the possibility of non-polemical critique, whose purpose is to ask similar questions of different societies. This process is crucial to establishing common patterns of development or the common origins of different religious traditions.

Such an investigation is threatening to those who wish to assert Islamic exceptionalism, whether to celebrate it or to criticize it. Some imagine Islamic knowledge to have been faithfully transmitted by pious forebears in the past, which preserved it from the kind of distortion (*tahrif*) that,

they argue, Christian and Jewish material has been subject to (the accusations of *tahrif* are made in the Qur'an: 2.75, 4.46, 5.13). Others see the Islamic world as peculiarly ill-equipped for modernity, where an unwillingness to adapt medieval ideas to contemporary situations has condemned a whole region to an unchanging stasis. Both ideas need to be opposed, and an important tool for doing this is to stress the common origins of Muslim and Christian thought and the similar paths taken by Muslim and Christian cultures.

We often think of globalization as a force that can open up societies to new ways of thinking and enrich the marketplace of ideas. Here, unfortunately, Oxford University Press's global connections have threatened to close down approaches to a subject rather than foster them. There is no obligation on anyone to follow the opinion of Shoemaker or any other "expert." But expertise cannot simply be dismissed or embraced because it is inconvenient or embarrassing or comes from a member of a different political or religious group. An academic press has a crucial role in civil society, through its ability to publish evidenced arguments that challenge vested interests and traditional interpretations, so that these arguments can be scrutinized in turn.

Conclusions

One might object that it is simply necessary to protect sensitivities in an area like early Islamic history. In response, I would argue that the reason that it is necessary to use source-critical perspectives to understand early Islam is, firstly, that it publicly levels the playing field to treat all religions as the same. To give special consideration to the objections of vocal, conservative Muslims provides the wider public with an image of Muslims in general as intolerant and censorious. The end result is for the state to endorse a majoritarian definition of Islam, which renders novel perspectives on Muhammad, or issues such as wine-drinking or figural representation, as un-Islamic (Ahmed 2016, 62–67).

Secondly, education ought to give students the capacity to criticize canonical discourses and identify whose interests they serve. This is as true of religious worldviews as it is of political worldviews: both rely on selective narratives to establish the proper behavior and attitudes of insiders and to exclude those who criticize the community and the interests of its leaders (Wood 2017). In educational environments where minority communities are the sole sources of “their” own history, there is often little room for dissenting voices to discuss how the custodians of minority narratives also engage in the suppression of internal minorities (cf. Hawkey and Prior 2011; Panjwani 2005).

The vilification of Muhammad has been a major point of contestation between Muslims and non-Muslims in recent years, a lightning rod for proponents of religious rights and freedom of speech. But concerns over the representation of Muhammad are not limited to direct mockery, like the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, or even the representation of Muhammad in literature, like Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*. A globalized publishing industry can be reluctant to present academic voices that offer alternative reconstructions of early Islamic history. Ulama do have important expertise in one body of medieval sources, and I am not suggesting that these sources should play no role in discussions of the historical Muhammad. But other sources and perspectives also deserve consideration, as they do, for instance in the debates about the historical Jesus (e.g., Vermes 1973; Ehrman 2000). What is more, the way that we tell the history of this important period is not politically naive, and the contemporary reception of the period should itself provide a fertile area of study (note the brilliant example of Khalidi 2009).

To avoid exposing Islamic history to the same kind of critique that is used for other worldviews might be an effort to avoid conflict or a sign of what Segovia (2018) calls “colonial paternalism.” But in countries where Muslims are co-citizens, and where their Islam informs their political thinking, it is appropriate to scrutinize the basis for this thinking, whether in terms of how Islamic norms are applied; the historicity of events that are used to generate those norms or the very

possibility of God or revelation. Such questions were certainly raised in Islamicate contexts, such as Baghdad in the ninth or tenth centuries, when free thinkers engaged in criticisms of organized religion of all kinds, even under the rule of a caliph who pronounced himself divinely guided (Stroumsa 1999). But this aspect of the Islamicate tradition is rarely discussed in modern curricula.

Edward Said (1994, xxv) commented that he had “no patience with the position that ‘we’ should only or mainly be concerned with what is ‘ours,’ any more than [I would argue that] only Arabs should read Arab books, use Arab methods and the like. As CLR James used to say, Beethoven belongs as much to West Indians as to Germans, since his music is now part of human heritage.” I would argue that the same is true for the Qur’as and the Sira: as works of literature and as the basis for cultural norms they deserve critical engagement by all.

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