

A Christian's Understanding of Blasphemy

By The Venerable Canon Martin Gorick

Thank you for your invitation today. You've asked me to speak about a difficult topic. The Christian Understanding of Blasphemy. I cannot really speak for all Christians everywhere and for all time. There will have been different views, in different cultures and different times of history. I can only speak for myself, a Christian in Britain today, and give you my view.

It is sometimes said that Christians like me are soft on blasphemy. We see people criticising God in the media, and no one seems to object. A musical is put on in the West End that seems to make fun of Christians and of Jesus, yet no one fights to have it shut down. Why is this? Am I too afraid to object? Do I not love God enough to defend him? I will come back to that. But it's clear that as a society we are open and tolerant of most beliefs and practices. Is that how Britain has always been?

I come from Oxford, that great university city. I live in Christ Church, a university college, and also the home of the Cathedral or mother church for Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. Prayers have been offered there day and night for almost one thousand years. Attitudes to blasphemy have sometimes been very different.

For example Christ Church was once in the heart of the Jewish part of the town. A thriving Jewish community lived in Oxford between 1070 and 1290 when all Jews were expelled from England. One day a Christian man fell in love with a Jewish woman. He learnt all about the Jewish faith and converted to Judaism, before marrying the woman he had loved for so long. When the Christian authorities found out they said this was blasphemy. He had insulted Christ by turning away from him. The man was taken from his wife, tied to a stake outside the largest church in Oxford and burnt to death. There is a plaque to mark the spot that you can see to this day.

That was a Christian attitude to blasphemy in Oxford in 1222. It's easy for a majority to assert their power over a minority. Christians were the majority. Jews the minority. The Jews suffered. Blasphemy laws can be used as an excuse to settle old scores.

One man owed his Jewish neighbour a lot of money. He accused him of insulting Jesus. The Jewish man had his house taken from him and died in poverty. Eventually all Jews were expelled from Britain in 1290, supposedly to purify the country. We should always beware of any religious or political movement that wants to bring purity of faith and practice. It sounds good but if you look at history people will always suffer.

The next great round of blasphemy battles in Oxford was during the Reformation. Christian Europe divided between Catholic and Protestant. Protestants felt that Catholics had corrupted the faith, and did not take the bible seriously enough. Catholics felt that Protestants were denying all the traditions of Christianity and denying the authority of religious leaders. In 1555 three Bishops were put on trial in Oxford, and burnt at the stake for blasphemy in the middle of the town. One of them was Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. There is a cross marking the spot in Broad Street Oxford to this day.

In 1589 the Protestants were in power, and four Catholics were executed in Oxford, their bodies cut into four and nailed to the gates of the town. Not content with that religious zealots attacked church buildings too, hacking down statues and carvings as blasphemous and idolatrous.

These religious wars, Christian against Christian, were centred on blasphemy but always mixed up with political power and the desire to control. Political leaders would excite the crowds with accusations of blasphemy, and people responded by hunting others down. This happened all over Europe with terrible results.

My own ancestors were refugees to England from religious wars in France. Many family members had been killed in France. Some escaped to England and found asylum here. They did not want to see religion used as an excuse for bloodshed. They did not feel that God was honoured by attacking other people, however much we may disagree with their religious views. In the name of blasphemy people were attacking and killing other human beings, made in the image of God. In the name of God people attacked and killed those made in the image of God. You and me. Men and women.

This had to stop. This pointless killing in the name of religion. This endless fighting to defend God's honour was in fact doing the opposite. It was bringing shame to his church and to his people. If this was what religion made people do, why would any sensible person want to be part of it?

And so the last person put to death for blasphemy in the UK was Thomas Aikenhead aged 20, in Scotland in 1697. He was prosecuted for denying the truth of the bible and of Christ's miracles. Do I think Jesus Christ was honoured by that young man's death? Certainly not. Jesus my Lord is bigger than Thomas Aikenhead or any other person who may choose to insult him. I may not like to hear it but human insults can never hurt God who is far beyond all of this. Does the King of Kings and Lord of Lords really need sinful human beings to defend him?

And so executions for blasphemy have not been seen in this country for over 300 years. And I say praise God for that! Christian Europe had seen many times the terrible consequences of trying to defend religion by force. Wars did not stop of course. We have seen terrible ones in the last century. But they were no longer fought on grounds of religious blasphemy.

The last prosecution for blasphemy in the UK was in 1978, nearly forty years ago now. A magazine had published an offensive poem about Jesus. The publishers were found guilty under the blasphemy laws and fined £500. Did that give honour to God? I'm not sure. The magazine became much more famous and sold many more copies. On the whole Christians have ignored such provocation since feeling God is bigger than West End shows or pictures in magazines. He doesn't need me to defend him and only give publicity to his detractors in the process.

There is one time in our bible that Jesus talks about blasphemy. In Mark 3.28 he says,

Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

Jesus had just been healing sick people from their diseases. Bringing health and new life. Some religious leaders were complaining, saying he was working through the power of the devil or Satan, not through God. If God tried to forgive them they

would not recognise him just as they did not recognise God working through Jesus. God wants to forgive not punish but some push his love away. That is their choice but God cannot forgive until they see him as he is.

But Jesus has first said that all sins and even blasphemies can be forgiven. That is a huge thing to say and Christians have often forgotten it in the past. God is big enough to see our sin, and still offer forgiveness to those who turn to him and repent. Nothing is beyond that forgiveness. To take a life for blasphemy is to thus to go against God himself. He alone is judge, not me.

So as a Christian I am very happy that we do not prosecute people for blasphemy in this country. We have seen in history how terrible it is when political power, or religious majorities attack religious minorities.

Christians and Muslims will have differences. Hindus and Sikhs will have differences. Sunni and Shia, Catholic and Protestant will have differences. There are places in our world when religious minorities feel constantly under suspicion or worse. God is not honoured when we act as if we are God and seek to punish people in God's name.

The UK has gone on a big journey on blasphemy law. We have come through religious wars and executions to arrive at the age in which we live now. When all can live in peace and minorities are free to practice their faith without fear.

That is something that gives honour to God.

That is something for all people of faith to treasure and to celebrate.

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