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Blasphemy and Persecution: Insights from 'The Message' on Freedom of Religion, Women's Rights, and Martyrdom in Early Islam

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Abstract

At a time when Muhammad was approaching the Quraysh worshipping in the Ka'abah, the voice of a woman from the inside reacted: "to challenge the gods within the earshot of gods is dangerous. Unreasonable, Rebellious, Blasphemous"! The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him and his noble family and companions), was the first in the history of Islam to be accused of committing blasphemy against 'gods' and 'goddesses'. His scanty following too, were accused of committing blasphemy and were brutally persecuted by the ruling Arab tribal confederation (the Quraysh) of Makkah at the time. The pattern of persecution to some extent equates the recent term of 'jungle justice' especially attributed to alleged blasphemers in Nigeria. The study of a documentary on the history of Muhammad and his struggle to establish Islam, titled 'The Message' (Arabic: 'Risalah'), provides greater insights on the meaning of blasphemy and its implications on freedom of religion or belief (FORB), the right of women and slaves as well as the concept of martyrdom as a consolation to paradise. This paper sheds an interesting light on blasphemy in the context of this documentary, as well as illustrates its significance to the understanding of the Islamic position on Forb, the concept of martyrdom and the right of women and slaves.
Keywords: *Blasphemy*, *Freedom of Religion*, *Martyrdom, The Message*

INTRODUCTION

Cases of blasphemy and persecution in the name of religious belief continue to be global issues that trigger social tensions, interreligious conflicts, and even systematic violence (Pratiwi, C. S., & Sunaryo, S. 2021). In Nigeria, for example, allegations of blasphemy often lead to "jungle justice"—mob punishments outside the legal process—targeting minority groups or individuals accused of desecrating religious symbols (Omilusi, M., & Peter, A. E. 2022; Adimekwe, M. C. 2024). This phenomenon not only reflects the state's failure to guarantee freedom of religion or belief (FORB), but also stems from a long history in which claims of "sacredness" have been used to legitimize violence. In the context of Islam, the roots of persecution against minority groups or new converts can be traced back to the early prophetic era in Mecca, where Muhammad and his followers were accused of blaspheming the Quraysh deities, leading to torture and expulsion. Similar patterns can be seen in contemporary conflicts, where blasphemy narratives are used as political tools to suppress dissent. Amnesty International (2023) reports a 30%

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increase in violence related to blasphemy accusations in Muslim-majority countries over the past decade (Dwivedi, S. K. 2023), underscoring the urgency of understanding the historical roots and social implications of this concept.

Contemporary studies on blasphemy and freedom of expression, such as those by Lemmens (2018) and Benesch (2015), highlight the tension between individual rights to critique religion and the protection of religious sensitivities. Lemmens critiques the absolutist approach to freedom of expression in European human rights law, particularly through an analysis of "irreligious" cartoons that often neglect the societal polarization they incite. Meanwhile, Benesch introduces the concept of "decent controversy" to distinguish constructive criticism from provocative expressions that risk inciting violence, as exemplified in the Charlie Hebdo case. Both scholars agree that accusations of blasphemy are frequently politicized to suppress dissent or maintain power hierarchies.

However, their analyses remain confined to Western-modern contexts and inadequately address historical-religious dimensions or the agency of marginalized groups, such as women and enslaved peoples. This is where the study of The Message (1976) becomes pivotal. Existing literature has yet to integrate perspectives from early Islamic history, where accusations of "blasphemy" against the Prophet Muhammad and his followers were weaponized by the Quraysh elite to safeguard their socio-political and economic dominance. Simultaneously, the resistance of marginalized figures like Sumayyah—a woman challenging patriarchal norms—and Bilal—an enslaved man asserting his humanity—embodies the egalitarian ethos of early Islam, often overlooked in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, prior studies neglect the film's nuanced portrayal of martyrdom as a form of consolation for persecution victims, rather than a justification for violence. By bridging these gaps, this article not only complements existing scholarship on blasphemy in non-Western contexts but also offers a holistic perspective that connects historical narratives to modern human rights issues, including religious freedom, gender equality, and the ethical responsibilities of media representation in pluralistic societies.

This article aims to analyze the representation of blasphemy, the rights of women and slaves, and the concept of martyrdom in *The Message* (1976) as a reflection of socio-political conflict during early Islam. Through a multidisciplinary approach that integrates film studies, history, and theology, this research addresses three key questions: (1) How was the accusation of blasphemy used as a tool to maintain the hegemonic power of the Quraysh? (2) In what ways does the film reconstruct the struggles of women and slaves as agents of resistance against oppressive systems? (3) How does the concept of martyrdom in the film differ from

contemporary narratives of extremism? By examining dialogues, key scenes, and the film's interfaith production context, this article seeks to uncover a humanistic perspective on FORB and social justice that is relevant to modern discussions on tolerance.

This article holds both academic and practical significance amid the global rise in religious intolerance. First, by linking the historical oppression of Muhammad and his followers with the phenomenon of "jungle justice" in Nigeria, this research offers a comparative perspective to understand how blasphemy allegations are often used as instruments of repression. Second, the analysis of women's and slaves' rights in *The Message* highlights Islam's egalitarian roots, which are frequently overlooked in extremist discourses. Third, the article critiques narrow narratives of martyrdom associated with violence, showing instead that the film presents martyrdom as a form of consolation for victims rather than justification for offensive acts. Furthermore, the use of a film produced by a non-Muslim crew as a primary source provides a unique perspective on interfaith dialogue and the ethics of religious representation in media—crucial issues in an age of disinformation and anti-Islamic caricature. The findings of this article are expected to serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, human rights activists, and educators in designing tolerance-promotion strategies rooted in universal values of justice and empathy.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this research is the case study method (Moleong, n.d.). The case study in question, as expressed by Deddy Mulyana, is a comprehensive description and explanation of various aspects of an individual, a group, an organization (community), a program, or a social situation (Sugiyono, 2020).

As a method of qualitative research approaches, this method was chosen because, as Bogdan and Bikien (1982) said, this research focused on one setting or object. To be precise, this research focused on the process of talqin dhikr as a method of da'wah in the TQN of the Suryalaya Islamic Boarding School (hereinafter referred to as TQN PP. Suryalaya).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What is Blasphemy?

Depending on 'who' is the person asking the question and for 'what purpose', the concept of blasphemy has often been more antagonistic, fluid and dynamic. Many scholars agree that blasphemy is 'a great disrespect shown to God

or to something holy, 'a speech or action considered to be contemptuous of God, or of people or objects considered sacred (Misbahu, I, 2023); Bosch, M. D., & Torrents, J. S, 2015). Islam regards blasphemy as 'a criminal offence including insulting the Islamic Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)' that attracts a punishment of death penalty (Al-Qassem, A. M., 2012), although instances exist where the punishment depends on whether the 'blasphemer' is a Muslim or non-Muslim.

Way back to 1976, an international organization of Ensemble Cast composed of film actors and producers from Libya, Morocco, Lebanon, Syria and United Kingdom, released in separately filmed Arabic and English-language versions, a documentary titled "The Message: the story of Islam" (Akkad, M. (Director), 1976). It was first released in the UK on July 30 1976, followed by Turkey in January 31 1977 and continues on in other countries of the World. Interestingly majority in this group were not Muslims, and even more interesting is the fact that the crew showed the much-required respect to the Muslims' inviolability by not showing the personality of the Prophet in the movie. This position alone, has disapproved the attitudes of today's so-called cartoonists whose all intents and purposes target against the sensitivity of Muslims by deliberately desecrating the personality of the Prophet of Islam. Although much details about the life of the Prophet were written by Muslim scholars and historians, this paper explores interesting lessons from what is narrated in this documentary about the subject of blasphemy, and with more details from other sources, analyzes the webs of opinions on the subject matter and how it fits into the framework of violent extremism (VE).

Blasphemy in the Context of 'The Message'

'The Message' is extremely important in this respect because, it has shed more interesting lights on the question of blasphemy as well as traced the dislocations from which today's blasphemous utterances are framed and 'ideologized'. At first instance, a scene was captured at the *Ka'abah* showing one of the caravans bringing golds and gods. Scared of seeing Muhammad approaching them, he queried: *'who is that man who stood there, who looked into my soul, carry me away from here'*! (Yuniati, A., Fadlilah, S., & Annury, M. N. 2018). As Muhammad reaches the *Ka'abah*, a conversation between two of its custodians (a man and a woman) blew up from the inside and it went like this:

The woman: Why must Muhammad come down here, why don't you stop him?
The man: maybe he will change.
The woman: change? He is 40 years old … it is unnatural! With a rich wife, he could afford the best of Makkah, yet he chooses to sit shivering in a cave. It is unnatural.

The man: for a man who dares to risk the anger of al-Uzza who keeps our health; Manat, the god of our property; Allat, the god of our family and tribes, and Hubal, who starts our caravans and depicts our fate …
The woman: to challenge the gods within earshot of the gods is dangerous. Unreasonable. Rebellious. Blasphemous! [Emphasis capitalized]
The man: yes, I am afraid Muhammad will herm himself.

The emphasis above is on the woman's seeming caution that Muhammad's 'unnatural' attitudes towards the gods in the *Ka'abah* is not only 'dangerous' but 'unreasonable', 'rebellious' and most importantly 'blasphemous.' In this same documentary, Muhammad's following too were accused of blaspheming the gods (Rumi, R. 2021). At the time when a crowd reacted violently against Muhammad's followers coming out to declare Islam to all men and women, a woman was captured shouting *"this is blasphemy, you idiot"*! (Yuniati, A., Fadlilah, S., & Annury, M. N. 2018). When Muhammad's following sought refuge from the king of Abyssinia (Arabic: *'Najash'* and Ethiopian *Semitic*: *the 'Negus'*), the rulers of Makkah went against their refuge (Akande, H. 2012). The Muslim exiles were asked to defend themselves before the monarch and among his responses, Jaafar b. Abi Talib, said to the monarch, *"Muhammad taught us to … and turn away from gods of wood and stones ….'* Having heard enough of this, Amr ibn al-As, along with Abdullah ibn Rabiah (a delegation of two men) sent to demand the surrender of the Muslim exiles, reacted harshly *"I cannot keep still and hear this blasphemy"* (Deus, A. J. 2015). It is interesting here to see how defensive Amr became at a time when Jaafar mentioned the 'gods of wood and stones.' He had to defend the gods by saying instead that 'the spirit residing inside the form is what they worship' not the gods as they appear in the form of wood, clay and stones.' On the contrary, blasphemous utterances against the Prophet's exceptional intelligent quotient (IQ) could not have to be protected by any religious freedom at that very time. For instance, he, Amr ibn al-As, responded to Jaafar that the holy Quran cannot be written by 'an illiterate person' and still be attributed to God; that it can't stand the miracle of Muhammad'. Somewhere in the documentary, the wife of Abu Sufyan, Hindu bint Utbah, reacted: "how can an 'illiterate' man go up on a mountain and came down three days later blazing with poetry". Earlier before now she responded to Ammar b. Yasseer: "Muhammad has starved himself into dreams and hid under the blanket with his eyes shut".

Not only on the question of blasphemy, but the story in the documentary also speaks of the right of women and slaves, the concept of martyrdom as a 'consolation' to victims of persecution not a belief towards violence, as well as the question of freedom of religion or belief (FORB).

About the Right of Women and Slaves

On the right of women for example, Muhammad instructed their dignity and integrity be safeguarded and they shouldn't be buried alive or even forced into marriage. This is quite revealing in the documentary where it was quoted from the letter Muhammad gave to Jaafar ibn Abi Talib to confirm to his followers the message of Allah unto humanity. Among others, the letter mentioned *"… when the female infant buried alive asks for which crime she was killed …."* (Yuniati, A., Fadlilah, S., & Annury, M. N. 2018). What transpired between Ammar and his parents after this letter was revealed, seems to have made the position of women very clear. It all began from where Ammar's farther, Yasseer challenged him of missing out in the night and staying with Muhammad elsewhere. Squeezed by his father's grabbing of his shoulder, Ammar mistakenly hit the god his parents were worshiping at home and broke into pieces.

While Ammar was repeating what Muhammad said about slaves, the human spirit in Bilal, an Ethiopian slave who was instructed by his Arab master, Umayyah, to whip Ammar, reawaken! Bilal now felt more appealing to the teachings of Muhammad than the inhuman instructions of his masters! He found his worth as a human being equal to his master before God, therefore disregarded his master's unjust decision and chose instead to abide by what he knew must have a meaning to his entire life. This radical change of ideal cost both Bilal and Ammar a severe dehumanization and incarceration. While Bilal was brutally tortured with a heavy stone under the burning desert pebbles and sand, the inhumanly brutal killing of Ammar's mother was carried out by Abu Jahl who blew her in the very hot burning weather of the desert. He, Ammar was also brutally tortured and had his father too, suffered the same gory killing (Dinet, E., & Ibrahim, S. B. 2022). It was at this very moment, of the killing of Ammar's mother, because it was the worst murder a human would not want to commit on earth, that the concept of *martyrdom* as a 'consolation' came into effect. 'Consolation' in this sense meant a sympathy to Ammar. This meant that Ammar's suffering was consoled with ascension to paradise, and of course, this approval came to him direct from the Prophet, assuring him that his mother and father 'are the first martyrs in Islam and they are promised paradise'.

The concept of martyrdom therefore, far from its misinterpreted notions, does not, in any way, suggest inciting violence or even justifying it afterwards. The lesson from it is nothing more than sympathizing with the victims of killings, torture, and persecution. This is more in the same way the concept of Jihad is being misinterpreted and sometimes confused with *al-Qitaal* or *al-Harb*, all of which do not suggest perpetrating violence but defensive action against war or attacks.

About Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB)

Coming to the concept of freedom of religion or belief (FORB), the documentary featured various instances where the question of FORB needs to be focused well and its 'universal assumptions' be re-assessed or re-looked into. Firstly, it is to be understood that Muhammad, did not just instruct his followers to migrate to Ethiopia under a Christian king had he not sensed there would have definitely been a fair prevalence of one's freedom of religion in that nation.[1] Secondly, what transpired between the Ethiopian king, the Negus, the delegation of the ruling family of the Quraysh, and the Muslims under Jaafar ibn Abi Talib must have revealed to us that 'freedom' does not suggest doing what you desired at all the times. It does not suggest someone's misuse of power to manipulate against another's religious belief. For instance, when **Amr ibn al-As** informed the Negus that the Muslim exiles are 'rebels in religion', the **Negus** replied:

Rebels? But at one time or the other, all religions were rebellions. The bodies of slaves of the World and beaten are disposal. But as Jesus Christ as our Shepherd, the souls of men are his sheep!

Amr: These are Arabs who have betrayed the religion of their fathers. They follow 'a lunatic' they call a Prophet.

The Negus: But I cannot put souls into chains without hearing them.

At this point, it could be seen how approaches differed. While Amr al-As was trying to convince the Negus that these were just rebels following a 'lunatic Prophet' and they should just be forced to surrender, the king on the contrary, preferred to grant them fair hearing. After the truth was revealed, the Negus chose not grant their surrender even if he were to be paid 'a mountain of gold'. He enjoined them the freedom to live in Ethiopia in peace and excise their religious rituals unharmed 'so long as they wish'.[2] Thirdly, while the reader reading this article, is expected to be following the link to this documentary, he must not forget the instance where Hamza gave Abu Jahl a wound slap on his face after calling Muhammad 'a liar' and 'a fraud'. Hamza further queried: "where is the lies and where is the truth … when you don't even allow him to speak, when it has not been spoken yet?'.[3] This is a clear example of how freedom of one's religion was denied and yet been protected. Again, in another instance, Abu Sufyan, one of the ruling Arab family of the Quraysh, was also featured enjoining the Muslims a sense of 'sympathy' and 'freedom'. He refused to subscribe to Abu Jahl's offer to destroy the Muslims and instead said, 'no, we have done enough, more would only create sympathy for

[1] This position could be observed at 43:40 to 44:03.
[2] The story here continues at 48:46 to 57:55
[3] Follow the story at 37:02 to 38:15.

them'.[4] This section consists of the results of research and how they are discussed. The results obtained from research must be supported by adequate data (Rohman, 2018). The results of the study must be the answers to the problem and the research objectives stated earlier in the introduction (Bamualim, 2018).

The accusations of blasphemy depicted in *The Message* (1976) transcend theological conflict, functioning as political instruments to preserve the socio-political hegemony of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca. The film illustrates how labeling Muhammad and his followers as "blasphemers" stemmed from their challenge to the Quraysh's economic and cultural dominance, which relied on polytheistic worship to legitimize their control over trade routes and social hierarchies. Muhammad's rejection of idolatry and advocacy for monotheism directly threatened the Quraysh's authority, as evidenced by the custodians of the Ka'abah framing his actions as "dangerous" and "blasphemous." This mirrors contemporary patterns, such as Nigeria's "jungle justice," where blasphemy allegations often target dissenters who disrupt power structures. The film thus underscores that blasphemy accusations are rarely neutral; they are weaponized to suppress transformative ideologies that challenge entrenched systems of power—a recurring phenomenon in both historical and modern contexts.

The Message articulates a counter-hegemonic narrative through the resistance of marginalized figures like Sumayyah and Bilal, embodying early Islam's egalitarian principles. Sumayyah's defiance against the patriarchal practice of female infanticide—a tradition sanctified by pre-Islamic norms—exemplifies Islam's revolutionary redefinition of gender justice, positioning women's rights as divine imperatives. Similarly, Bilal's emancipation from slavery, both physically and spiritually, critiques the systemic dehumanization enforced by Arab tribal elites. The film recontextualizes martyrdom not as a call to violence but as an act of solidarity with victims of oppression, as seen in the consolatory acknowledgment of Sumayyah and her husband as Islam's "first martyrs." This contrasts sharply with extremist narratives that exploit martyrdom to justify terrorism. Furthermore, Muhammad's strategic decision to seek refuge in Ethiopia under a Christian ruler highlights the nuanced ethics of religious freedom, where tolerance is not relativism but a commitment to protecting vulnerable communities from persecution. By intertwining these themes, *The Message* transcends historical documentation, emerging as a critical lens to reevaluate modern human rights challenges through the interplay of ethics, justice, and the politicization of sacred discourse.

CONCLUSION

[4] The story continues at 34:56 to 35:05.

This study underscores the multifaceted nature of blasphemy and persecution in early Islam, as depicted in *The Message* (1976), revealing how accusations of blasphemy were weaponized by the Quraysh elite to suppress dissent and maintain socio-political hegemony. Through a critical analysis of the film's narrative, the article demonstrates that these accusations were not merely theological disputes but tools of oppression aimed at silencing Muhammad's egalitarian teachings, which challenged entrenched hierarchies by advocating for the rights of women, slaves, and marginalized groups. The film's portrayal of figures like Sumayyah and Bilal highlights Islam's early commitment to human dignity and resistance against systemic injustice, while its nuanced depiction of martyrdom as a form of consolation—rather than a call to violence—offers a counter-narrative to extremist interpretations. Furthermore, the documentary's emphasis on freedom of religion or belief (FORB), exemplified by the Negus's fair adjudication and Muhammad's strategic migration to Ethiopia, critiques modern absolutist approaches to religious freedom that often neglect contextual ethics. By bridging historical and contemporary discourses, this research reaffirms the urgency of re-evaluating blasphemy laws and persecution practices through a human rights lens, advocating for policies that prioritize justice, inclusivity, and interfaith dialogue. Ultimately, *The Message* serves as both a historical mirror and a moral compass, urging societies to confront the politicization of religion while reclaiming the egalitarian ethos foundational to Islamic teachings.

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