

Press release

# **India: Muslim intellectuals, activists condemn Paris beheading, demand abolition of apostasy and blasphemy laws**

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**Muslim intellectuals and activists speaking at a webinar on Sunday condemned the Paris beheading of a school teacher, Samuel Paty, by an 18-year-old Muslim fanatic, Abdullakh Anzorov.**

The webinar was organised by the Indian Muslims for Secular Democracy (IMSD). Moderated by its convener, Javed Anand, all four panellists are office bearers and prominent members of IMSD.

In his introductory remarks Anand stated: "We are here to condemn in unequivocal terms, no ifs and buts, not only the man responsible for this barbaric act but all those who had any role in the instigation of the crime as also all those who seek to justify it. We are here not just to condemn the slaying of Mr Paty, but also to demand the abolishing of apostasy and banishing of blasphemy anywhere and everywhere across the world".

Islamic Scholar Dr Zeenat Shaukat Ali, Mumbai-based, argued that killing people for blasphemy or apostasy is not permissible in Islam. The Qur'an never mentioned such punishments. The Qur'an has stood for peace and justice in a non-violent way. It will be very fruitful if scholars and ulema scrutinised and sifted through Hadith literature which has been pending over the years. The confirmation of a Hadith has to be in consonance with the verses of the Qur'an, she said.

"Respectfully, the Paris beheading is a wake-up call to the ulema and leaders of the Muslim world. It is time for both the clergy and the parents to instruct children that such acts of violence are not only detested and abhorred by Islam but are in total contradiction to Islam's reverence for peace, explicit recognition of tolerance, compassion, social equality, high moral order and spiritual depth, Ali added.

Columnist, New Age Islam, Arshad Alam, Delhi-based, in his presentation contextualised the Islamist beheading of the teacher. Pointing out that it was planned and pre-meditated, he argued the prime objective of such acts of terror is to silence any critique of Islam. Alam added that Charlie Hebdo cartoons must be seen within a European tradition which has for long satirised religious traditions, particularly Christianity. Since Islam is also now a European religion, the same yardstick must be applied to this religion also. Those who want to retain blasphemy laws on the statute are basically the same forces which are opposed to the liberal secular tradition and therefore should be rightly understood as indulging in right wing politics, he said.

Alam argued that it is incumbent on Muslims to raise their voice against the laws of blasphemy and apostasy as worldwide they are the worst victims of such laws. Moreover, these laws serve to control

and intimidate the minds of Muslims and till the time they are not abrogated, Muslims and others will not have the freedom to discuss, debate and critique, something which is cardinal in order to develop a free and open society.

Advocate and mediator, A. J. Jawad, Chennai-based, spoke about the similarities between blasphemy and sedition as weapons of power and control used by theocracies and autocracies to suppress dissent and to whip up mob frenzy. He said that religion and nationalism are excuses used to charge up emotions. The anti-blasphemy laws and anti-sedition laws are used to attack detractors and dissenters by theocratic and autocratic (far right) rulers.

He pointed out how in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, Sunni scholars of law and theology, called the “ulema,” began working closely with political rulers to challenge what they considered to be the sacrilegious influence of Muslim philosophers on society.

The most prominent in consolidating Sunni orthodoxy, said Jawad, was the brilliant and highly regarded Islamic scholar Ghazali, who died in the year 1111. In several influential books still widely read today, Ghazali declared two long-dead leading Muslim philosophers, Farabi and Ibn Sina, apostates for their unorthodox views on God’s power and the nature of resurrection. Their followers, Ghazali wrote, could be punished with death.

Ghazali’s declaration provided justification to Muslim sultans from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward who wished to persecute- even execute - thinkers seen as threats to conservative religious rule. The trend continues today, said Jawad.

Activist and writer Feroze Mithiborwala, Mumbai-based, said essentially the basic argument against the cartoon controversy is that they “mock” and “offend my religious sensibilities” and thus should be banned. The cartoons of Prophet Muhammad, which undoubtedly hurt the feelings of ordinary Muslims actually required a non-violent response, which would have been far more effective.

On one hand, we have a murder committed by a religious fanatic in the name of blasphemy. On the other hand, there is a secular French tradition of absolute freedom of expression, which includes the right to offend all religions, Mithiborwala added.

He said it’s high time religious people realised one basic truth: every religious text and tradition is ‘offensive, blasphemous and heretical’ to the followers of other sects and religions.

The very concepts of blasphemy and heresy are essentially anti-people and anti-democratic, as their agenda is to stymie any theological and intellectual debate and discussion on the issue of religious oppression and violence, both ideological and structural. Therefore concepts such as blasphemy and heresy have no place in any conscientious civilised society and must go, Mithiborwala concluded.

A 2-minute silence was observed at the beginning of the webinar as a mark of respect for the slain teacher whom Hassen Chalghoumi, an imam who leads prayers at a mosque in a Paris suburb described as “a martyr for freedom of expression, and a wise man who has taught tolerance, civilisation and respect for others.” The imam added: “This is not Islam, sorry, it’s not religion, its Islamism, it’s the poison of Islam.”

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**Indian Muslims for Secular Democracy (IMSD)**

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