

Blasphemy? There is no such thing



by Lev Tsitrin

Protests against the screening of *'The Lady of Heaven,'* a movie that, [per Wikipedia](#) offers a Shia perspective and therefore may (and apparently does) roil some Sunnis, are rooted in something the protestors call "blasphemy." The term is, obviously, pejorative. "Blasphemy, as defined in some religions or religion-based laws, is an insult that shows contempt, disrespect or lack of reverence concerning a deity, an object considered sacred or something considered inviolable," the same Wikipedia enlightens us.

That definition is interesting, above all, for its lack of uniformity, including under the same clause two very

different, if not incompatible, components. "A deity" is very different indeed from "an object considered sacred;" the former is an actually existent superior being, the latter, a mere projection of a human idea of such being onto a human-made material object like a statue or a book. The former is indeed sacred; the latter is no more sacred than any human speculation or a human-made thing. The former is a God, the latter, if we allow ourselves to forget that it is a mere human concoction, turns into an idol. God and a human picture of God are two very different things indeed: one should command reverence; the other is a legitimate subject for critical inquiry.

And how do we know when we are dealing with legitimate manifestations of the deity rather than with man-made speculations, so we could act reverently towards the former, and downplay the latter? Alas! We have no scientifically reliable means of separating the two. In that respect, religion differs markedly from physical sciences where uniformity is enforced by empirical evidence. In science, an ingenious hypothesis offered by a brilliant mind may get extinguished by a negative experiment that would leave it by the wayside. This is how Nature "reveals" itself – an experiment cuts off the truth's rivals. By contrast, in religion the rival theories (we call them "religions") stay with us for as long as they can find at least one adherent.

While in science the empirical evidence acts as a revelation, staging a reliable, repeatable, and transparent "revelational" experiment in religion is impossible. Apparently, God does not feel that He has to reply to our inquiries and to repeatedly provide us clear answers that, being witnessed by the entire human collective, cannot be doubted. Instead, He seems perfectly content with leaving us to hypothesize about His purposes, and the ways of reaching Him.

In this absence of a certainly of what is a real deity and what is a man-made theory of a deity (which may well be an

“idol”), how can we place our respect appropriately, avoiding “blasphemy” by honoring the deity – and by dishonoring the idols? It is “a mission impossible.” Of course, every theological hypothesis has adherents who are adamantly convinced that theirs is the right and true one – but their assurance does not make it so. We simply cannot know, and our self-assurance may just as well be a work of our ego as a divine confirmation that we got it right.

A truth-clinching experiment being out of reach, what does it do to the notion of “blasphemy”? It renders the term “blasphemy” meaningless – since we cannot possibly know where to apply it. After all, what is wrong with “contempt, disrespect or lack of reverence” towards an idol? One would argue (as the biblical prophets most vehemently did) that, in fact, *not* doing so is “blasphemy.” If you think of it, this is precisely what those protesting the film do – they are blaspheming it. In fact, Mohammed himself blasphemed against the mores and beliefs of his tribe which prior to him were considered sacred, when he preached Islam. So how could present-day Moslems find “blasphemy” blameworthy and sinful? And, much more importantly, how can they know whether their own belief system is right, and is not in need of a correction or replacement? It is impossible. In the absence of a reliable, physics-like experiment we cannot say for sure which theological hypothesis is, or is not, true. There being nothing but uncertainty, there can be no limitations set on criticism, and there can be no such thing as “blasphemy.”

This is not to say that there is no spiritual truth – but that we cannot really know what that truth is. We can feel the tug of this religion or that – but this proves nothing beyond our own tastes and predilections. Just the other day I had a twitter exchange with someone who kept sending me short clips of lectures which, he claimed, proved that Mohammed was a prophet. I listened – and found the argument to be laughable, and asked him how he could take such drivel seriously. There

was no reply. To him, it made sense – but not to me.

The bottom line is, the guys who protest the screenings of *'The Lady of Heaven'* (or, to use their own terminology, “blaspheme” it) need to learn to be realistic about what they can know and what they can't. They are within their rights to like Islam, in their definition of the word, but they cannot possibly know whether it is the truth. They may admire Mohammed – but it does not mean that God talked to him and that he was a prophet: that, no one can possibly know. They may dislike the movie – but it does not mean that others won't like it.

To each his own. In the world of uncertainty we live in, one man's blasphemy is another man's blessing. And which is ultimately which, it is not given to us to know.

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