



What is Blasphemy?

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- Blasphemy is the act of insulting or ridiculing God, religious beliefs or sacred texts.
- A 2017 [report](#) by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom identified 71 out of 195 countries that have blasphemy laws.
- Punishments can be severe, including the death penalty, lashings and imprisonment. In some countries, blasphemy laws are used only rarely.
- The US Commission report, *Respecting Rights? Measuring the World’s Blasphemy Laws*, said that blasphemy laws were more likely to be actively enforced in the Islamic world, although they have also been invoked elsewhere in recent years, including Europe.
- Critics of blasphemy laws, who include mainstream faith leaders, argue they are outdated and unnecessarily curb free speech, but others are adamant that they are still needed to protect people’s deeply held spiritual beliefs.
- The International Coalition against Blasphemy Laws, a campaign within the International Humanist and Ethical Union, seeks to [repeal](#) all blasphemy laws, saying they contravene human rights.
- Lord Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, said in 2008, as Parliament prepared to abolish England’s medieval laws, that the Church of England [supported](#) the move, but he cautioned that they should be replaced by new laws that effectively punished “hate” crimes against all religions.
- But some Christian campaigners disagreed, and the Roman Catholic MP Edward Leigh strongly [opposed](#) the move, saying it would send out the wrong message, and encourage more people to make fun of Christianity.

MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, ASIA-PACIFIC

- Blasphemy laws are found in 18 of 20 countries in the Middle East, North Africa region; and 12 of 50 countries in the Asia Pacific region, according to a [report](#) by the Pew Research Centre. For Muslims, it is blasphemous to speak insultingly not only of Allah but also of the Prophet Muhammed.

- Iran and Pakistan are the only two countries that explicitly enshrine the death penalty in law, although it has reportedly also been carried out in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- The most recent high-profile case in the Muslim world is that of Pakistani Christian [Asia Bibi](#), whose conviction was overturned in November 2018, following international pressure, after she had served eight years in prison.
- According to critics, blasphemy laws in countries such as Pakistan have been used to persecute minority groups such as Christians or to pursue personal vendettas. However, where such cases have attracted international attention, the death sentence has often been commuted.
- In 2013, the Saudi human rights activist [Raif Badawi](#) was found guilty of insulting Islam in blog posts that criticised the country's religious police and hardline Wahhabi ideology. He was sentenced to 10 years in jail and 1,000 lashes, of which 50 have been so far administered.

EUROPE

- Europe is one of the most secular regions of the world, but several countries still have laws dealing with blasphemy, although they are rarely invoked: Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Russia and Spain. Prosecutions are rare and in most cases difficult, because of constitutional guarantees on freedom of expression.
- Blasphemy was abolished as an offence in England and Wales in 2008, but it remains in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- In the most notorious case in England, *Gay News* was found guilty of blasphemous libel in 1977 after a campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, brought a private prosecution over a poem the newspaper published in which a gay Roman centurion fantasises about his feelings for Christ during the crucifixion.
- Thirty years later, Christian campaigners failed to win a controversial blasphemy case against the BBC for screening *Jerry Springer: the Opera*, a musical they complained savagely mocked Christian belief. Soon afterwards, with the support of many mainstream Church leaders and free speech campaigners, the country's blasphemy laws were repealed and broader "hate" laws introduced.

- In October, 2018, the Republic of Ireland voted in a referendum to abolish blasphemy laws enshrined in its constitution. This followed a police investigation into the writer and comedian Stephen Fry for comments he made on Irish TV describing God as “stupid”, “selfish” and “a maniac”. Police dropped the case.
- Denmark also repealed its 334-year-old blasphemy law in 2017, soon after a Danish man was charged with blasphemy for posting a video of himself burning the Koran.
- In other cases in Europe, a Greek blogger was convicted in 2014 for “malicious blasphemy” for mocking an Orthodox monk on Facebook, although his sentence was overturned on appeal. In Germany, a man was fined €500 in 2016 for displaying anti-Christian stickers on his car.

USA AND CANADA

- In the United States, blasphemy laws are deemed to be incompatible with the constitution. The first amendment protects free speech and religious exercise from interference of the state.
- Canada abolished its law of [blasphemous libel](#), which could carry the penalty of imprisonment, in December 2018, following a two year campaign.