

Blasphemy in Pakistan: An Interview with Shemeem Burney Abbas



Shemeem Burney Abbas

Shemeem Burney Abbas is a scholar of Sufism at the State University of New York at Purchase. Born and raised in Pakistan, she began teaching in 1969 and developed women's educational programs in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. She earned her PhD from the University of Texas at Austin with research on the oral tradition of Sufism, a branch of Islam that seeks to bring Allah into the daily lives of average people. Those who practice Sufism face discrimination, death, and destruction of sacred sites at the hands of extremist Sunni Muslims.

*After completing her graduate education in the United States, Abbas became a professor at Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad, Pakistan. As a woman with a PhD from an American school who researches the Sufi tradition, she faced problems in Pakistani higher education. Abbas was accused by clerics of making "blasphemous" remarks about Islam, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad, which is a crime punishable by death in Pakistan. After trying to defend herself in meetings and letters, she moved back to the United States in 1999 and published *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*. Recently, she has drawn from her own experiences to write about the history and development of blasphemy laws in Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws: From Islamic Empires to the Taliban.*

Abbas has been a featured guest on such radio programs as The Brian Lehrer Show and the subject of an article in the New York Times. In the interview that follows, she discusses the role of reli-

gion in politics, women in Pakistan, the development of blasphemy laws, and the current Muslim violence in Pakistan.

—Ryan Shaffer

RYAN SHAFFER: As a practicing Muslim, what do you see wrong with legislation that prevents criticism of the majority's religion?

SHEMEEM BURNEY ABBAS: This is a tricky question because many countries,

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such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran, are not looking at legislation alone. These countries are theocracies where either the military or tribe or the clerics have usurped power over people. They issue edicts either through military ordinances, as happened in the case of Pakistan, a religious leader (in Saudi Arabia), or the Supreme Council (in Iran). In these countries, there hardly is a legislative process. Sadly, the majority of the Muslim followers are reluctant to question out of fear.

SHAFFER: What is Sufism, and why have the Sufi population and shrines in Pakistan come under increasing attack in recent years?

the Prophet Muhammad's *hadith* (tradition) to music. This includes percussion, which enhances communication between the performers and audiences. The practice aims to bring spirituality to common people through a medium they can enjoy and understand. As a result, an entire tradition of music evolved with worship built around the tombs/shrines of the Sufi mentors. Thursday evenings prior to the holy Muslim day of Friday are favorite times to practice these rituals, while the *urs* or the death anniversary of particular Sufi mentors are also celebrated through a musical tradition. Women and men visit Sufi shrines for worship, community, and tolerance, which is popular in South Asia.

Sufi populations and shrines in Pakistan have come under increasing attack because they challenge the orthodox Islam that is preached from the mosque pulpits through illiterate *mullahs* or clerics. Sufism presents the majority flip-side of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam practiced by many terrorists, which I don't even call Islam. Sadly, that militant Islam is backed by oil money and state institutions, such as the Pakistani military, which has a vested interest in promoting Wahhabism to support *jihād*.

This started in the late 1970s under General Zia-ul-Haq and the resistance against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Sufis and Sufi shrines are not canon-driven and represent a democratic practice. It is eclectic and represents the practices of many sects and beliefs. Islam in South Asia evolved in a multicultural/multireligious environment. Sufism threatens tribal Wahhabi Islam, which is artificially supported by oil money. Because of the vast network of Wahhabism, the peaceful practices of Sufism have come under major armed attacks.

SHAFFER: Why do Muslim clerics, including sheikhs and *mullahs*, have conflict with the Sufis?

ABBAS: Muslim clerics, including the sheikhs and the *mullahs*, have a conflict with the Sufis due to the issues above, but also because the Sufis have ridiculed the sheikhs and the *mullahs* in their poetry. Poets such as Baba Bulle Shah, Sultan Bahu, and Shah Latif have satirized the bookish knowledge of the *mullahs*, which is devoid of love and understanding of the human spirit. The element of forgiveness is missing in the sheikh and *mullahs*' interpretation of the Qur'an or the manner in which the prophet Muhammad lived his life—in humility.

The sheikhs and *mullahs* focus on hell and condemn women's sexuality. Yet, none of this is found in Sufism, and these ideas are ridiculed in the musical traditions of Sufism. Singers such as Abida Parvin and Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan uphold these traditions. In fact, my work focuses on the strength of women's voices in Sufism, a major reason for the blasphemy charge against me.

Furthermore, for the Sufis, just being able to say the *alif* (the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, with which Allah or God is written) is enough to be a believer. However, the Sufis challenge the sheikhs' and *mullahs*' orthodoxy and argue that there is no place for it in Islam. Muhammad never condoned clerics or their hegemony in Islam. In fact, anyone could recite the call for prayer from the mosque during the Prophet's lifetime.

SHAFFER: In your book *Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws*, you examine the development of the country's religious laws. While Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League supported the partition for a Muslim state, it was after

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the 1971 loss of East Pakistan that the country increasingly moved to the right. Why was this such a significant political event, one which paved the way for strict religious laws in the 1980s?

ABBAS: Although Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League supported the partition of British India for a Muslim nation, it was a mistake in hindsight. The partition of India has given religious Islamic parties in Pakistan justification in their demands for a theocracy. The loss of East Pakistan in 1971, which became Bangladesh, caused Pakistan to move to the right under democratically elected Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was supposedly a socialist. However, Bhutto conceded to right-wing orthodox demands for many reasons, including pressure from Islamic parties and some Gulf countries. He agreed to the "Islamization" of the educational curriculum and other state institutions, which led to his ouster through a military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq and marked the beginning of strict religious laws in the 1980s.

SHAFFER: You have asked, "If a

woman and her donkey could travel alone from Arabia to Jerusalem in the caliph Omar's time, why is it that in the second millennium some contemporary Islamic states will not permit a woman to drive?" And Section 295(C), which forbids "defiling" the Holy Prophet's wives or family, has been used to target high profile women. How have the views on women impacted politics and election campaigns in Pakistan?

ABBAS: The best example was Benazir Bhutto's 2007 assassination, as it involved collusion between the military, President Pervez Musharraf, and the Islamic extremists. Benazir was a figure feared by conservative men, and she was killed campaigning in public. There is a connection to Aisha, Muhammad's youngest wife, who battled Ali, his son-in-law and cousin, because of her own political ambitions. Muslim men would not like women to follow Aisha's example in wanting political power. However, Benazir did, and others in Bangladesh, such as Khalida Zia and Hasina Wajid, have become successful prime ministers in Muslim countries.

Although women do continue to seek political careers and campaign in Pakistan, many come from backgrounds of power either because of land holdings (Syeda Abida Hussain) or because they have the backing of men (notably Hina Rabbani Khar).

Pakistani women are resilient and continue to bring about change in small steps in secular politics. There is another area of right-wing politics that women are involved with as well. Pakistan is a young country that is still going through experimentation, and it is interesting that women's participation in secular and religious politics is publicly visible.

SHAFFER: You have lived in both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Are there any notable differences in religious laws?

ABBAS: Pakistan's Hudood Ordinances and the blasphemy laws instituted under General Zia-ul-Haq were directed by Saudi Arabia. Yet, Pakistan has notable differences in religious laws because Pakistan has a complete set of secular laws too that are part of the country's colonial legacy. Saudi Arabia has its own restrictive *shari'a* laws, but Pakistan is different

because it has many different Muslim religious sects. For example, we have a 15 percent population of *Shi'a* who have their own religious laws. In contrast, Saudi Arabia does not even acknowledge the *Shi'a*.

In addition, Pakistan has Christians, Hindus, Parsees, and other faiths that have their own customs and practice their own laws. Yet, Saudi Arabia acknowledges only one Islamic faith, which is Wahhabism.

SHAFFER: Your book also discusses some legal justifications for Islamic law applying to such non-Muslims as Sikhs and Christians. Why can non-Muslims be found guilty and punished with execution for criticizing a religion they do not believe in?

ABBAS: This is the whole stupidity of General Zia-ul-Haq's establishment of Saudi Arabian *shari'a* law in the 1980s. Historically, the Muslim rulers of India did not apply these laws to non-Muslims. It was Zia-ul-Haq and the current Islamic parties who justify applying the laws to nonbelievers.

Attempts to change the law have been met with great resistance. Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and the minority minister for religious affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, were both assassinated by extremists for trying to make amendments to the religious laws. As a result, amending the laws is not even discussed now. These laws should be banished. This is not Muhammad's Islam; it has been hijacked by the *mullahs*.

SHAFFER: Your book also explores the Hudood Ordinances. How are women treated differently than men under these provisions? How does this affect rape prosecutions?

ABBAS: I challenge the Hudood Ordinances in my book. According to these ordinances, women's testimonies are reduced to one-half of a man's in value. This is un-Islamic. Muhammad did not advocate anything of the kind, and the *hadith* that is cited to justify this is taken out of context. It has fostered further corruption in an already weak government. How can reducing a woman's testimony to one-half of a man's be justified when Khadija, the Prophet Muhammad's wife, used her own independent judgment to

hire Muhammad to conduct her business? This negates the Prophet's example.

As for the Hudood Ordinances' stipulation on rape witnesses, such as needing four Muslim adult male witnesses to substantiate a rape charge, why would a woman be raped in the presence of four males? It has led to extreme injustices with hundreds of women languishing in jail for not having the required evidence [editor's note: rape accusers can be charged with adultery, a crime]. The women are then again sexually abused while in custody. The case of Mukhtaran Mai is notorious: after several years and all the international publicity, Mukhtaran's perpetrators were released by the country's highest judicial system for lack of evidence.

SHAFFER: You argue that Pakistani blasphemy, or *kufri*, laws are innately political, with the Holy Qur'an not mentioning the laws and the law being used to silence minorities, intellectuals, and political rivals. Is it possible to have an Islamic democracy? Does a state religion, or Islam in particular, interfere with democratic principles?

ABBAS: Yes, indeed Pakistan's blasphemy laws are political and not Qur'anic. They are created to silence dissent and persecute political rivals. No, Islam does not interfere with democratic principles. There is a lot of room for independent thinking in Islam. This is a long discussion, but I personally believe that

there should not have been the partition of India, and the leaders both Hindu and Muslims could have coexisted.

Creating a state in the name of religion gave the Islamic political parties an opportunity to hijack the country, which I examine in my book. I am really worried about the future of Pakistan. The recent attack at the Karachi airport by the Taliban and other instances that I cite are pernicious indicators.

Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League visualized Pakistan as a secular democracy where religion would be practiced in the home. Religion should not meddle with politics. It's messy business. The Islamic state has to go back to the principles of Averroës, or Ibn-Rushd, who in the twelfth century advocated Aristotelian reasoning that influenced the European Enlightenment. This is what is needed for the present Islamic world.

We do not need dogma. Islamic societies have a long history of intelligent, insightful thinking that has been expressed in the arts, sciences, and literature. We need a turnaround from tribal Islam promoted by oil money.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are political and not Qur'anic. SHB

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