

Blasphemy And The Islamic Way

Those who respond with violence are going against the Quran's spirit of reason and persuasion

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Due to some recent events in Pakistan, the issue of blasphemy is again in the news. It is generally held that Islam prescribes capital punishment for those who commit blasphemy; that is, using abusive language against the Prophet of Islam. But this is quite untrue. According to Islam, blasphemy is simply a misuse of freedom and not a cognisable offence; the blasphemer is not liable to incur legal punishment.

This kind of law has no basis in Islamic scriptures. If someone uses abusive language against the Prophet, Muslims must take it as a case of misunderstanding, and then try to remove this misunderstanding. They are required to do so by engaging in discussion or by providing the blasphemer with Islamic literature that gives the true image of the Prophet of Islam.

To use abusive language against the Prophet or to praise him are both a matter of one's own choice. Whatever the choice, it is in God's domain to pass judgment on it. Muslims have nothing to do in this situation except try to remove the misunderstanding and then leave the rest to God.

If there is such a case – which could be called blasphemy – and in anger one tries to punish the offender, one is simply reacting negatively to the situation. And acting in

this way is looked upon with extreme disfavour in Islam. Islam always tries to go to the root cause of any given problem.

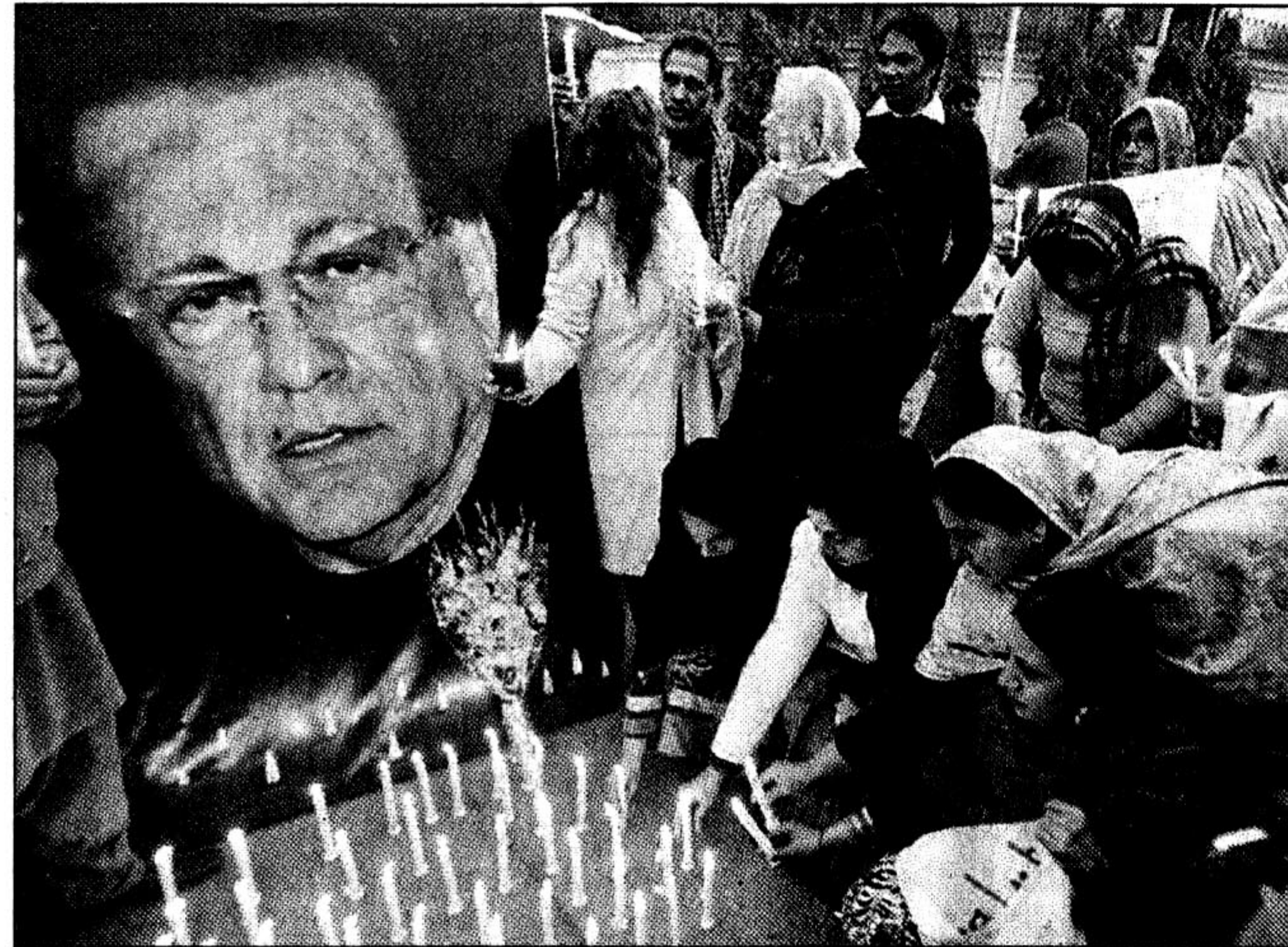
When one abuses the Prophet of Islam, it is most probably due to some kind of provocation. Without provocation, this kind of negative attitude is extremely unlikely. That is why the Quran advises Muslims to get at the real reason.

The Quran points to one such root cause behind this kind of act and urges Muslims to try to come to grips with it: "But do not revile those (beings) whom they invoke instead of God, lest they, in

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their hostility, revile God out of ignorance." (6:108)

It is on the record that, during the Prophet's time, there were some non-believers who used to use abusive language against the Prophet of Islam. The Prophet of Islam never suggested any legal punishment for those persons. He simply directed them to



A candle in the wind

one of his companions, Hassan bin Sabit al-Ansari, who would respond to their blasphemous statements and remove their misunderstanding by means of argument.

Islam suggests capital punishment for only one offence, and that is murder. Except in the case of murder, there is no such severe legal punishment in Islam. If ever there were any case of such punishment being meted out, it must have been in obedience to an executive order – an extremely rare exception – and not carried out under any general law of punishment.

Moreover, meting out punishment is the prerogative of an established court and not of any individual or non-governmental organisation.

According to Islam, if anyone commits a crime, his case will be referred to a court established by law and, after completing the required judicial proceedings, the judge will give his verdict. And then it is only for the authorised police to implement the court order, not any civilian.

The whole scheme of Islam is based on the process of peaceful dialogue. In a verse of the Quran, God Almighty gives this injunction to the Prophet: "So, [O Prophet] remind them: your task is only to remind, you are not over them a warden." (88:21-22)

This is the standard Islamic response to problems, and the case of blasphemy is certainly no exception. Muslims must, therefore, exhort people

in a friendly manner. They must try to change their hearts and minds. It must be borne in mind that the Quran is not a criminal code; it is a book of persuasion. So Muslims must deal with such cases by reasoning and not by meting out punishment.

It is tantamount to defamation of Islam to say that Islam cannot give a reason-based response, and that is why it endeavours to inflict physical punishment on those who make any kind of negative remark against the Prophet. Islam, after all, is a rational religion; all Islamic teachings are based on reason and argument. Islam relies on rational argument rather than on any kind of physical punishment.

In the Islamic scriptures, the Quran and the Hadith, there is no such injunction to deliver physical punishment to one who commits blasphemy. This law was only made during the Abbasid period and is an expression of the imperatives of that period. At that time, the Muslims had established their empire and were in political supremacy. Due to their sense of pride at having accomplished this, they made such a law. But it was a clear innovation. And according to the Hadith, every innovation in the religion of Islam must needs be rejected.

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