

Lesson Plan – Exploring Secularism

KS4 Lesson 3 – What are blasphemy laws

Background	Blasphemy is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “something that you say or do that shows you do not respect God or a religion”. Generally, the term is applied by different groups to describe beliefs or statements they have a theological disagreement with, because either they differ on interpretations of a religion or criticise religious ideas and institutions. Almost by definition, secularists agree that there shouldn’t be restrictions on blasphemous speech of ideas. Some critics of religion reject the term blasphemy – arguing that gods cannot be offended either because they don’t exist or don’t take offence – while others embrace it in order to subvert the power of religion to restrict speech and thought.
Subjects	Religious Education at KS4 Citizenship at KS4
Curriculum links	AQA Religious Studies Theme F: Religion, human rights and social justice Pupils should study religious teachings, and religious, philosophical and ethical arguments, relating to the issues that follow, and their impact and influence in the modern world. They should be aware of contrasting perspectives in contemporary British society on all of these issues. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Freedom of religious expression.</i>• <i>Issues of equality, freedom of religion and belief including freedom of religious expression.</i>• <i>Human rights and the responsibilities that come with rights, including the responsibility to respect the rights of others.</i>• <i>Social justice.</i>
Key Question	What are blasphemy laws?
Learning Outcomes	Expected: Pupils can explain what a blasphemy law is Pupils can explain secularist and non-secularist views on blasphemy laws Greater Depth: Pupils can explain the link between blasphemy laws and religious discrimination

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Stimulus	<p>Throughout the ages organised religions treated offensive language towards individuals, the community and towards the religious ideas and beliefs as blasphemy. Today, to unjustly damage the reputation of an <i>individual</i> is considered a form of unjustified use of free speech and is called a slander. To publicly call someone a thief without evidence is against the law and could get you on court for slander.</p> <p>Blasphemy on the other hand is an "injury to the reputation" of the <i>collective</i> by using disrespectful language towards their religion or beliefs. For example, making a claim that the Bible is just a fiction and the existence of Jesus just a myth, or mocking specific religious beliefs in any way, used to be punishable by law as it is offensive to the people who hold those beliefs. In 2008 blasphemy law was abolished in England and Wales and everyone is allowed to be critical of religious ideas or even satirise them.</p> <p>Viewpoint 1</p> <p>Blasphemy is an offense to God, no one should have right to do it freely and we are right to punish those that do. We are a Christian country and the rights of Christians need to be respected. It is not alright to offend other people's deeply held beliefs and mock them. Christianity teaches love and tolerance and we should protect those values from mistreatment of those that are intolerant of us.</p> <p>Viewpoint 2</p> <p>I am nonreligious and a humanist myself but I find it to be very important that we have a law that will protect the sentiments of all religious and nonreligious communities in the UK. No religious or nonreligious worldview should be mocked and we should have laws in place to prevent that. Mocking the worldviews that are part of someone's identity can cause great emotional harm and should be restricted.</p>
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Viewpoint 3

Human rights protect individuals and not ideas or beliefs. Freedom of speech is a fundamental right and the Universal declaration of human rights states that all ideas can be scrutinised, criticised, satirised and mocked. These rights were hard fought and liberal democracies uphold them as they understand that the only way to fight bad ideas is if we are free to express criticism against them. Those that demand that their beliefs are respected and safeguarded from criticism or ridicule are the intolerant of others and their right of freedom of expression.

Viewpoint 4

Freedom of expression and freedom of speech are basic human rights and every set of religious or non-religious beliefs should be allowed to be criticised, offended or even satirised and mocked. Religious views inside of the same religion are highly diverse and what is offensive to some Christians for example is not offensive to some other Christians even though they hold similar or same beliefs. In the end, what is offensive to someone is arbitrary and subjective. Someone's subjective feelings of being offended cannot be the criteria for limiting the freedom of speech because feelings are subjective and anyone can claim they are offended without objective way to determine if it is true or not.

Viewpoint 5

Blasphemy laws are good in preventing discrimination, conflict, violence and protecting social harmony and religious peace. If we punish people who insult and criticise religious beliefs this will prevent confrontation between different religious groups since they will not be allowed to offend each other without consequences. This is a good thing, especially in our multicultural societies with many different faiths.

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	<p>Viewpoint 6</p> <p>I am a liberal and a Muslim. I believe that there should be no blasphemy laws. These kinds of laws not only prevent legitimate criticism of some religious beliefs or potentially dangerous religious leadership but are also well known to produce a culture of mob violence against blasphemers in countries that have blasphemy laws in place. These laws legitimise persecution of religious minorities and different and progressive views inside of religious tradition under a disguise of protecting the “correct” view of the religion.</p>
<p>Exercise</p>	<p>Part 1.</p> <p>Task:</p> <p>1) Match the description of a law restricting speech on religion to the time and place – guess which of the countries matches the description.</p> <p><i>France 13th - 18th Century</i> <i>16th century to the mid-19th century England</i> <i>18th - 21st Century USA</i> <i>France 18th - 21st century</i> <i>Iran 20th - 21st century</i></p> <p>“All foul language against God, including denying his being or providence, all profane scoffing at the Holy Scriptures and Jesus Christ, and exposing any part thereof to contempt or ridicule are punishable by the temporal courts with death, imprisonment, corporal punishment and fine.”</p> <p>“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”</p> <p>An attack on the purity of religion was punished by law and became extreme during the reign of Louis IX. Later canonized by the Catholic church as Saint Louis, he became obsessed in his fight against heretics, Jews and Muslims, and set the punishment for blasphemy to mutilation of the tongue and lips.</p>

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The law prevents against criticizing the Islamic regime, insulting Islam, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards. Religious teachings and interpretations that diverge from the ones imposed by the state are punishable by law.

Criticising and satirising or ridiculing religious and nonreligious ideas are not punished by law. Criticising religious leaders and their views is open and free for everyone.

2) Discuss in pairs for each one if it is a blasphemy law or not and why

Part 2. Discussion of the six viewpoints from the stimulus, are they good arguments for or against a blasphemy law.

- (a) Rank the Viewpoints from best (1) to worst (6)
- (b) Discuss in pairs/groups why do you support that view
- (c) Reflection questions to discuss

- 1) Should we be free to criticise religious (and non-religious) beliefs?
- 2) Should we be free to mock and satirise religious (and non-religious) beliefs?
- 3) What is the benefit of being able to criticise religious beliefs, and what are potential benefits of not being able to do so?
- 4) Is there a benefit in liberal democracy to be able to satirise or mock religious beliefs?
- 5) Is there a benefit in liberal democracy to restrict and punish satirising or mocking religious (and non-religious) beliefs?
- 6) Overall, would you argue that we should be free or restricted in being able to mock religious (and non-religious) beliefs?

Answers for TASK 1 in order

16th century to the mid-19th century England

21st Century USA

France 13th Century

Iran 21st century

France 21st century

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Take it Further	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Research Charlie Hebdo shootings in France - are Muslims in France discriminated against?2) Research Christian Asia Bibi blasphemy case in Pakistan – are Christians in Pakistan discriminated against?3) Write an email to the government of Pakistan explaining why they should abolish their blasphemy law or keep it in place4) Write an email to the government of UK, USA or France explaining why they should criminalise blasphemy law and bring it back
What do secularists think about blasphemy laws?	<p>Viewpoint 1</p> <p>The only secularist legitimate criteria to limit free speech is defamatory and untrue speech against individuals, for example publicly claiming that someone is a criminal without any evidence. In a liberal secular democracy, we should tolerate each other, but that does not mean we should be forced to tolerate other's beliefs. Good and dynamic democracy will always involve challenging each other's religious and non-religious views. The only way this is possible is that everyone allows freedom of expression to others, which involves criticism and even satire.</p> <p>Viewpoint 2</p> <p>Both religious and non-religious secularists do not demand that their beliefs and values are protected by the force of law. Feelings about what is offensive is subjective and cannot be enforced equally to everyone. This is because people holding the same beliefs will differ on what is offensive, and what is offensive often changes over time. Since everyone has a different idea of what is considered offensive, it is impossible to accommodate and protect all feelings against potentially offensive speech. For this reason, we cannot treat everyone equally and equality of treatment of different groups is an important principle of secularism.</p> <p>Viewpoint 3</p> <p>Punishing criticism and satire of different beliefs might reduce the number of cases of offensive speech between different religious or non-religious groups on paper, but will increase and solidify the power of the dominant groups and make social and theological changes difficult or impossible. Such blasphemy laws would benefit those religious groups with power, and this would break the principle of equality between different religious and non-religious groups. We want to empower progressive and liberal voices inside</p>

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	<p>religious tradition to be able to have their say and challenge more traditional views, something that is impossible if the structures are protected from criticism.</p> <p>Viewpoint 4</p> <p>This is close to a secularist view. Freedom of speech cannot be limited by someone's feelings that are subjective, something that makes equal treatment by protection from offence impossible. The only legitimate limits to freedom of speech are if someone directly incites violence towards an individual or a group of people, or publicly and falsely accuses an individual (slander and libel).</p> <p>Viewpoint 5</p> <p>Secularist view is that free speech is a basic human freedom and essential for human intellectual and social progress. It is the only way to battle bad ideas that still exist in our society. The only way to make a positive change is to challenge the status quo that is often giving someone a privileged position in a society. Inability to criticise or satirise ideas that are seen as negative only gives those that hold them more power.</p> <p>Viewpoint 6</p> <p>Secularists acknowledge the oppressiveness of blasphemy laws throughout history, as they were used to silencing any criticism coming from the inside of the religious tradition but also outside of it. These kinds of laws produce the culture of intolerance among people towards any form of criticism of their identity and can result in societies with high number of cases of wild mob killings of “blasphemers”.</p>
Link to KS3 Study	KS3 Lessons Theme 2 on Freedom of expression: What is Free Speech?