
The Tyrannical Threat of New Blasphemy Laws, in Scotland?

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Nobody likes to feel slighted by jibes or have their beliefs contradicted. However, it is almost always a cause for celebration amongst those in the religious freedom community when blasphemy laws are abolished, even archaic laws that have not been enforced in 175 years.

Freedom of conscience, expression, and religion are vital pillars in advanced and healthy societies. It is more troubling, however, when old laws are being discarded only to be replaced with new and aggressively imposed blasphemy laws.

“Where in the Middle East is this dreadful threat to liberty being enacted?” you may be forgiven for asking. “In Scotland,” would be the surprising response.

The [Hate Crime and Public Order Bill](#) has managed to unite Scottish Catholics, Protestants, Secularists, Feminists, and additional unlikely bedfellows in opposition on the basis that it would be extraordinarily damaging to fundamental freedoms. Of the few groups not standing in opposition, trans rights activists have succeeded in beefing up the legislation, to include putting into legal peril even sincere and intellectually serious challenges to the ideology underlying the transgender movement.

The legislation would make it an offense punishable by imprisonment to “stir up hatred” with speech that is “threatening or abusive.” Of course, this language conjures up images of Nazi rallies, and at first glance would seem entirely reasonable. There is no justification for hatred, or threatening or abusive language or behaviour in or out of the pulpit.

Christians and other faith groups should be the most unlikely sources of such attitudes. However, the terms “hatred,” “threatening,” and “abusive” have been more loosely defined in recent times. Would the peaceful communication of orthodox religious beliefs about gender, sexual practice, and other social touch points now fall into those categories? Perhaps even a refusal to affirm proactively certain lifestyle choices would be considered hateful and a form of abuse.

Moreover, if this bill is enacted, the hosts of activists with the time and inclination to pursue vexatious litigation against dissenting voices will find ample ground on which to pursue it. The Scottish Government is performing contortion acts to crowbar freedom of expression clauses into the bill, which simply demonstrates that this legislation is prone to violate that very freedom.

The overview of the bill states that it “also abolishes the offence of blasphemy.” How painfully ironic a new “blasphemy law” is created in the very legislation that abolishes an anti-blasphemy statute.

If a new blasphemy bill wasn't enough, a group of 27 church leaders has been granted permission for a judicial review over the closure of all places of worship in Scotland under recent Covid-19 measures. The draconian approach by the Scottish Government could be overturned subject to the outcome of hearings on 11th and 12th March. Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced on 24th February that churches would be allowed to reopen in the first week of April, but even then they will be restricted with arbitrary limits on attendance regardless of the venue size. It would seem entirely appropriate for the U.S. Department of State and the UK Human Rights Minister, Lord Ahmad, to take a close look at Scotland's concerning government policies, and to use their diplomatic channels to encourage a change of tack.

Whilst the Scottish National Party is the instigator of the Hate Crime and Public Order Bill, most Western liberal democracies are heading in a similar direction. Practicing Christians, Muslims, and Jews should not be alone in their alarm over this bill. It should worry everyone. And I do mean everyone. Anybody with an opinion, or anyone who just wants to form his or her own opinion, is at risk. Further, the activists who are the championing beneficiaries of blasphemy laws are themselves at risk. For just as the trans rights groups now devour their elders in the Progressivist Movement – i.e., third-wave feminists and gay rights advocates – so they will in turn be overtaken by some new, as of yet unimagined cause with its own zealous agitants. The laws which proponents of transgenderism fought for will be used against them because they fail to supply any internal logic that would preclude such a turn of events.

But how, in such modern liberal societies, did we get here? Surely this is the Free World, is it not?

More than a decade pursuing religious freedom and spotlighting persecution in the Middle East provides one with insights into the challenges that often accompany pluralism and religious diversity.

The scale and severity of the problem in countries like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are, without doubt, dramatically different from the challenges faced in the UK or the United States.

However, there are also striking similarities.

In many countries within the Middle East and North Africa region, violators of Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights often take the form of secular governments that have been cowed by fundamentalist groups and so impose arbitrary restrictions on the places of worship of minorities. They criminalise public expressions of a person's faith, including those that may "shake the faith of a Muslim." In certain countries they seek through their laws and their courts to "promote virtue and punish vice." They apply blasphemy laws to anyone who might have said or posted an opinion that runs contrary to that of the fundamentalists driving the agenda. Often the allegations of blasphemy are completely without foundation, weaponised for the benefit of the accuser. Another category of religious freedom violators are non-state actors seeking to create societies with homogenous beliefs and values through violence and threats of violence, displacement of dissenters, and systems of social advantage and discrimination based on people's beliefs (dhimmitude). One final example of a potential source of religious intolerance is the majority faith community which, when whipped up by fundamentalists, can be incited to target places of worship, homes of religious minorities, and certain individuals and their families, with violence and threats of

violence. Then there is religious discrimination in which employers are instructed to fire those who hold “alternative” beliefs, government remove adopted children from the custody of believers, and in countless other ways, disfavoured members of religious communities are denied an equal share in society.

To be clear, the circumstances of faith communities in less stable areas of the world are far more severe in nature than anything presently experienced in the West. However, if the descriptions of the previous paragraph sent a chill down your spine it is because there are undeniable similarities with social agendas being pursued right now by the Scottish Parliament.

Erosion of religious freedom amongst other core liberties has been camouflaged by incrementalism and the remarkable subverting of words such as “liberal,” “progressive” and “tolerance”.

The so-called liberal agenda of the past thirty years or so promised the destruction of outdated moral codes and structures so that everyone would be free to think, say, and be whatever they wanted without fear or favour. Of course, once the old moral code was dismantled, it was replaced not with freedom but a new and more fiercely imposed moral code.

The liberal agenda created freedom only for those who agreed with it. It established a new “righteous” and “unrighteous.” Old blasphemy laws make way for new blasphemy laws. And they have long since wrested control over institutions of civil society – television and film-making, schools, universities, political parties, and even church denominations – turning them into their temples of orthodoxy. And this orthodoxy demands submission, confession, and repentance with no doctrine of mercy or reconciliation.

It might sound overdramatic but we are only ever a few words of legislation away from prison sentences for religious leaders who teach the foundational doctrines of their scriptures, or worshippers who dare to communicate values informed by their beliefs.

Until recently, there has been a cordon sanitaire of political sensibility from the majority, which has kept our politics from erring too far towards extremism of any kind. However, whilst Westminster is perhaps timidly seeking to address the obvious threats to liberty with the announcement of a free speech champion to tackle, in particular, the problem in academia, the Scottish Government is walking dangerously in lockstep with progressivist militants.

The multitude of Western NGOs with a focus on international religious freedom need to keep an eye over their shoulder on what is happening in their own countries and to connect the dots between what is seen in other countries around the world and what we are seeing in the West. Faith communities must cease labouring under the sleepy assumption that “what happens over there won’t ever happen here.”

The religious, and any who value their liberties, must respond not just by relentlessly demanding our fundamental rights but also winsomely demonstrating our value and place in society. And governments must be instructed in no uncertain terms to turn away from their disastrous course towards tyranny.

Tragically, this imperative now extends to Scotland.

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Miles has over a decade of experience in international affairs and religious freedom, during that time focusing on the Middle East and North Africa. He is well-travelled in the MENA region and has a strong understanding of the various relevant dynamics. Miles is based in London, England, which is an increasingly important location for the advance of religious freedom. He has a network of positive and strategic relationships with politicians, civil servants, NGO leaders, faith group representatives, and other key influencers in Washington D.C., Ottawa, and Westminster. Through these connections and experiences, he works to achieve critical outcomes for religious minorities suffering human rights violations. He applies strategic thinking and effective campaign methods to collaborative efforts to advance religious freedom.

Miles has a background in politics as an elected representative in London and a campaign manager. He also worked in journalism at the BBC.



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