

College 'hate speech' policies 'parallel' blasphemy laws in Pakistan, Muslim lawyer says

By [Samuel Smith](#), CP Reporter



Muslim lawyer and author Asma Uddin speaks during a panel discussion hosted by the National Religious Broadcasters at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 11, 2019. She was joined in the conversation by NRB General Counsel Craig Parshall and journalist Steven Waldman. | The Christian Post

WASHINGTON — A Muslim lawyer is warning that “hate speech” policies instituted at a number of college campuses in the U.S. are having similar psychological effects on students that anti-blasphemy laws in Pakistan have on citizens who are sometimes

incited to mob violence.

Asma Uddin, an author and religious freedom attorney who has worked on U.S. Supreme Court and federal cases, participated in a wide-ranging discussion on religious liberty Wednesday at the National Press Club during a panel event hosted by the National Religious Broadcasters, an association of Christian media organizations.

The event was moderated by evangelical lawyer Craig Parshall, NRB's general counsel, and journalist Steven Waldman, the founder of Beliefnet who has written extensively on the history of religious freedom in America.

Uddin, a U.S. citizen of Pakistani descent who founded AtIMuslimah.com, touched on the topic of hate speech codes that seem to be increasingly implemented on public and private college campuses in the United States. Such policies have been enacted to prevent people from speaking in ways that could offend other students.

In a number of cases, students have been suspended or punished in some way for voicing their religious beliefs in class on issues like Islam and sexual morality. Some colleges have also restricted free speech on campuses to administratively selected "free speech zones."

"Increasingly, administrators are trying to sort of shield students from offensive speech," said Uddin, who previously served with the legal nonprofit Becket and worked on Supreme Court cases such as *Hobby Lobby* and *Hosanna-Tabor*.

"There have been plenty of studies, including by centrists such as Jonathan Haidt, who have shown exactly the sort of psychological problem this creates and actually sets up a situation that is sort of conducive to young adults who are falling into depression, for instance."

As a known critic of Pakistan's blasphemy laws (which criminalizes criticizing the religion of Islam and in some cases is punishable by death), Uddin warned that what she has seen taking place on some college campuses in the U.S. over the last few years is similar to what has taken place in the Muslim-majority nation.

In Pakistan, mob violence has been known to ensue after allegations have been made against Christians and religious minorities that they insulted Islam and committed blasphemy. In some cases, mob violence has led to the killing of those who were accused of blasphemy.

In comparison, there have been cases where mobs of protestors have formed on college campuses in the U.S. to oppose conservative scholars invited to speak on campus. At Middlebury College in Vermont in 2017, a professor had to go to the hospital after she was assaulted by an angry student mob while escorting a conservative scholar who was halted from speaking on campus.

Earlier this year, Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow was prevented from speaking during an anniversary event when a group of angry students stormed the stage to urge the school to divest its budget from fossil fuels and for-profit prisons.

Bacow issued a rebuke of the students in an op-ed saying that "when we shut down conversation, when we shut down debate, we shut down the opportunity to learn through reasoned discourse."

"If you look at the Pakistani context, for instance, in places that have blasphemy laws and enforce them, that is exactly the case. It legitimizes the [claim] where people say, 'Well, you offended me and I am rightful in responding with violence,'" Uddin said. "I see the sort of same phenomenon that is being created and I do think there is a parallel between overly broad hate speech codes and blasphemy laws."

However, there is a reason for hope, the panelists said. They pointed to the Chicago Statement promoting free speech and the open exchange of ideas that have been embraced by a number of private and public colleges in recent years.

“We are seeing some inroads that way,” Parshall said.

In an interview with The Christian Post following the panel, Uddin clarified that her remark was based on actual documented incidents where mob violence has occurred on campuses. However, she did not mean to suggest that such a level of violence on campus is widespread.

“I am interested in looking at that connection. To me, it is interesting having read Jonathan Haidt’s book that he wrote with Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, and the way they connected it to symptoms of depression and the way this sort of coddling creates that type of context,” she explained.

“What are the social-psychological effects of this overprotection? As somebody who is openly critical blasphemy laws from a legal policy perspective but also from the perspective of what it does to people and what type of actions and behavior transpires, I am coming at it from that place of concern as opposed to trying to paint people as unruly.”

She warned that the more colleges enact such policies, the more it “crystalizes” a person’s right to not be offended.

“It is sort of like if you don’t get offended, you don’t build up these necessary barriers and defenses to live in a world that is offensive,” she stressed.

Uddin is the author of the recently released book *When Islam Is Not a Religion: Inside America's Fight for Religious Freedom*. The book examines religious freedom mainly through the lens of attacks against Muslims but also examines religious freedom issues facing other religions.

She said that she was inspired to write the book by witnessing how “deeply politicized” the issue of religious freedom has become of the years in the contexts of sexual freedom vs. religious freedom and majority religion (Christianity) vs. minority religion (Islam).

“There is fear. A lot of conservatives, unfortunately, perpetuate that if we give Muslims freedom, they will take over the U.S. On the flip side, that is what the liberals say about conservatives: ‘If we give Christians these rights than they are just going to institute a Christians state,” she said. “It’s a fear of Christian nationalism. It is the same thing. If they think that that one version of the argument is ridiculous, they should also think that the other version is ridiculous.”

Polls have shown that some Republicans have troubling views when it comes to the freedom for Islam in the U.S. In 2015, only 49 percent of Republicans questioned for a Public Policy Polling [survey](#) said they think Islam should be “legal” in the United States, while 30 percent said Islam shouldn’t be legal and 21 percent said they were not sure.

In a number of cases nationwide, there has been [pushback over plans to build mosques](#) and Muslim communities have faced efforts to block or deny zoning permits for construction.

“We are now living in a country where a few years ago, there was a poll where 50 percent of Republicans said they were not sure that Islam should be legal in America, where houses of worship, particularly mosques are routinely denied permission for construction,” Waldman, a former Newsweek correspondent and founder of Report for America, said.

“These are attacks on religious freedom on such a more fundamental level. ... If we are going to fight for the rights of people to have headscarves in the workplace or to be able to not to participate in a same-sex wedding if they don’t want to, we should fight 10 times harder for basic religious freedom rights that are now in danger.”

Opposition to mosques is sometimes spurred on by conservative Christians. In fact, some Southern Baptists demand that action be taken against the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission after the body issued a legal brief in defense of a mosque construction in a New Jersey township on the historic Church Street.

Waldman challenged evangelicals to “reclaim the mantle of leadership that they once had as the foremost leaders in the creation of religious freedom.”

“[This] means not only defending yourself against legitimate infringements on your rights, but becoming the leading defenders of American Muslims,” Waldman asserted. “That actually right now is the No. 1 threat to religious freedom. Nothing would do more to enshrine and strengthen democracy than if evangelicals reclaimed that mantle of leadership.”

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