Sovereignty between God and the State: Insulting Muhammad in Contemporary Pakistan

The act of insulting the Prophet Muhammad has often garnered international headlines in recent years. In Pakistan, in the past decade, dozens of alleged Prophet-insulters, including Salman Taseer the then-governor of Punjab, have been murdered for their critique of Muhammad. Despite the riveting and sensationalized media coverage of ‘radical Pakistani Muslims’ supporting these extra-judicial murders, there is a gaping dearth of informed discourse on the religious reasons meticulously cited by Pakistani traditional Muslim scholars (‘ulama’) to legitimate such acts. Similarly, the systematically reasoned religious opposition to such views remains virtually undocumented. It is precisely this lacuna that I address in my paper.

This paper highlights the tensions and intellectual disagreements between these two groups and makes a number of distinct contributions. 1) It brings to light the richness of the ‘ulama’ tradition in Pakistan and provides a vital counter to the narrative that Pakistani ‘ulama’ are united in their views on the legitimacy of extra-judicial punishment for insulting Muhammad. 2) My work emphasizes that the disparity between the views of these anti-vigilante-justice ‘ulama’ and the ‘ulama’ celebrating extra-judicial murders of Prophet-insulters results from their drastically different opinions about state sovereignty. 3) Finally, in emphasizing Pakistani ‘ulama’s divergent commitments to state sovereignty, my work poses an important challenge to the views of scholars who asserts the incompatibility of the shari’a and the modern state. Departing from such scholars, I emphasize both arguments and agreements over sovereignty between the state and the shari’a, i.e. God’s sovereign will as articulated by the ‘ulama’.