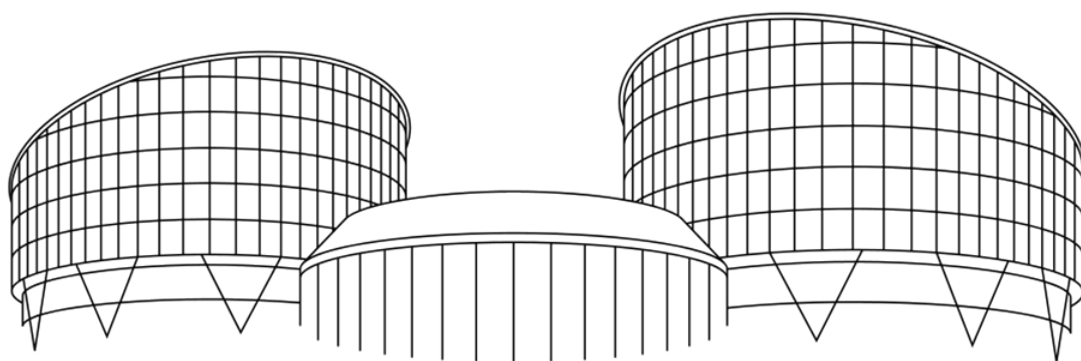


Anti-blasphemy laws, free speech and religious freedom

Anti-blasphemy restrictions essentially require people to accord sanctity to doctrines they do not endorse and subordinate their spiritual ideals to those who consider them infidels.

by Matthew M. Hausman



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Freedom of speech is taken for granted in western society, but it is an essential right that is necessary for the perpetuation of constitutional democracy. Unfortunately, it also seems to be an endangered species under stealth attack by extremism masquerading as diversity and tolerance. As European courts enforce laws criminalizing the critical discussion of certain religions, and as the political left blames western society for inflaming Islamist passions by refusing to accommodate radical dictates, the right to speak freely is being threatened by a stultifying political correctness. What is being eroded are classical liberal values.

Nothing illustrates this better than a recent decision by the

European Court of Human Rights affirming an Austrian court's verdict against a woman for suggesting that Muhammad's marriage to a young girl as recounted in Muslim scripture was tantamount to child abuse. The Human Rights Court held that her comments could be perceived as "an abusive attack on the Prophet of Islam" and thus were properly subject to prosecution under Austrian law.

The net consequence of this ruling, however, was to enforce an anti-blasphemy restriction against speech, though the offending words were uttered in a pluralistic country that supposedly values freedom of expression.

Although criticism of specific belief systems could certainly offend their adherents, empirical analysis or even disparagement of any faith would be perfectly legal in the United States, where free speech is constitutionally protected and government is prohibited from favoring or promoting any particular religion...

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