Stoning – the true horror

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Recently I posted a blog about the treatment of women in many Islamic states and the fact that such treatment, if following the legal definition, amounts to a crime against humanity. In it, I linked to a document produced by Amnesty International entitled "How to stone someone to death" (pdf). The document describes in step-by-step detail, as outlined in the Iranian penal code, exactly how to bury someone up to their waist — or chest if female — and throw stones at their head until they die.

A few days after I had posted the blog, I re-read the document and felt it merited a blog of its own. Why? Because we need to admit, and face up to, the true horror of stoning. It is really happening. It is happening to real people and it is happening in the name of Islam. This is the truth – whether we like it or not.

Liars, apologists, the desperate to believe, and the interminably naive will deny it, or wish it not so, but no amount of wishing, denial, or apology erases objective fact, and these facts must be confronted.

If you don't have time, or can't stomach it, here are some of the main points of the document (though the pictures are worth looking at):

1. The size of the stone is specified (with accompanying pictures) so that it will not be too small, or too big. Suffering is important.
2. A man is buried to his waist and a woman to her chest. If he/she can get out of the hole, they can escape the punishment; so must make sure women cannot get out.
3. If the stoning is based on confession, the judge will throw the first stone. If based on witness testimony, the witness will throw the first stone.
4. Every 20 minutes or so, the stoning will stop to see if the condemned has yet died. If not, stoning continues (this is Article 23 by the way).
5. It is not all bad news though: Article 16 states that the punishment should not "inflict torture, torment or mutilation of the condemned" and the stoning will be carried out "with ultimate calmness and without exercising violence". I'm not sure what dictionary the Iranian regime reads but they've got a rather strange understanding of the words "torture" and "violence" - but then words mean whatever you want them to mean when you talk about Islam.

Earlier this year, Iran reviewed its penal code. Stoning as punishment for adultery was removed — that is until the Guardian Council got hold of it and promptly re-inserted this religious command. The Guardian Council is a group of unelected clerics who hold supreme power in Iran, and who ensure the compatibility of all legislation with sharia law.

Saudi Arabia also stones people to death, and the barbarism is swelling as sharia law advances. In the last few years, a 13 year old girl in Somalia, a soldier in Pakistan, and a young couple in Afghanistan have all been stoned to death. On all occasions, Islamic sharia law was cited as the justification. In fact, all of the countries which maintain stoning on their legal books are governed by sharia law.

Stoning is not mentioned in the Quran and because of this many people deny that it stems from Islamic teaching. This is dishonest at best. Stoning is not in the Quran but it is in the ahadith and for that reason, is part of sharia law. When Maryam Namazie and I debated a couple of Ahmadiyya Muslims at UCL in 2011, one of our opponents Ayyaz Mahmood insisted that stoning was not a part of Islam. His desperate to believe audience soaked it up, but the next day he was online admitting he had lied. The comments he made have since been removed, but Maryam has discussed them here.

This is what he said:

'Had Maryam asked me, "Has the Holy Prophet (sa) ever ordered that a man be stoned to death?" To this, I would have had to answer yes, and then hope and pray that the moderator would give me a minute or two (which isn't really enough) to explain the whole background of those specific Ahadith… But of course, at the time, the opportunity did not afford itself to give this entire explanation. So I gave her the direct answer to her question, which was a big, "NO". Only to silence her. Because I didn't want to get into this whole issue during the debate…'

So, let's clear this up – what is the basis for stoning in Islam?

Here is the hadith:

A bedouin came to Allah's Apostle and said, "O Allah's apostle! I ask you by Allah to judge My case according to Allah's Laws." His opponent, who was more learned than he, said, "Yes, judge between us according to Allah's Laws, and allow me to speak." Allah's Apostle said, "Speak." He (i .e. the bedouin or the other man) said, "My son was working as a laborer for this (man) and he committed illegal sexual intercourse with his wife. The people told me that it was obligatory that my son should be stoned to death, so in lieu of that I ransomed my son by paying one hundred sheep and a slave girl. Then I asked the religious scholars about it, and they informed me that my son must be lashed one hundred lashes, and be exiled for one year, and the wife of this (man) must be stoned to death." Allah's Apostle said, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, I will judge between you according to Allah's Laws. The slave-girl and the sheep are to be returned to you, your son is to receive a hundred lashes and be exiled for one year. You, Unais, go to the wife of this (man) and if she confesses her guilt, stone her to death." Unais went to that woman next morning and she confessed. Allah's Apostle ordered that she be stoned to death.

Sahih Bukhari 3:50:885

As a direct result of this story (and various translations but which always end the same way), stoning is a reality in Islamic states.

Lying is not the only defence against this barbarism though, apologists must also take credit. Their arguments include:

1. There must be four witnesses so really this is just a deterrent. Is this good enough? We don't object to a society where our sex lives are governed by the threat of a horrific punishment? Sorry, I don't want the threat of stoning any more than I want stoning, and to be fair, threatening to stone someone to death for having sex could hardly be described as moderate.
2. "But it's in the Bible as well". Yes it is in the Bible, but it's not being carried out in the name of the Bible (not any more at least). So the difference is between it happening and not happening. A rather significant difference you might say.

3. "This is the extreme fringe of Islam, it is a misinterpretation" – it seems that all Islamic states have misunderstood this, but so have many of Britain's mainstream and high-profile Islamists, including it seems, the moderate Muslim Council of Britain.

Inayat Bunglawala was a high-profile member of the MCB for many years. When he was the assistant secretary general, Bunglawala was asked by journalist Joan Smith to condemn stoning for adultery. Bunglawala refused to do so, adding "you are asking me to condemn my prophet". Bunglawala is not alone in the MCB in this regard. Suhaib Hasan has also misunderstood (Hasan is a prominent figure in the Islamic Sharia Council and blames women for the violence they face). He advocates stoning and once told us that "stoning will turn Britain in to a haven of peace".

The ultra-moderate Swiss academic and lecturer at Oxford University Tariq Ramadan has debated this issue in France with Nicolas Sarkozy. The ultra-moderate Ramadan not only told us that his view is a minority one, but that this view only stretches as far as asking for a "moratorium". In the debate Ramadan denied there was any violence against women in Islam, having just seconds earlier called for a "moratorium" on stoning for adultery. This is the 1984-esque double-speak we have come to expect (see point 5 above).

Interestingly, Ramadan also called for a "politically independent" Muslim French population.

The fact is that stoning is very much a part of Islamic sharia law, and very much a reality in the lives of millions of people. Whether they face the stones, or face the threat of them, the real horror of this cannot be denied. Stoning needs to be named and shamed – there is too much at stake to run from this and bury our heads in the sand.

See also: 'The Stoning of Soraya M' is an important film and I highly recommend it. It displays the true terror of this crime in all its abominable glory. The Iranian Government called the movie "Islamophobic" which would be funny if not so deadly serious. The film is based on true events.

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Anne Marie Waters was a member of the NSS. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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