



## Event Report

### Examining the Religious Foundations for Political Violence: Embracing Tolerance

*Thursday 6 December 2018, House of Lords, London, UK*

This was the third and final meeting in a series of workshops hosted by ICSR and TRENDS Research & Advisory. The focus was on tolerance and respect for other religious belief systems in society. Recent events regarding claims of blasphemy highlight the problematic nature of blasphemy and its contribution to political violence when it is used as a symbol of intolerance. Laws on blasphemy are designed to ensure belief systems are protected by prohibiting the insulting or profaning of a religious belief. Such intentions may be framed as promoting mutual respect and tolerance among different groups of believers. In practice blasphemy laws are demonstrating how religion becomes politicised fostering intolerance and leading to violence in society.

It was agreed that blasphemy is an important subject to discuss in order to differentiate the boundaries of legitimately questioning aspects of a religious belief system and assaulting the entire foundations of a religion. The matter is complex as violent responses to suspected blasphemy occur both through the state structures and within societies. Various events were discussed where the accusation of blasphemy has been used by the state in pursuit of political objective. More of a concern, are instances where the issue of blasphemy has been used by groups in a society to further violence in society. In the latter situation, it appears that the accusation of blasphemy leads individuals to the belief that violent responses are justified. The situation escalates when groups in society pursue an agenda saying the state has not taken appropriate action to address the perceived attack on religion.

It was discussed whether governments can exacerbate religious problems by getting involved in blasphemy cases and making efforts of protecting particular groups. Laws in this area only address the accusation and adverse impacts of alleged behaviour. Suggestions were made on putting more attention on the building of good relationships between belief systems based on tolerance.

Religion is becoming a very prominent identity marker around the world. At the same time, societies are becoming more diverse and information and messaging about religion is extremely easy with modern technology. It is agreed that discussions surrounding religion are very binary and nuance is often absent. This is due to the increase in the anxiety and fear that is surrounding religion in multiple ways when the matter is politicised. This makes it



important to consider how conversations on religions are conducted to ensure adequate recognition and respect of other belief systems.

It was noted that extreme behaviour comes from extreme feeling, not extreme thinking, and that there is a naivete around secular people believing they know the “absolute truth”. One participant observed that they noticed a power balance issue when discussing religion with very religious people. They felt more attacked when they thought the participant was secular, and warmed up to a discussion when they revealed they themselves were a believer in Christianity. Several other participants agreed that sympathy to faith is seen as very important in a world where many people do not understand the role religion has in global affairs. They also often see secularism as a mere way to put down all religions, and secular extremism is seen as an existential threat.

Going forward, it was recommended that tolerance in discussing religion can be furthered in the following ways:

- Blasphemy laws should not be used by government or civil society to centralise religious identity giving rise to tensions between groups.
- Discussions about religion, either by government or the public, need to be conducted in a spirit of tolerance and not suspicion.
- Legitimate critiques or criticism of religion should not be viewed as an attack.
- Further debate and discussion about religion should be welcomed and fostered in societies through the state and community, in various settings.
- Education about one’s religion and the religion of others is essential in furthering tolerance and understanding.