

Today's Martyrs – Aasiya Noreen aka Asia Bibi

Aasiya Noreen, better known to the world as Asia Bibi, faced death for almost 10 years. She had been convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death by hanging, the only woman in Pakistan so punished. She had been the object of death threats by vigilantes. Her story is not just one of great injustice to an individual, but has grown into a saga of political mayhem and assassination.



This story began on Sunday June 14, 2009 in the village of Ittan Wali. Asia was a 44 year old mother of five children who had hired herself out as a field hand. In her great thirst under the hot sun she drank from a well, only to be confronted by the other women who declared that as a Christian she had polluted it. When she replied “Jesus would see it differently” she was told “Jesus was unclean too...you should convert to redeem yourself for your filthy religion”. Asia then said the words that sealed her fate:

“I’m not going to convert. I believe in my religion and in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of mankind. What did your Prophet Muhammad ever do to save mankind? And why should it be me that converts instead of you?”

The women attacked her and told her that she would die. Between blows Asia replied “I didn’t say anything bad, I just asked you a question”. In the end her pickings were stolen and she had to run home.

Five days later it was Friday, and Asia was back picking berries. An angry crowd poured into the field, grabbed Asia and began to beat her. She was dragged into town and told by the imam who had delivered the sermon that had incited the crowd that she must convert or die. Asia refused and was beaten until the police arrived and arrested her. Her family had to flee the village. Denied legal representation, she was tricked into signing a confession she could not read, and on November 8, 2009 was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

Asia was not the only prisoner on her ward who had run afoul of the blasphemy laws. A young Muslim woman named Zarmina had also been imprisoned under that charge. As a newlywed she often rode behind her husband on his motor scooter until one day he lost control and had an accident. He ran off the road and collided with a monument to Muhammed. They were both arrested and convicted of blasphemy. It did not matter that it was an accident or that she was not at the controls – intent is immaterial in Islamic law. One night Zarmina began screaming in her cell. Asia called for help and banged her bowl and spoon to get attention, but prison staff did not come nor did any other prisoner join her calls. Zarmina’s lifeless body was removed the next day, the apparent victim of poison. The other inmates denied hearing any screams, gave each other knowing looks as if they approved of the outcome, and chuckled at Asia’s ignorance. Asia asked herself “Have people gone mad?”

Help came to Asia from unexpected sources. The day after her conviction she was taken from her cell and brought to meet the Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti. She had known of the government appointment of this fellow Roman Catholic, but could not believe that he was interested in her or that he promised to financially support her family until a new refuge could be found for them. A few months later she was brought into a press conference with the Muslim governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, who kindly but firmly defended her against the blasphemy laws. A public case in her favor was being assembled as her appeal began to wind through the courts.

Then came disaster. Governor Taseer was shot dead by one of his bodyguards on January 4, 2011 as he left a luncheon. The guard immediately surrendered and claimed he was just defending the blasphemy laws; several imams came to the killer's defense. Minister Bhatti again requested the assignment of bodyguards but was denied by the government. On March 2, 2011 Shahbaz Bhatti was shot dead as he drove away from his mother's home; the terror group Tehrik-i-Taliban claimed it had killed a 'known blasphemer'.

All of these events have been collected in a book entitled *Blasphemy: A Memoir: Sentenced to Death over a Cup of Water*. Proceeds from the sale of this book supported Asia's family while in hiding.

While in prison Asia made her own meals since prison authorities could not guarantee that she would not be poisoned. For her protection a television camera recorded every event in her cell, which explained why the occasional beatings she received from guards have happened in corridors. On May 11, 2014 authorities arrested five men linked to Tehrik-i-Taliban who were in possession of multiple weapons, explosives, maps, and plans of Asia's prison, including her cell. Prison authorities continued to pressure her to accept Islam, going so far as to using a Quran to teach her literacy.

Postscript: The Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned her conviction on October 31, 2018 on the grounds she had been denied due process, and ordered her release. The decision set off massive violence in the country, but few were killed, mostly Muslims deemed to not be radical enough. Asia Bibi was finally released to a secure location by November 15, and was allowed to leave Pakistan for Canada by May 8, 2019. The prayers of many around the world have been answered!

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