

Is the death penalty for apostasy in the Qur'an? Yes it is, sweet little Rifqa

Posted by Robert on August 30, 2009 5:02 PM

Salam al-Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a thoroughly unpleasant character with whom I have appeared on many radio shows (on which he invariably likens me to Osama bin Laden, although I have never flown any planes into buildings, beheaded anyone, or exhorted anyone to do so), attacks Rifqa Bary, the seventeen-year-old girl who converted from Islam to Christianity and fled from her home and father after he threatened to kill her (as she explains [1] [here](#)), and her supporters in a contemptuous, dishonest, condescending and arrogant piece at the [2] [Huffington Post](#), "Rifqa, the Reverend [sic] and Apostasy" (August 18).

[3] [Hugh Fitzgerald](#) and [4] [Andy Bostom](#) have already weighed in on this utterly contemptible article, but I have a few things to add.

Al-Marayati is intent on impugning [5] [Rifqa's own testimony](#) in favor of her father's protestations that he does not intend to kill her -- and indeed, it is her word against his, and the only price we will have to pay if al-Marayati turns out to be wrong is a murdered teenage girl. To support his case, al-Marayati makes essentially two points, both encapsulated in this sentence: "Mohamed Bary allowed his daughter to become a cheerleader and says she can practice any faith she wants -- clearly, he is not a fundamentalist."

His first point is thus that Mohamed Bary, by allowing his daughter to prance around in skimpy cheerleader costumes, clearly was not the sort to insist on the finer points of Islamic law like the death penalty for apostasy (which al-Marayati implies does not exist anyway, so it's hard to see why it would be a feature of "fundamentalism" in the first place). However, honor killing victims in the West have invariably been girls who have been Westernized, adopting Western non-Muslim mores to the growing dismay of their male relatives. Al-Marayati's point is that if Mohamed Bary were a "fundamentalist," he *would not have allowed* Rifqa to become Westernized in the first place. Real life, however, is not always that simple. Honor killing victims like Amina and Sarah Said in Texas and Aqsa Parvez in Canada appear to be quite Westernized for a considerable period before their relationships with their fathers reached a tipping point, and they were murdered. [Rifqa Bary fled before that could happen](#), but the fact that she was a hijab-less cheerleader indicates nothing. Pamela Geller [6] [explains further](#) in responding to the same claim from Mike Thomas of the Orlando Sentinel:

Victims are generally beautiful, Westernized, and dressed in a manner that perhaps Thomas would term "provocative." Muslim girls who live in the West lead two lives. Amina and Sarah Said, allegedly murdered by their father in Texas on New Year's Day 2008 for having non-Muslim boyfriends, were honor students, star athletes, soccer players, tennis players, etc. Rifqa was the same way in Ohio before she fled. These girls led double lives. The murder always happens when the family sees they have lost control of the child.

Al-Marayati's second point is that, contrary to Rifqa's own claim, the Qur'an says nothing about killing apostates:

She claims that her parents "love God more than me" and therefore have to perform an honor killing on her. She argues "it's in the Quran". No it's not, sweet little Rifqa. It's not in the Quran. Whoever told you that is either ignorant or a liar. You should look it up yourself before claiming it's in the Quran.

Rev. Lorenz is then quoted in a local television station report saying that if a Muslim leaves his religion and does not return to Islam in a couple of days, then he must be killed. He claims that someone showed him the verse. There is no such verse, Rev. Lorenz. In every faith, apostasy is shunned but ultimate judgment is left to God, not people.

Two things are being confused here: honor killing and the death penalty for apostasy. Honor killing is not discussed directly in the Qur'an, although it is given strong implicit support by 18:74, 80-81, when the mysterious figure known in Islamic tradition as Khidr, traveling with the prophet Moses, kills a young man Moses terms "innocent" (18:74). Khidr explains: "And as for the lad, his parents were believers and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief. So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection." The young man is murdered because he is an unbeliever, so that his parents may be given a believing child in exchange. (Why the unbelieving son has to be killed before the believing son can be given to them is not explained.) Thus the precedent is set: a child who is an unbeliever is killed for his unbelief.

The death penalty for apostasy is found more directly in the Qur'an -- Islamic authorities generally root it in two Qur'anic verses, 2:217 and 4:89, as Hugh has noted. Here is 2:217:

They ask thee concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month. Say: "Fighting therein is a grave (offence); but graver is it in the sight of Allah to prevent access to the path of Allah, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members."

Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith if they can. And if any of you turn back from their faith and die in unbelief, their works will bear no fruit in this life and in the Hereafter; they will be companions of the Fire and will abide therein.

What does it mean that the works of those who "turn back from their faith and die in unbelief" will "bear no fruit in this life" as well as in the next? Let's go for an answer to the *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, a classic and thoroughly mainstream exegesis of the Qur'an. **About 2:217, Qurtubi says this:**

Scholars disagree about whether or not apostates are asked to repent. One group say that they are asked to repent and, if they do not, they are killed. Some say they are given an hour and others a month. Others say that they are asked to repent three times, and that is the view of Malik. Al-Hasan said they are asked a hundred times. It is also said that they are killed without being asked to repent.

Did you notice one option that Qurtubi never mentions? That's right: he never says anything like "some say the apostate should not be killed." The only point of contention seems to be how long the Muslim must wait before he kills the apostate.

Meanwhile, 4:89 says this:

They but wish that ye should **reject Faith**, as they do, and thus be on the same footing (as they). But take not friends from their ranks until they flee in the way of Allah (from what is forbidden). **But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them;** and (in any case) take no friends or helpers from their ranks.

Thus those who have fled from what is forbidden, i.e., embraced Islam, should be killed if they "turn renegades." The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, another venerable and respected commentary on the Qur'an, explains that a Muslim should not trust these people "until they emigrate in the way of God, a proper emigration that would confirm their belief" -- that is, if they leave their homes to join up with the Muslims. "Then, if they turn away, and remain upon their ways, take them, as captives, and slay them wherever you find them." Here again, no attempt is made, in this Qur'an commentary or any of those that Muslims revere as trustworthy, to explain that this does *not* actually mean that one should kill the "renegade."

And of course al-Marayati focuses narrowly on Rifqa's statement about the Qur'an. He never mentions, although he surely must know, that [7] [Muhammad said "Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him,"](#) and that this statement in the Hadith (in which it appears several times) became the foundation for the unanimous verdict of all the schools of Islamic jurisprudence: **the apostate must be killed.**

That he does not mention this key point is just one indication that as a witness to Islamic teaching on this (and other) matters, Salam al-Marayati is not to be trusted.

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[6] http://www.newsmax.com/pamela_geller/rifqa_barry_orlando_ohio/2009/08/24/251576.html
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