

Apostasy in Islam

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“if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them”(Qur’an 4:89)

Narrated Ikrima:

Ali burnt some people [hypocrites] and this news reached Ibn ‘Abbas, who said, “Had I been in his place I would not have burnt them, as the Prophet said, ‘Don’t punish (anybody) with Allah’s Punishment.’ No doubt, I would have killed them, for the Prophet said, ‘If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him.’ “(Bukhari 4.260)

Introduction

In this article I discuss Apostasy in Islam. There are two main parts in this study; one deals with some Hadith references on apostasy, and one deals with Qur’anic references on apostasy. It is important here to mention that Hadith is an integral part of Islam. Many of the Islamic creeds and practices cannot be understood without Hadiths. Main line Muslims accept the Hadith as authoritative. It is only in the last twenty years or so that we saw movement away from relying on the Hadith by very few Muslim scholars who consider themselves enlightened. My own view is that there is no Islam without Hadith. In fact, if you take the Qur’an (only) to some remote Island and ask its inhabitants to practice Islam, they will not be able to. Many of the Qur’anic teachings themselves present themselves as to “How” and “When” in the Hadith. This is a topic of study on its own. I just thought about mentioning it since I’ll be relying on the Hadith and the Qur’an to achieve some valid deductions as to what does Islam teach regarding treatment of apostates.

Part 1: The Hadith references

This article discusses seven hadiths in Sahih Al-Bukhari about apostasy in Islam. I start by pointing out Islam’s decision regarding apostasy, then I introduce certain implications in the quoted hadiths. A discussion with a substantive conclusion follows that. I end part I of this article with the actual hadiths quoted.

Islam’s Decision Regarding Apostates

Apostates are to be put to death according to the Islamic Hadiths. The first quoted Hadith below shows that Muhammad ordered the killing of anyone who changes his/her Islamic religion.

Other issues that seem to be implicated

1. The first hadith below seems to imply that hell or God’s punishment in the end of time had a physical existence. Fire and burning are viewed in the physical sense.
2. Early Muslims had no tolerance to anyone who became a Muslim then changed his mind and believed differently. The second Hadith below clarifies this point. (As a side but useful point here, note that Muhammad is using a “Siwak” to brush his teeth. So, I say to you westerners why waste your money on dental floss, toothpicks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, even dentists. Forget about all of that and just get yourself a good quality Siwak [or any other tree stick of your choice!].

This is Sunnah folks.

3. The third Hadith shows that Muslims will go to war to fight a group of apostates. There is also some economic benefits to Muslims out of such a war.
4. The fourth Hadith shows that those who leave their religion (Islam) are to be killed. Not only that, but the killers will also be rewarded on resurrection day.
5. The fifth Hadith is a validation that early Muslims had no problem chopping off heads of apostates.
6. The sixth Hadith below shows Muhammad telling his followers that there are three groups of people who should be killed: murderers, adulterers, and apostates. Do not worry about our current moral values that are tolerant and allows people to change their beliefs and religions. Under the banner of Islam, you do not have to worry about all that tolerance Jargon. Everyone gets killed but the Muslims. See, the tolerance problem becomes nonexistent. Also, if you plan to become an apostate, go ahead and kill the people you don't like, and commit adultery. Islam has one punishment fits all policy on this matter. I think it was the clear air of Arabia that prompted Muhammad to equate Apostasy with murder and adultery.
7. I added the last Hadith; number 7, to show how the punishment is to be done to people who commit a combination of apostasy, murder and theft. The way the prophet Muhammad reacted to such crimes is Sunnah to be followed by all Muslims! It was not enough for Muhammad to kill them. He had to do it in a brutal, slow and painful way.

Discussion of the Hadith Evidence

Humans believing anything is a continuous and dynamic process. It is ever changing. I may believe that the God of Islam (or any other religion for that matter) exists at one point in my life. Later on I may encounter new evidence or questions and become agnostic. Later on I may encounter new experiences and change some of my beliefs again. The fact of the matter is this: humans are liable to change some or many of their beliefs during certain intervals of their lifetime. This change is, in a sense, similar to what Carl Popper calls a paradigm shift. Such a process of belief change is inconsistent with the Islamic beliefs about apostasy. Islam; TRUE Islam that is, does not allow any individual in the Muslim community to change their beliefs by rejecting Islam and/or believing something else, say Buddhism or Christianity. Because of this intolerance that exists in Islam, one has to reject the basic Islamic beliefs about apostates, or better yet, reject all of the Islamic creeds altogether.

Part I Hadith Quotations

All quotations are from **Sahih Al-Bukhari**

1. Volume 9, Book 84, Number 57:

Narrated 'Ikrima:

Some Zanadiqa (atheists) were brought to 'Ali and he burnt them. The news of this event, reached Ibn 'Abbas who said, "If I had been in his place, I would not have burnt them, as Allah's Apostle forbade it, saying, 'Do not punish anybody with Allah's punishment (fire).' I would have killed them according to the statement of Allah's Apostle, 'Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him.'"

2. Volume 9, Book 84, Number 58:

Narrated Abu Burda:

Abu Musa said, "I came to the Prophet along with two men (from the tribe) of Ash'ariyin, one on my right and the other on my left, while Allah's Apostle was brushing his teeth (with a Siwak), and both men asked him for some employment. The Prophet said, 'O Abu Musa (O 'Abdullah bin Qais!).' I said, 'By Him Who sent you with the Truth, these two men did not tell me what was in their hearts and I did not feel (realize) that they were seeking employment.' As if I were looking now at his Siwak being drawn to a corner under his lips, and he said, 'We never (or, we do not) appoint for our affairs anyone who seeks to be employed. But O Abu Musa! (or 'Abdullah bin Qais!) Go to Yemen.'" The Prophet then sent Mu'adh bin Jabal after him and when Mu'adh reached him, he spread out a cushion for him and requested him to get down (and sit on the cushion). Behold: There was a fettered man beside Abu Muisa. Mu'adh asked, "Who is this (man)?" Abu Muisa said, "He was a Jew and became a Muslim and then reverted back to Judaism." Then Abu Muisa requested Mu'adh to sit down but Mu'adh said, "I will not sit down till he has been killed. This is the judgment of Allah and His Apostle (for such cases) and repeated it thrice. Then Abu

Musa ordered that the man be killed, and he was killed. Abu Musa added, "Then we discussed the night prayers and one of us said, 'I pray and sleep, and I hope that Allah will reward me for my sleep as well as for my prayers.'"

3. Volume 9, Book 84, Number 59:

Narrated Abu Huraira:

When the Prophet died and Abu Bakr became his successor and some of the Arabs reverted to disbelief, 'Umar said, "O Abu Bakr! How can you fight these people although Allah's Apostle said, 'I have been ordered to fight the people till they say: 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, 'and whoever said, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah', Allah will save his property and his life from me, unless (he does something for which he receives legal punishment) justly, and his account will be with Allah?'" "Abu Bakr said, "By Allah! I will fight whoever differentiates between prayers and Zakat as Zakat is the right to be taken from property (according to Allah's Orders). By Allah! If they refused to pay me even a kid they used to pay to Allah's Apostle, I would fight with them for withholding it." 'Umar said, "By Allah: It was nothing, but I noticed that Allah opened Abu Bakr's chest towards the decision to fight, therefore I realized that his decision was right."

4. Volume 9, Book 84, Number 64:

Narrated 'Ali:

Whenever I tell you a narration from Allah's Apostle, by Allah, I would rather fall down from the sky than ascribe a false statement to him, but if I tell you something between me and you (not a Hadith) then it was indeed a trick (i.e., I may say things just to cheat my enemy). No doubt I heard Allah's Apostle saying, "During the last days there will appear some young foolish people who will say the best words but their faith will not go beyond their throats (i.e. they will have no faith) and will go out from (leave) their religion as an arrow goes out of the game. So, where-ever you find them, kill them, for who-ever kills them shall have reward on the Day of Resurrection."

5. Volume 5, Book 59, Number 632:

Narrated Abu Burda:

That the Prophet sent his (i.e. Abu Burda's) grandfather, Abu Musa and Mu'adh to Yemen and said to both of them "Facilitate things for the people (Be kind and lenient) and do not make things difficult (for people), and give them good tidings, and do not repulse them and both of you should obey each other." Abu Musa said, "O Allah's Prophet! In our land there is an alcoholic drink (prepared) from barley called Al-Mizr, and another (prepared) from honey, called Al-Bit" The Prophet said, "All intoxicants are prohibited." Then both of them proceeded and Mu'adh asked Abu Musa, "How do you recite the Quran?" Abu Musa replied, "I recite it while I am standing, sitting or riding my riding animals, at intervals and piecemeal." Muadh said, "But I sleep and then get up. I sleep and hope for Allah's Reward for my sleep as I seek His Reward for my night prayer." Then he (i.e. Muadh) pitched a tent and they started visiting each other. Once Muadh paid a visit to Abu Musa and saw a chained man. Muadh asked, "What is this?" Abu Musa said, "(He was) a Jew who embraced Islam and has now turned apostate." Muadh said, "I will surely chop off his neck!"

6. Volume 9, Book 83, Number 17:

Narrated 'Abdullah:

Allah's Apostle said, "The blood of a Muslim who confesses that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that I am His Apostle, cannot be shed except in three cases: In Qisas for murder, a married person who commits illegal sexual intercourse and the one who reverts from Islam (apostate) and leaves the Muslims."

7. Volume 9, Book 83, Number 37:

Narrated Abu Qilaba:

Once 'Umar bin 'Abdul 'Aziz sat on his throne in the courtyard of his house so that the people might gather before him. Then he admitted them and (when they came in), he said, "What do you think of Al-Qasama?" They said, "We say that it is lawful to depend on Al-Qasama in Qisas, as the previous Muslim Caliphs carried out Qisas depending on it." Then he said to me, "O Abu Qilaba! What do you say about it?" He let me appear before the people and I said, "O Chief of the Believers! You have the chiefs of the army staff and the nobles of the Arabs. If fifty of them testified that a married man had committed illegal sexual intercourse in Damascus but they had not seen him (doing so), would you stone him?" He said, "No." I said, "If fifty of them testified that a man had committed theft in Hums, would you cut off his hand though they did not see him?" He replied, "No." I said, "By Allah, Allah's Apostle never killed anyone except in one of the following three situations: (1) A person who killed somebody unjustly, was killed (in Qisas,) (2) a married person who committed illegal sexual intercourse and (3) a man who fought against Allah and His Apostle and deserted Islam and became an apostate." Then the people said, "Didn't Anas bin Malik narrate that Allah's Apostle cut off the hands of the thieves, branded their eyes and then, threw them in the sun?" I said, "I shall tell you the narration of Anas. Anas said: "Eight persons from the tribe of 'Ukl came to Allah's Apostle and gave the Pledge of allegiance for Islam (became Muslim). The

climate of the place (Medina) did not suit them, so they became sick and complained about that to Allah's Apostle. He said (to them), "Won't you go out with the shepherd of our camels and drink of the camels' milk and urine (as medicine)?" They said, "Yes." So they went out and drank the camels' milk and urine, and after they became healthy, they killed the shepherd of Allah's Apostle and took away all the camels. This news reached Allah's Apostle, so he sent (men) to follow their traces and they were captured and brought (to the Prophet). He then ordered to cut their hands and feet, and their eyes were branded with heated pieces of iron, and then he threw them in the sun till they died." I said, "What can be worse than what those people did? They deserted Islam, committed murder and theft."

Part II: Apostasy - The Quranic Evidence

In part I of this study we saw that the Hadith evidence prescribes the death penalty for apostates. What about the Qur'an? Some Muslim readers may point to the fact that Hadith evidence is not as good as the Qur'anic evidence. Well, let us see if the Qur'an differs in this regard. Once done with this task, I will introduce a story to the reader that shows Islam in action with regard to Apostasy. This story happened in the great Islamic Umma of Sudan; the same great Muslim nation that wanted to kill a decent human being who took an honorable profession of teaching in a poverty stricken country just because she allowed her students to name a teddy bear "Muhammad".

Some Muslims claim that the Qur'an does not have any verse "which prescribes an earthly punishment for apostasy". Some even quote some of the earlier Qur'anic verses. One such verse is: "... There is no compulsion in religion. ...".

It is important to know that the earlier dated verses of the Qur'an, before the Hijra, had a softer tone to them than later Qur'anic verses. The reason is simple: In Mecca, Muhammad had a small number of followers. He and his followers could not protect themselves if his Qur'anic tone was too harsh. Later on, all such nice verses were abrogated by harsher ones. After the Hijra, and especially after his gruesome act of Bani Qurayza's genocide, Muhammad's fortunes changed. He had the economic resources and the strength to have "harsher" Qur'anic revelations.

Now, Let us look at some of the Qur'anic apostasy jewels that were revealed to Muhammad when he was strong enough:

002.217

YUSUFALI: 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.

Al-Shafi'i, the founder of one of the four Sunni Islam schools of law, interprets the above verse to mean that an apostate is to get the death penalty. [Source: Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*, pages 34-5.]. And as a bonus here, it is worth mentioning that Al-Razi and Al-Tha'alibi reach a similar conclusion and state that the apostate should be killed.

Below is even a clearer Qur'anic jewel regarding the fate of apostates (I am quoting all three reliable translations of the Qur'an to insure clarity of the meaning of the verse:

004.089

YUSUFALI: 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;-
PICKTHAL: They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever

ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them,

SHAKIR: They desire that you should disbelieve as they have disbelieved, so that you might be (all) alike; therefore take not from among them friends until they fly (their homes) in Allah's way; but if they turn back, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them, and take not from among them a friend or a helper.

And there it is folks: if you become an apostate, a true Muslim is not allowed to be a friend to you anymore. Rather, Muslims should kill those apostate Kafirs. It is worth mentioning here that Baydawi, in his commentary on the Qur'an, interprets the above verse to mean that the apostate should be killed openly or secretly, and no intercession will be accepted in this case. [Source: Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam*, pages 33-4.]

Abu Al'Ala' Al-mawdudi, the influential Islamic thinker of the twentieth century (considered by many the spiritual leader of the Muslim brothers movement) clearly interprets the Qur'an commanding the death penalty for apostates. He uses the following Qur'anic gems to drive his point home:

009.011

YUSUFALI: But (even so), if they repent, establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, - they are your brethren in Faith: (thus) do We explain the Signs in detail, for those who understand.

009.012

YUSUFALI: But if they violate their oaths after their covenant, and taunt you for your Faith, - fight ye the chiefs of Unfaith: for their oaths are nothing to them: that thus they may be restrained

Al-Mawdudi takes into consideration the occasion of the revelation in interpreting those two verses. His "*The punishment of the Apostate according to Islamic Law*" is available on line at www.answering-islam.org.

Well, it is evident that the claim that "There is no single verse in the Qur'an which prescribes an earthly punishment for apostasy", as one reader of a previously published article of mine claimed, is baseless. As you have seen above, there are more than just a "single verse" in the Qur'an that prescribe murdering an innocent human being who just wanted to practice her/his basic right of freedom and ability to change some of her/his beliefs.

An Apostasy Story – Food for Thought

I would like to end this article with a story that ought to make any true Muslim ashamed of the Islamic beliefs about apostasy: The late Sudanese theologian Mahmud Muhammad Taha tried to reform Islam by attempting to minimize the role of the Qur'an as a source of law in Sudan. He wanted to devise new laws to better accommodate the Sudanese people of the twentieth century. Needless to say that the religious authorities in Khartoum did not take kindly to his attempts. He was declared an apostate in 1968. Under Islamic law, his punishment was the death penalty. His writings were burned and he managed to escape execution for seventeen years. When he was seventy six years old, he was tried again and was hanged publicly in Khartoum in January of 1985. [Source: Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1990), pages 75-6]

Conclusion

The grim reality for a modern Muslim regarding apostasy is that its death penalty is rooted in the Qur'an and in the Hadith. I have shown that this is the case in this article. Such a punishment for a behavior that is not a crime at all, but a right that any human being of our time should enjoy, cannot be a morally justified punishment. One should be

able to change religious beliefs if one wants to without the threat of being killed.
