

Apostasy in Islam

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Qur'an (4:89) – *“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.”*

In other words, if they leave Islam, find them, and kill them.

In *The Penalties for Apostasy and Islam*, a book written by a devout Muslim, the author explains the various penalties for apostasy (leaving Islam) from all four major schools of the Shari'a[1].

“All four imams (the founders of the four schools of Islamic law) — may Allah have mercy upon them — agree that the apostate who falls from Islam is beyond doubt — may Allah forbid it — must be killed, and his blood must be spilled without reservation. The hypocrite and heretic (zindiq) who poses as a Muslim but has secretly remained an unbeliever must also be killed.”

According to Islamic Shari'a law and all four Sunni Madhabs, anyone who leaves Islam should be executed. Furthermore, his marriage should be annulled and his children and property confiscated. The reason why executing apostates has always been an unquestionable part of Islamic law is that there is an indisputable record of Muhammad and his companions doing exactly that.

Mohamed personally ordered the execution of a man who had once followed him, but then apostatized. He died by multiple sword slashes while he was clutching the curtain of the sacred mosque in Mecca.[2] All Muslims are strictly commanded to follow Mohamed's example in their actions; hence, this tradition has continued to this day.

Bukhari (52:260) – *“...The Prophet said, 'If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him.'”*

Bukhari (83:37) – *“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.”*

Bukhari (84:57) – *“[In the words of Allah's Apostle, 'Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him.'”*

Bukhari (89:271) – *A man who embraces Islam, then reverts to Judaism is to be killed according to the verdict of Allah and his apostle.”*

Bukhari (84:64-65) – *“Allah's Apostle: 'During the last days there will appear some young foolish people who will go out from (leave) their religion as an arrow goes out of the game. So, wherever you find them, kill them, for whoever kills them shall have reward on the Day of Resurrection.'”*

Reliance of the Traveller (Islamic Law) 08.1 – *“When a person who has reached puberty and is sane, voluntarily apostatizes from Islam, he deserves to be killed.”*

Apostasy after Mohamed's Death

The Ridda wars (also known as the Wars of Apostasy) [3] were a set of military campaigns against the apostasy and rebellion of many of the tribes who had become Muslim during Mohammed's lifetime. The Caliph Abu Bakr was the main general and they took place during 632 and 633 AD, following the death of Mohamed. It seems that right after the Prophet's death, although Muslims want to project that the Arabian Peninsula was a united front after Mohamed's conquest, trouble and rebellion started brewing. A huge portion of the Islamic empire wanted out.

The Muslims couldn't accept religious plurality in any form, and acted quickly. As we can see, this covered a huge territory and the forces of their strongest military might were deployed:

- Khalid ibn al-Walid deployed to al-Yamama (eastern Nejd) against Musaylima, Malik ibn Nuwayra, and Sajf Al-Tamimiyah
- 'Al' Ala' bin Al-Hadrami deployed to Bahrain
- Ikr mah ibn Abu Jahi central Arabia with Khalid ibn al-Walid then onto Mahra to reinforce Arfaja
- Hudafah bin Mshaan Al-Ghaffani a Himyari to Oman deployed against the Yemeni Himyarites then to reinforce Arfaja
- Arfaja al-Bariqi an Azdi to South east Arabia Mahra then Yemen Hadramawt
- al-Muhajir ibi Umayya in Yemen

These groups were violently subdued and forcibly brought back into the fold of Islam. It seems that the word of Islam was ever ready to behead those who thought otherwise.

Apologist Responses

Although it has been perfectly acceptable under Islamic law to kill Muslims who choose to embrace another religion, contemporary Muslims have realized that this causes Islam to appear barbarian and outdated. There is a tendency to deny fourteen centuries of Islamic teaching and even the very words of Mohamed himself — especially for Western ears.

Muslims often quote verse 2:256 which states “Let there be no compulsion in religion, for truth stands out from error.” But all Muslim scholars agree that both verses were spoken by Mohamed during an earlier time in his teachings, when he did not have the power to compel others, in Mecca, at a time when there were less than 100 followers. They are abrogated by later verses. The concept of “abrogation” in the Quran is that Allah chose to reveal that supercede earlier ayat in the same Quran. The central ayah that deals with abrogation is Surah 2:106:

None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?

An example of a verse which would supersede 2:256 would be 9:29, as the 9th book of the Quran (Tawbah or Repentance) was the last book revealed in Islam. It says: *Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of truth, [even if they are] of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah (poll tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. This verse clearly commands Muslims to fight unbelievers until they either accept Islam or accept a state of humiliation under Islamic rule i.e. dhimmitude, or second class status of non-Muslims (an obvious illustration of compulsion)*[4] (discussed in greater length in chapter 10.)

These apologists also ignore the fact that apostasy is, not just “unbelief,” but unbelief that follows belief in something else, possibly an elevated spirituality, which neither of these verses addresses. It seems that the assumption is that anyone who would leave Islam would immediately turn into an immoral criminal so he or she must be killed. This of course, is a ridiculous assumption.

Some Muslims claim that apostasy laws were justified in earlier times because in essence, apostates were war deserters. It begs the question, why were the Muslims during Mohammed's time constantly at war (during the last 10 years of his life he commanded 65 battles in total)? If the environment was so hostile, why didn't they just move to safer terrain to focus on spiritual issues and practices? Islam is not just a religion by any stretch of the imagination, but also a political and military ideology. Nonetheless, Mohamed's words and deeds do not state that apostate soldiers are the only ones to be killed, but rather anyone who leaves Islam. Just reread the above Hadith and Koranic verses if you question this.

Other Muslims claim that death for apostasy is necessary because some nefarious individuals would prey on the weak and uneducated; convincing them that God's true religion is false. It is true, ignorant people can be manipulated to believe many things. However, if Islam is actually the true religion of the God, wouldn't it stand up merely on logic? Would it need a death threat to keep its followers in the fold?

Compare this to the belief that the Periodic Table of Elements in Chemistry is legitimate. Do people have to be threatened with death to believe in its accuracy? Are scientists issuing fatwas to non-believers? I'm not sure, but there could be doubters; there could be people who say “These are not the accurate elements according to science.” Actually, a new element was recently discovered[5]. Appropriate scientific procedures, tests and protocol were taken, and the element was accepted as legitimate. If someone doesn't believe that this is accurate, they are more than welcome to submit a paper to refute the finding. Truth usually survives. No one has to be threatened with death. This is why we have courts, judges, and experts; however, Muslims claim that Mohammed's example is for all time and that at no time can it be questioned. So how can it be verified?

Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind); If ye love Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (3:31)

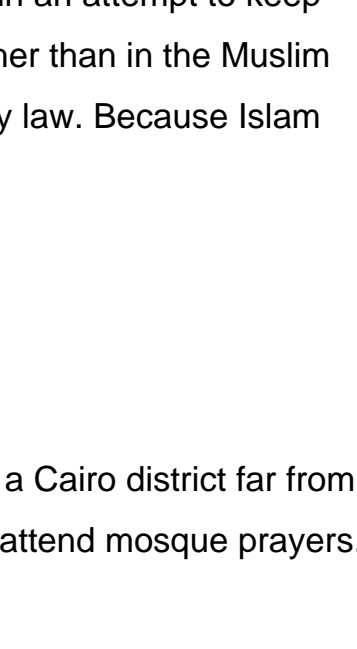
As we see by the above verse, questioning the morality of Mohamed's actions is a sin. Actually, questioning anything in the Qur'an is punishable by law in all Muslim countries.

Islamic doctrine is thus challenged to meet modern methods of truth seeking and since the example of Mohammed has to be followed forever, I am not quite sure how this could be done.

At no point in time, prior neither to my conversion nor after, had I ever been informed about apostasy rules and it's consequences in Islam. It was only after seeing events in the news that I began to research this. I think informing prospective Muslims that one could be killed if he or she decided to leave Islam should be the obligation of every Imam in the world. Not informing the prospective convert to know this important piece of information is a grave moral transgression. Even if a convert is residing in a country in which leaving Islam would not pose a threat by any governmental entity, the fact that apostasy is punishable by death, makes that person vulnerable to groups who are willing to go above and beyond the law, even in countries in which Islam is not the dominant religion, nor is the changing of one's religion punishable by law.[6] The threat is far greater in Islamic countries, where scores of people have actually been killed and continue to be threatened. [7] Thousands of cases can be cited all over the world today.

Here is a very illustrative case in point. Kareem has gained so much media attention that the Egyptian government has clearly concluded that it would not be in their best interest, from a PR point of view, to kill Kareem. Nonetheless, he has been jailed and repeatedly tortured.

Abdul Kareem Nabeel Suleiman – <http://www.freekareem.org>



Currently, one of the most famous cases in Egypt today is the case of Abdul Kareem Nabeel Suleiman, better known by his Internet pseudonym Kareem Amer. He is a 24-year-old native of Alexandria, Egypt. He grew up in a very religious family and attended the Al-Azhar religious school system his entire life. He began to rebel against the religious extremism he perceived in his school and began to express his opinions on a blog entitled “Modern Discussion.” When the Al-Azhar administration discovered his blog in late 2005, he was expelled from the school and his case was referred to state prosecutors. On February 22, 2007, Kareem was sentenced to four years in prison: three years for ‘contempt of religion’, and one year for ‘defaming the President of Egypt’.[8]

Some fundamentalists like Egyptian [Sheikh Yusuf] Al-Qaradawi, who speaks on al-Jazeera, claim that killing an apostate is right so long as there is a single hadith that orders it.[9] Clearly, there are plenty.

In attempting to justify these claims, many Egyptians point to the fact that Christians attempting to become Muslims also face at times harsh beatings, torture and death threats at the hands of their families. This may be true. There are crazy people who do crazy things in every walk of life. However, the big difference is that this is not advocated by their religion and as a result, there are far fewer cases. Something that should be noted is that I don't believe there has been a single case of murder or torture due to a Christian leaving his faith in a non-Muslim country in the last at least 50 to 100 years. The laws in Muslim countries are so extreme that it seems they bring out the worst in even people of other faiths in an attempt to keep their relatives in the fold. Furthermore, there is no police authority in any nation, other than in the Muslim world, in which it is considered illegal to change one's religion nor is it punishable by law. Because Islam sanctifies this treatment, torture of apostates goes on all over the Muslim world.

Another example illustrates the result of Shariah law:

In an incident in April documented by Compass, a Christian convert couple living in a Cairo district far from their relatives were targeted after aggressive Islamists noticed the husband did not attend mosque prayers.

Mounting a deliberate watch, the Islamist vigilantes followed the husband until they finally saw him go into a church.

Soon afterwards, a group of 10 men stormed the couple's home without warning, accusing them of committing “apostasy.” They made a neighborhood spectacle by searching their house and dragging them off to the police station.

There the wife was raped twice and her husband savagely beaten. When the Islamist vigilantes finally released them a day later, they threatened the convert couple with prison if they dared to tell anyone what had happened to them.

The husband was subsequently fired from his well-paying job, and local shopkeepers refused to sell them food or other goods. They were eventually forced to move away to a remote village, where he found work as a day laborer.[10]

This is just one example but there are thousands more.

Beyond an actual death threat (something a discreet former Muslim in the West could avoid) there is an additional concern to a prospective convert. The idea that someone would be killed because they believe in something different is in and of itself a moral transgression and the antithesis of the belief in free speech that most Westerners feel is intrinsic to a civil society. Most Muslim converts are peace loving people. They come to Islam to achieve a greater level of simplicity and spirituality. How can it be moral to allow someone to convert without this knowledge? It is like marrying someone and later finding out that they have another identity. I personally felt deceived not knowing that apostasy was punished by death upon taking my Shahada (committing to be a Muslim.)

Lastly, no major world religion sanctifies death for apostasy other than ancient Judaism.

Some would justify the legitimacy of the Islamic view of death for apostasy because of this similar notion found in the Torah:

Deuteronomy 13:6-10 (New International Version) 6

If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, 7 gods of your peoples, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), 8 do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. 9 You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. 10 Stone him to death, because he tried to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Nonetheless, and worth noting, death by apostasy has not been practiced in Judaism since 200 A.D. This might only be because Jews found themselves completely stripped of sovereignty and secular authority, but in the end of the day, it is not practiced at all. Regardless, the brutality of the State of Israel seems to point to an underlying cruelty that still exists within Israel, a state committed to a text which has many violent references. Ironically, Muslims are constantly pointing to their barbarian nature, but it seems that many Muslims can not see the same traits in their own faith.

Nevertheless, and most importantly, in the end of the day, so what? Because an even more ancient religion preaches hate and intolerance should we condone it? Just because a belief is shrouded in the notion of “religion” does that offer legitimacy? Do two wrongs make a right?

A sound belief system does not require a death threat to retain believers. It is like a flower in bloom, everyone agrees that it is beautiful. A tolerant respectful society accepts if its beauty does not resonate with some and moves on.

[1] <http://www.light-of-life.com/eng/law/>

[2] The Life of the Prophet Mohammed Ibn Kathir, Vol. III, Pages 402-403

[3] Ridda Wars http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Ridda_wars

[4] The Journal for the Study of Dhimmitude <http://www.dhimmi.com/>

[5] Element 117 discovered? <http://www.webelements.com/>

[6] Christian convert from Islam shot dead inKashmir <http://www.sperforum.com/site/article.asp?id=6705>

[7] Persecution of Ex-Muslims http://www.wikislam.com/wiki/Persecution_of_Ex-Muslims

[8] http://www.freekareem.org/kareem-faq/#who_is_kareem

[9] Killing apostates not in Qur'an but a strongly held view in the masses <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Killing-apostates-not-in-Qur%27an-but-a-strongly-held-view-in-the-masses-5748.html>

[10] Egyptian Police Torture Christian Convert <http://www.opendoorsusa.org/content/view/full/173>

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