

Book Reviews

Apostasy in Islam

Taha Jabir Alalwani

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This lucid and concise book is an important and timely contribution in light of current intra-Muslim political rivalries that find their fueling justifications in the domain of “excommunication” and mutual accusations of disbelief and apostasy (*takfīr*). This situation has caused Alalwani, the author of this “treatise,” to delve into the controversies and subtleties of this sensitive and manipulation-laden issue. He attempts, both scripturally and logically, to clarify its various aspects and challenge the conventional and traditional approaches to it, which have been obscured by the historical weight of dogma and power politics (pp. 19-20, 129).

Alalwani’s contends that there is no explicitly stated evidence, whether from the Qur’an or the Prophet’s Sunnah, that mandates the death penalty for merely changing one’s religion, as long as doing so is not accompanied or associated with another criminal act. He highlights that when stipulating that an apostate should be killed, the jurists were in fact dealing with “compound” crimes that involved, in addition to apostasy, other political, legal, and social dimensions (p. 1). He proceeds to make his point by providing evidence from the Qur’an and the Sunnah while casting doubt on the authenticity or consistency of much of what the *fuqahā’* (jurists and scholars) narrated later on and attributed to the Prophet or his Companions. His chosen method combines philosophical, analytical, inductive, and historical approaches along with Islamic textual sciences and fields of knowledge (p. 3). He focuses on cases in which an individual changes his/her faith without engaging in hostile or criminal activities against the Muslim community, which otherwise would elevate the case to one of security threat or treason (p. 4).

The study comprises six chapters. The first two deal with whether apostasy is a capital crime and with the Qur’anic depiction of what apostasy means. Alalwani points out that despite unleashing the “sword of consensus” regarding the death penalty for this event, in fact there is no such consensus, for no

less a figure than Umar ibn al-Khattab opposed it (pp. 7, 73-74). In chapter 2, Alalwani indicates that while close to 200 Qur'anic verses (p. 43) designate disbelief and apostasy as most heinous offences, nowhere does the Qur'an stipulate a death sentence or any earthly punishment (p. 41).

In chapter 3, the author focuses on the Sunnah and the Prophetic hadiths (narrations) to examine claims justifying the death penalty. He continuously stresses the Qur'an's primacy over the Sunnah and that the former's principles and epistemic methodology "clearly specify the unqualified nature of religious freedom." He also emphasizes that the Sunnah should never conflict with the Qur'an (p. 43). Thus, as he points out, despite several cases of apostasy during the Prophet's time as well as the existence of hypocrites in Madinah, of whom the Prophet was well aware and whom he recognized, it is an "established fact that never in his entire life [had he] put an apostate to death" (pp. 65, 67). In fact, the Truce of Hudaibiyyah between the Muslims and the Makkan pagans allowed for those who wished to leave the Muslims and join the pagans to do so with impunity (p. 64).

Chapter 4 deals with hadiths attributed to the Prophet and that appear to support the death penalty. One of these widely circulated hadiths, "If anyone changes his religion, put him to death," is actually both "solitary" (*ahad*) and has an incomplete chain of transmission (*mursal*). In addition, it is related to a particular situation: some Jews in Madinah sought to cast doubts about Islam into the Muslims' hearts by professing it for a short time and then apostatizing (p. 67). Other unreliable hadiths are based on cases in which Companions who outlived Muhammad reportedly executed apostates. For instance, he indicates that one chain of transmission of such hadiths begins with 'Ikrimah, a slave of Ibn Abbas, the Prophet's cousin. 'Ikrimah was a known liar (p. 78), and al-Bukhari was criticized for narrating hadiths on his authority (pp. 78-79).

A bigger problem was that the Hadith literature was elevated in many cases to being an equal of or parallel to the Qur'an, with the end result that hadiths were frequently allowed to "reign supreme over the Qur'an and pass judgment on it" (p. 72). And when some jurists actually declared a hadith as sound and authoritative, even when it was not, simply because it supported their views concerning apostasy or other issues (pp. 89-90), one can imagine what may have transpired.

Other unreliable hadiths narrated that Imam Ali killed and burned apostates who allegedly professed him to be God (pp. 91-94). According to the author, these were spread by Ali's enemies in order to "alienate" people from him by depicting him as cruel (p. 95) and unknowledgeable (pp. 83, 93), as unaware that the Prophet had prohibited killing by burning. More sinisterly, at times his enemies attempted to insinuate that he acted as the idolatrous peo-

ple of Abraham's time had, for they had sought to throw Abraham into the fire (pp. 85, 95). In fact, some of these hadiths did not indicate who these supposedly burned people were, while in other places the same hadith added "Shi'ites" (pp. 86, 87) — a seeming act of interpolation (*tadlīs*). As it stands, such hadiths were part of a power discourse constructed over time and linked to historical intra-Muslim political rivalries, much of which is being rehashed today. Thus the author stresses that the Qur'an must reign supreme over the Sunnah and that the latter can only be verified in terms of the former.

In chapter 5, Alalwani proceeds to examine the views of Muslim jurists and schools of thought (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, Zahiri, Zaydi, Ibadi, and Imami) on the issue. He points out that claims of consensus are problematic, as the very concept of consensus is contested, and that most schools of jurisprudence have confused apostasy in the political sense with apostasy as a matter of changing one's faith (p. 98). He attributes this to additions caused by the Hejazi oral culture, which was influenced by earlier Jewish views that anyone who left Judaism should be killed (p. 98). In addition, Islamic conquests had brought many societies into the fold of the "Islamic state," willingly or otherwise, thereby incorporating all of the issues pertaining to loyalty to the state, rebellion, sedition, laws, allegiances, and a host of other factors. When combined with the precedent of Abu Bakr's *imprecisely* defined "wars of apostasy," in which public order and governance were intertwined with the religio-political aspect of paying alms to the state, this served to add to the confusion (pp. 98-99). As a consequence, Muslim scholars came to link renunciation of Islam with the "theoretical possibility" that the one who does so will — or actually does — wage war on the community. According to Alalwani, this is unwarranted (p. 103).

Finally, in chapter 6 Alalwani goes through a non-exhaustive list of historical Muslim figures accused of apostasy or heresy, among them Ahmad ibn Nasr al-Khuza'i, who was killed by the Mu'tazilite caliph al-Wathiq, and who according to Alalwani, was "no less knowledgeable, venerable or steadfast in his faith than Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal" (p. 121).

This book is by all means a welcome contribution that deals with a sensitive and potentially explosive issue both figuratively and literally. The current rehashing of this issue and the way it has come to be manipulated and used by certain regimes and groups with self-proclaimed Islamic credentials shows that the community seems unable to transcend its historical pathologies. As it stands, the concept of apostasy no longer seems to be a means to protect the community's integrity, but in fact, as a re-constructed power discourse, has become a means of tearing its fabric apart; the very opposite of that which had persuaded classical Muslim scholars to declare apostasy a capital offense

in the first place. In other words it has come to serve the very antithesis of its *raison d'être* so to speak, thereby creating inherent contradictions in the very structure of the Muslim body politic.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fact that this very idea has become instrumental in the current confluence of three of the major pathological manifestations in Muslim history: The Kharijites exemplified by modern-day Salafis/Wahhabis, the (Isma'ili) Assassins (al-Hashashin) exemplified by the suicidal tactics adopted by these groups and which killed more Muslims than non-Muslims, and *al-mulk al-'adūd* (corrupt kingship) as exemplified by the Saudi regime and other Gulf shaykhdoms. Added to this are the farcical mulahs and clerics in the service of monarchies and a more modern phenomenon of pseudo-masonic type of "Muslim" Brotherhood. All, in different ways, have become the constituent elements of the apostasy discourse.

Deconstructing the concept of apostasy (*takfīr*) therefore, toward which Alalwani's work is an important step in the right direction, is of crucial importance for reinstating the community's integrity as a matter of sheer survival. After all, it was Prophet Muhammad who pointed his community's attention to the double-edged sword of *takfīr* and its contradictions when he stated to the effect that: "If one tells a Muslim that you are an unbeliever, then one of the two is inflicted with it (*viz.*, disbelief)."

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