

Islam's Law of Apostasy in Our Globalized World

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By Jacob Thomas

A new world order emerged soon after the end of World War II. One of the new ingredients in that new world order was the ending of the era of European colonization, particularly in Africa and Asia. Many of those people who had lived under colonization began migrating in the millions from their homelands to Europe and the Americas. Large numbers of Muslims began to settle in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy, and Spain, which were more than willing to receive them. The United States also began to open its doors to more Muslim immigration. The new immigrants did not always readily assimilate to their new adopted countries. Over the ensuing years complaints and grievances began to manifest themselves in their closely knit communities. They became more disparaging of many aspects of Western culture and even though they enjoyed the benefits of more freedoms and opportunities than their former homelands had offered them, they were unsatisfied with their lot. For many, a stricter adherence to their Islamic faith came to be the norm. And growing intolerance to all other faiths became more and more the prevailing attitude.

Even as these new immigrants to the West were able to practice their religious and political beliefs in complete freedom, another completely opposite phenomenon was occurring in the lands of their birth. The leaders in many of those newly de-colonized countries were drafting policies that did not allow for tolerance and freedom of expression for any religion but Islam. Many guest workers from Asia and Africa went to live and work in the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. But they had a rude awakening when they attempted to practice Christianity. Saudi Arabia in particular has been very hostile to religious freedom of its guest workers. They are absolutely forbidden to engage in any worship activity. It is obvious to all who follow world events that conditions for natives in many African countries in particular are even worse. Many who hold to a faith other than Islam are mercilessly sought out, harassed and murdered.

While non-Muslims are free to convert to Islam, Muslims who convert to other faiths have to contend with the age-long *Law of Apostasy, or "Radda,"* as it is known in Arabic.

There is a long history behind this Islamic tradition. Soon after the death of Muhammad in June, 632 A.D., several Arab tribes defected from Islam, and reverted to their old ways of life. *Abu Bakr*, the first caliph, mounted military campaigns against the rebels and forced them back into the fold of Islam. *Abu Bakr's* campaigns are known as *Huroob al-Radda*, i.e. the wars against apostasy.

Eventually, the four Sunni Schools for the interpretation of the Shari'a codified the rules regarding the sin of apostasy (*radda*) and declared that, unless an apostate repented, he or she is to be punished with death. This harsh attitude towards Muslims who convert to other religions is based on the belief that Muhammad was Allah's last messenger to mankind. Several Qur'anic verses can be adduced as a basis for this harsh treatment of the apostates, such as *Surat Aal 'Imran*, a Medinan Chapter 3:85, which states:

“And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the losers.”

The subject of Apostasy is currently receiving a good deal of attention in the Arab world. On, 8 May, 2009, an article appeared in the online daily, *Al-Awan*, entitled ***“The Proceedings of the Final Meeting of the Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) Assembly.”*** A subtitle carried these shocking Arabic words: ” □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ ! ”

“He who changes his religion must be killed.”

Following are excerpts from this article, followed by my analysis and comments.

“The Islamic ***“Ulema”*** (Religious Authorities) who met at the ***19th Session of the Islamic Fiqh Assembly*** in *al-Shariqah* (UAE) from 26-30 April, 2009, did not distance themselves from the historical tradition regarding apostates and followers of non-Islamic faiths. The documents they produced at the end of their meetings reiterated the classical dictum: ***‘He who changes his religion must be killed, Man Baddala Deenahu Faqtuloohu.’*** Likewise, no changes were made in the 7th century edict [issued during the era of the First Caliphate in Medina, 632-661) that proclaimed: ***‘Eject Jews and Christians from Arabia!’*** These documents are posted on the website of ***The Islamic Fiqh Assembly***, a branch of the ***OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference.)***

"According to the Assembly, religious freedom is guaranteed in Islam. However, it comes with the following conditions: ***'This freedom must be protected from any religious and ideological attempts to subvert the Islamic identity of the Umma.'*** In other words, this "protected" freedom should make no room for any divergence from fundamental Islamic beliefs. No attempts to spread doubts about Islam are to be allowed. Religious security must be maintained as part and parcel of national security.

"Now, as the above conditions are placed on religions freedom, the very idea of "freedom" becomes meaningless. Any departure from the accepted and prevailing Islamic tradition would be regarded as ***Radda*** (Apostasy) and ***Kufr*** (Unbelief). And to commit the sin of ***Radda*** is to court the traditional death sentence unless repentance takes place!

"Furthermore, ***'Freedom of Speech and Expression'*** is a guaranteed right according to the documents released by the Assembly. But there is a proviso. The freedom of speech can only be exercised ***'within the context of the Sharia.'*** This, being interpreted in true Islamic fashion, implies that ***'the purpose of freedom of expression is to win the favor of Allah and to serve the interests of Muslims.'*** Therefore, no criticism should be leveled at

the laws, ceremonies, and fundamentals of Islam, under the guise of the exercise of the freedom of speech.

"The recommendations issued by the Assembly to the members of the *OIC* states, asked them to coordinate their efforts *'for the protection of the non-negotiable elements of the Islamic heritage in light of the many alien forces that threaten family life.'* Also, the member states were requested to re-study the *International Agreements and Conventions* they had signed with respect to women, in order to reject all those sections that contradict the specificity of Islamic culture and *Sharia*.

"It is unfortunate that the documents produced by the *Islamic Fiqh Assembly* indicate that the delegates of the member states of the *OIC* did not take one step in the direction of rescuing the Islamic institutions from fanaticism. The legacy of discrimination against non-Muslims that has accumulated across the centuries has not changed at all.

"The conditions for a *Dialogue between Religions* that have been proposed by the Islamic states require a critical re-evaluation. Muslim delegates who take part in such encounters should be willing to learn from similar dialogues that have taken place, for example, in the Catholic Church, where previously-held strict positions, were abandoned. A new spirit was manifested at *The Second Vatican Council* with the issuing of two famous declarations about religious freedom: *'Dignitatis Humanae,'* and the relation of the church with non-Christian religions, *'Nostra Estate.'*

"At this juncture in world history there is no escaping the reality of calls for religious tolerance. Acceptance of the *International Declaration of Human Rights* and the respect of the basic freedoms, including freedom of belief, and of changing one's belief should be upheld by all nation states. True freedom does not exist apart from accepting inherent differences in thought and practice of all belief systems. Muslims need to reject the classification of the world into two realms: the one inhabited by *'people of the Truth'* [i.e. Islam] and the other by *'people of the Falsehood'* [i.e. all 'Others']. The toleration of all religious doctrines and political ideologies and the espousal of them should be truly free for all people. No one should be excluded from religious, social and political life for harboring opinions contrary to the *status quo*, and no one should be threatened with physical abuse or incarceration for such beliefs, whatever they are.

“Would the *Islamic Fiqh Assembly* ever manifest the courage of the *Second Vatican Council?*”

Analysis

The article of the reformist Arab intellectual deplored the unbending attitude manifested in the proceedings of the April 2009, meeting of *“The Islamic Fiqh Assembly.”* Any hope for a new spirit of tolerance regarding conversion was dashed, and the old tradition as summarized in a dictum attributed to Muhammad remained in place! *“He who changes his religion must be killed”*

Comments

We should all be grateful that brave Arab intellectuals are raising delicate subjects such as the conversion of Muslims to other faiths. The *al-Awan* website is comprised of individuals who are engaged in this noble effort. Its motto calls for “*the rise of a rational and secular, i.e. non-religious culture.*” It is to be hoped that their number will continue to increase.

I wrote an article for FFI on 18 May, 2007 entitled “*A New Minority in North Africa,*”^{*} which dealt with the mortal dangers that would be faced by Muslims who had embraced the Christian faith, should North African states fall under the rule of the Islamists. It speaks to the very situation the *al-Awan* intellectual warned about, as the following quotes make clear:

“The deep reason for forbidding *radda* is to maintain the very *raison d’etre* of Islam. Muhammad declared himself to be the last prophet of Allah. Therefore, there could be no new prophet to supersede him; nor could the previous revelations given to the prophets that preceded him, be considered as authentic; since as Muslims contend, they have all been corrupted. Islam remains the only true religion, and Muslims must never consider leaving their faith, for the sin of apostasy is just as serious as the sin of *shirk* (belief in many gods.)

“However strict the laws of apostasy may be, the fact is that some Muslims are converting to Christianity. This is not propaganda emanating from the Christian side. [There are] anecdotal accounts about the reality of these conversions, based on Arab and non-Christian sources.

“Most of the testimonies of the converts pointed to the fact that what attracted them to the Christian faith was something that was totally lacking in their own tradition. Allah seemed to be unconcerned about his creatures; all he demanded was blind obedience. They craved for love, and they discovered that message in the Christian faith. That’s the summary reason for their conversion.

“The relation between Islam and the rest of the world is marked by asymmetry. Muslims may and do enjoy all kinds of freedoms and privileges in the lands of the *Kuffar*; however non-Muslims are not granted the same rights and privileges when they live in *Daru’l Islam*. Western politicians don’t seem to notice this anomaly; while most Western academicians don’t appear concerned about this lack of *quid pro quo* in the Islamic world. In our globalized world, this state of affairs should not continue. The existence of these *New Christians* of North Africa must be acknowledged; they need our love and our concern. We should not allow them to be eliminated, if the Islamists succeed in taking over the governments in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.”

The Law of Apostasy in Islam cannot go on unchallenged in our globalized world. It is high time for Muslim religious leaders to rethink this age-long and inhuman law. The

very fact that an Arab intellectual brought to light a shocking reaffirmation of the law against *Irtidad*, points to the urgency of dealing with this intolerable rule.