

# Apostasy in Islam: a Death Sentence?

It is common to hear claims that apostasy from Islam is not mentioned in the Koran and that Muslims are free to leave Islam without penalty (along with the quick dismissal of any suggestion of a death penalty being involved). The reality is these claims are wrong.

Here is the section of a verse in the Koran that addresses apostasy:

Chapter 4, Verse 89

*...But if they turn back (from Islam), take (hold of) them and kill them wherever you find them...*

There are other verses in the Koran dealing with apostasy, e.g. 3:86-88, 3:102, and 4:137.

And here is another such verse with some interesting modern commentary:

Chapter 2, Verse 217

*...And whosoever of you turns back from his religion and dies as a disbeliever, then his deeds will be lost in this life and in the Hereafter, and they will be the dwellers of the Fire. They will abide therein forever.*

The modern *Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan* aptly explained the meaning of this section of 2:217:

*An apostate, that is, a person who renounces the Islamic faith after accepting it, will have a double*

*punishment, in this world as well as in the next. This verse mentions only his punishment in the Hereafter, not his punishment in this world. An apostate, in case he does not repent, shall be slain. A hadeeth says: "Whoever changes his religion, slay him." - (Saheeh-ul-Bukhari, hadeeth 3017). This is his punishment in this world.*

*Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan*, Vol. 1, p. 193

Here is that *hadith*:

*Narrated 'Ikrima: 'Ali burnt some people 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.'"*

*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, No. 3017

Ibn 'Abbas was referring to statements of Muhammad such as this:

*Narrated 'Abdullah: Allah's Messenger said, "The blood of a Muslim who confesses that La ilaha illallah (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah) and that I am the Messenger of Allah, cannot be shed except in three cases:... (3) the one who turns renegade from Islam (apostate) and leaves the group of Muslims (by innovating heresy, new ideas and new things, etc. in the Islamic religion)."*

*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, No. 6878

And Muhammad even specified the nature of that death:

*If someone changes his religion - then strike off his head!*

*Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas, 36.18.15, in a section titled "Judgement on Abandonment of Islam."*

Muhammad died in 632 AD, and Abu Bakr became the first of the four "Rightly Guided" Caliphs; these first four caliphs were so named because they are believed to have held the most firmly to the teachings of Muhammad.

The first challenge Abu Bakr faced was the sudden groundswell of apostasy by Arab tribes who left Islam when they found out Muhammad had died. This resulted in the Wars of Apostasy (known as the *Riddah Wars*).

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Muslim scholar Majid Khadduri wrote this about those wars:

*The outstanding case of apostasy was the secession of the tribes of Arabia after the death of Muhammad. Abu Bakr, the first caliph, warned them first to return to Islam, and those who did not return were severely fought, especially by Khalid ibn al-Walid, who burned a great number of them in spite of objections raised regarding the penalty of burning. The leaders of the apostate tribes were severely punished and most of them were slain. An eminent chronicler, al-Baladhuri, reports that nobody escaped death save those who returned to Islam.*

*War and Peace in the Law of Islam*, p. 77

Al-Baladuri was a 9<sup>th</sup> Century Muslim scholar, and he wrote this about one of those battles:

*They fought against Khalid, and one of the Moslems fell a martyr. By Allah's help at last, the "polytheist" troops were dispersed, and Khalid had on that day the apostates burned. When abu-Bakr was told about it, he said, "I shall not sheathe a sword that Allah had unsheathed against the 'unbelievers.'"*

*The Origins of the Islamic State*, p. 148

You might hear someone say these wars were only about politics and had nothing to do with Islam. But they were called the *Riddah* Wars for a reason:

*Riddah: Apostasy. Abandoning one's faith. Islam forbids this for a Muslim; it is considered a capital offense.*

*Dictionary of Islamic Words and Expressions* (Saleh), p. 193.

Muhammad's command of death for apostasy from Islam is generally reflected today in the rulings about apostasy by the five major schools of Sharia Law. These schools say that a male who leaves Islam should be killed. However, there can be an exception for a female. Instead of facing a death sentence for apostasy, as she would with the Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki schools, the Hanafi school believes "that women should be forced to return to Islam by such punishment as beating or imprisonment." Her imprisonment would last until she returned to Islam or died. But under the Jafari school "she will be imprisoned and beaten at the times of the prescribed prayer until she repents or dies," or

she will be "condemned to perpetual imprisonment, and is to be beaten with rods at the hours of prayer." (See *Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, pp. 147-148.)

As a widely accepted manual of Sharia Law so aptly summed it up:

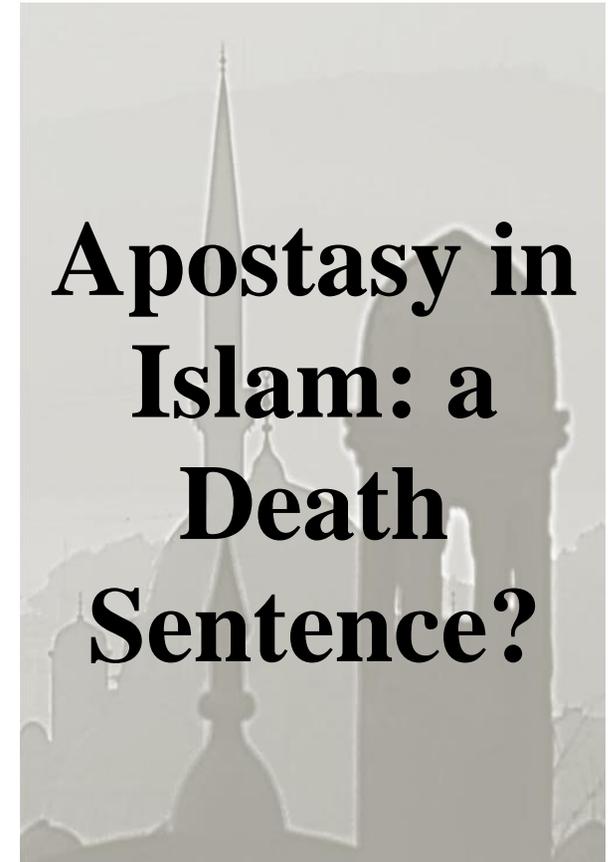
*When a person who has reached puberty and is sane voluntarily apostatizes from Islam, he deserves to be killed...There is no indemnity for killing an apostate.*

*Reliance of the Traveller*, o8.1 and o8.4

So we can see that the idea of a Muslim leaving Islam is forbidden and punishable by death.

\*\*\*However, a Muslim can pretend to renounce Islam! For more about this see the brochure *Islam Teaches Personal Deception?*\*\*\*

Dr. Kirby is the author of five books on Islam. His latest book is *The Lure of Fantasy Islam: Exposing the Myths and Myth Makers*. His books are available on Amazon.com.



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