

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...

In explaining this Koran verse, the 11th Century Muslim scholar al-Wahidi wrote:

Mujahid said apropos this verse: "This was revealed about some people who left Mecca to Medina [claiming to be Muslims]...they then renounced Islam...Allah, exalted is He, then revealed their hypocrisy by means of this verse and commanded that they be executed..."

Al-Wahidi's Asbab al-Nuzul, p. 80

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* 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 actual *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 20th 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 9th 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.

The death penalty for Muslims who leave Islam is still a valid punishment today. And there is a reason for why the death penalty was, and still is a valid punishment. In 2013, Yusuf Al-

Qaradawi, a preeminent Egyptian scholar, and then-head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, stated plainly that if the punishment for apostasy had not been death, Islam would not have long survived after the death of Muhammad:

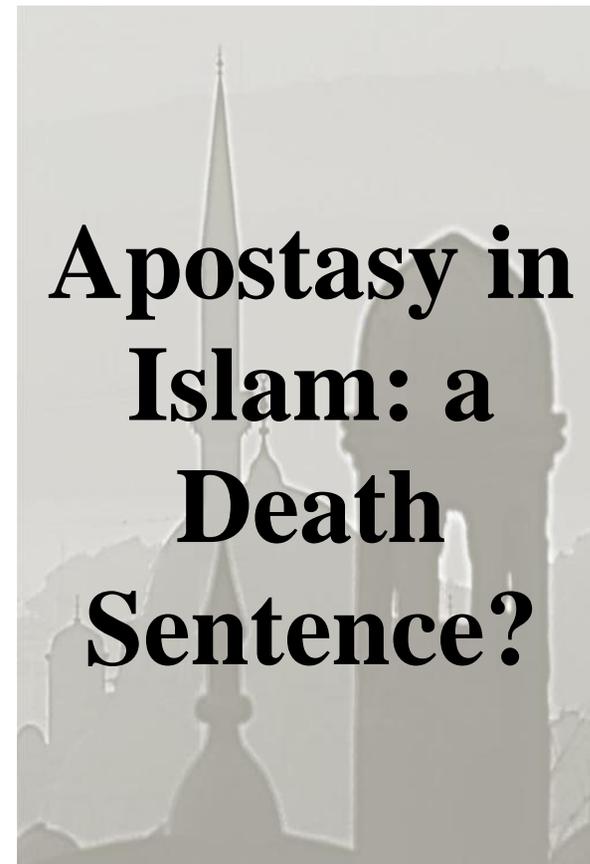
If they had gotten rid of the apostasy punishment Islam wouldn't exist today. Islam would have ended since the death of the prophet, peace be upon him. So opposing apostasy is what kept Islam to this day. Surah Al-Ma'idah says: The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His apostle is that they should be murdered or crucified. According to Abi Kulaba's narration, this verse means the apostates. And many hadiths, not only one or two, but many, narrated by a number of Muhammad's companions state that any apostate should be killed.

"Topic: If they had gotten rid of the apostasy punishment Islam wouldn't exist today," *CEMB forum*, April 1, 2013,
<https://www.councilofexmuslims.com/index.php?topic=23759.0>

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 six books on Islam. His latest book is *Islamic Doctrine versus the U.S. Constitution: The Dilemma for Muslim Public Officials*. His books are available on Amazon.com.



Part of a series on Islam

By Dr. Stephen M. Kirby

IslamSeries@gmail.com

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