



Death Lists and Dissenters

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Allegations of "apostasy" among Muslims are presently a topic for global controversy. To Westerners, apostasy from Islam seems to denote conversion to Christianity, since the persecution of Muslims who have changed their religion has gained media attention -- most recently in the case of a Christian convert, Abdul Rahman, who was threatened by a local judge in Afghanistan. It is also widely believed in the West that apostasy from Islam is invariably punished by death.

Both views are distorted. The phenomenon of public abandonment of Islam for Christianity did not become widespread until the last 150 years or so, and cases have remained rare enough that there is no substantial body of Islamic jurisprudence dealing with it. In general, apostasy from Islam was defined in the past as denial of foundational concepts of the relig-

ion -- more as heresy than as a change of faiths.

Shafi'i Sunni jurisprudence, a school of *shari'a* which remains widespread in Arab countries and Southeast Asia, defines apostasy as straying from the religion, rather than leaving it or joining another, and recommends repeated mercy and opportunities to correct alleged errors. The Maliki school of jurisprudence, which is established in northwest Africa, is severe on those who change religions, demanding capital punishment. This may reflect the history of formerly-Islamic Spain where, during periods when territory passed from Muslim to Christian rule, Muslims who had converted from Christianity to Islam returned to their earlier faith.

I have personally and extensively observed Islamic customs in which the faith of Muhammad has fused with Christian elements (in the Balkans),

Buddhism and shamanism (in Central Asia), and local folk religious traditions (in Indonesia). In the first two cases, syncretism or religious merging attracted no criticism from mainstream Muslim clerics, who considered porous borders between faiths a natural phenomenon. In Indonesia, however, Muslim clerics influenced by the Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia have preached against such variations from the standard Sunni way, and recently have incited violence against those who diverge from their path.

However, under the great Muslim empires, accusations of apostasy were often pretexts for the suppression of political and intellectual dissent, and that is how such charges are typically employed today in such countries as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have warned against accusations of apostasy, according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which is prevalent from the Balkans to India. The Prophet, it is said, opined that when one Muslim accuses another of disbelief, the accuser is the unbeliever.

The accusation of apostasy or unbelief remained mainly a political matter until the 18th century and the rise of the Wahhabis, who practiced *takfir* or accusation of apostasy against all Muslims who rejected Wahhabi doctrines, but especially against Shias and Sufis, or spiritual Muslims. They most certainly followed such accusations with death sentences, despoliation of property, and reduction of captive women to servitude.

Such terms have now appeared on the margin of American Islamic discourse -- literally: "We have issued our commands to the soldiers of God to wor-

ship God by pouring out their blood and burning their homes [i.e. of the supposed apostates]... Their women are to be abducted; their children enslaved, and their money confiscated."

This brutal idiom appeared in a claim of apostasy and threat of death issued on April 10 by a group, apparently in Egypt, called "Supporters of God's Messenger [Muhammad]." Included in [the list of those condemned](#) was Imam Ahmed Subhy Mansour, a Virginia-based Egyptian Islamic dissident who is also a founder, with me, of the Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP), a think-tank supporting moderate Islam.

Subhy Mansour is not an apostate from Islam. He has not renounced the religion or denied any of its essential precepts. He is a critic of Sunni traditions. I do not agree with some of his views on the history of Islam, but these opinions have nothing to do with basic matters of faith, and therefore cannot be considered the basis for a charge of apostasy. Subhy Mansour's views are controversial but certainly within the norms of Islamic debate.

Commentaries on the April 10 death list have been published by other CIP founders including M. Zuhdi Jasser in Phoenix, previously a victim of Wahhabi ideological aggression, as [reported in TCS](#), and CIP Canada representative [Salim Mansur](#), a journalist; and [here](#).

Given the Sunni-Shia split and Wahhabi influence, accusations of apostasy have led to horrific loss of life in Iraq, and a movement has begun among Sunnis to ban the practice of *takfir*. Charges that all Muslims except Wahhabis are unbelievers are more

than a theological position; they also promote the elitist mentality that every extremist movement needs to recruit and maintain itself.

Nevertheless, issues of conversion from Islam to Christianity remain a major issue in the threatened clash of civilizations. Aside from general religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, which is an immediate necessity, a global Islamic consensus with contemporary attitudes about freedom of religious

conscience will have to be developed by Muslim authorities in a long series of colloquies inspired by the utmost seriousness and intellectual weight. There is no simple answer to these questions. Still, the intent of the April 10 death list was not to clarify religious views, but to intimidate dissenters. This must not be tolerated by Western authorities, who must assist those threatened by such aggression, especially those residing in the democracies.