FREEDOM OF RELIGION, APOSTASY AND ISLAM

ABDULLAH SAEED
and HASSAN SAEED
## Contents

**Introduction** *Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed*  

### Part I  *Abdullah Saeed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Historical Context of the Debate on Apostasy and the Roots of Intolerance</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Apostasy and Related Concepts</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Punishment for Apostasy in Islamic Law and the Evidence</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Evidence against Capital Punishment for Apostasy</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Apostasy and the Position of Muslim Thinkers in the Modern Period</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Apostasy Law and its Potential for Misuse</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reasons for Apostasy and Understanding its Fear among Muslims</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part II  *Hassan Saeed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Religious Freedom in Malaysia: Overview and Restrictions</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Apostasy Laws in Malaysia: Approaches of the Two Major Political Parties</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Apostasy Laws in Malaysia: Jurisdiction and Constitutionality</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Apostasy Laws in Malaysia: The Future</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part III  *Abdullah Saeed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Need to Rethink Apostasy Laws</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part IV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix 1: Islamic Aqidah Protection (Perlis) Bill 2000</th>
<th>177</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apostasy (riddah), desertion of Islam or converting from Islam to another religion, is today vigorously debated among Muslims. High-profile apostasy cases, and an increasing number of publications affirming the punishment of death for apostasy, have brought this once largely ignored pre-modern Islamic law to life. In the recent past, several high-profile cases of apostasy have emerged in Muslim societies and made headlines in the international media. It is these cases that have led Muslims, particularly intellectuals, to look at the question of apostasy and its place in a modern Muslim society.

One of the most famous recent apostasy cases is related to Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa (1989) declaring Salman Rushdie, the British-Indian novelist, an apostate. Since then Egypt, for example, has seen several high-profile cases of apostasy. In 1992, an Egyptian intellectual, Farag Foda, was gunned down by extremists who had accused him of apostasy. In 1993, a case of apostasy was filed against Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a professor of Islamic philosophy at Cairo University, asking the Egyptian courts to declare him an apostate. Similarly, a case of apostasy was filed in 2001 against Nawal al-Saadawi, the Egyptian feminist writer. Apart from these high-profile cases, a number of cases of apostasy or blasphemy that did not make international headlines were brought against converts, intellectuals, journalists and writers in a variety of Muslim nations including Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Under Pakistan's blasphemy law, which functions like an apostasy law as far as Muslims are concerned, hundreds of people have been accused since the law's promulgation in 1986. Several Muslim heads of state remain accused of apostasy by their extremist opponents. While the majority of Muslim states have no death penalty for apostasy, states like Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Sudan are exceptions.

Though apostasy has a long history in texts on Islamic law, its treatment has not differed essentially from its conceptualization in the second century of Islam. Even in the modern period, Muslim scholars have remained, on the whole, faithful to the law of apostasy as it exists in the pre-modern Islamic legal texts. Since the law of apostasy had been considered by many Muslims to be one of the 'immutable' laws in Islamic law, no attempt was made until the modern period to question its basis or debate its validity. The law of apostasy had become one of the non-negotiable aspects of Islamic law, much like the prescribed punishments (hudud) specified in the Qur'an for theft or fornication. However, those punishments at least have
Qur'anic support, whereas the punishment of apostasy does not, as this book argues. It is largely based on a number of isolated traditions of the Prophet (hadith ahad) or their interpretations.

Muslim questioning of the basis of the apostasy law stems only from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Muslim modernists of this period such as Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida and Muhammad Iqbal were among the earliest to provide the basic framework within which it became possible to question the pre-modern conception of apostasy and its punishment. Gradually, in the twentieth century, several thinkers of a more 'liberal' persuasion also began to highlight the problematic nature of the law. In the late twentieth century, even a number of leading Islamists joined the call for rethinking of the law of apostasy.

Among those who contributed significantly to the debate from a 'liberal' perspective was S.A. Rahman, the retired Chief Justice of Pakistan, who examined the textual basis of the law in detail and highlighted the weakness of the foundations on which the law of apostasy was based. Others included Hasan al-Turabi, Rashid al-Ghannushi, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Mohammed Salim el-Awa and Abdullahi An-Na‘im. Their views have been vigorously challenged by scholars of a more traditionalist persuasion.

One of the important aspects of the debate is the punishment for apostasy, that is, death for those who turn away from Islam. This punishment, specified in pre-modern Islamic law, is seen by many Muslims today as a tool for preventing Muslims from converting to another religion, or for forcing intellectuals, thinkers, writers and artists to remain within the limitations of the established orthodoxy in a given Muslim state. The death penalty is staunchly defended by a significant number of Muslims, but equally strongly opposed by an increasingly vocal group that includes some prominent Muslim thinkers and even Islamists. Its defenders, however, dominate the debate by drawing on ideas and views expressed in pre-modern Islamic law. They are armed with what they consider to be supporting texts from the the Qur’an and hadith, the views of pre-modern Muslim scholars as well as fatwas from conservative religious leaders today. This leaves opponents of the law of apostasy largely defenceless against what appears to be unassailable and authoritative ‘textual’ evidence.

Many Muslims are uncomfortable with the law of apostasy and argue that it is outdated and should be abolished. They have attempted to reinterpret the associated texts, pointing out that there is no Qur'anic basis for the death penalty and that, in the practice of the Prophet (sunnah), the death penalty for apostasy was not for a simple change of faith but for a more political act such as high treason. These thinkers argue, on the contrary, that freedom of religion for all, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, is a fundamental principle of Islam and that the law of apostasy therefore goes against this fundamental principle and should be discarded.

This book is a contribution to the thinking that freedom of religion is a fundamental principle of Islam and that the death penalty for apostasy
violates this principle. It argues that the death penalty conflicts with the foundation texts of Islam, the Qur'an and the sunnah, and with the current ethos of human rights, in particular the freedom to choose one's religion. The book demonstrates that the early development of the law of apostasy in general, and its punishment in particular, was in response to the socio-political situation of the Muslim community in the immediate post-prophetic period (in the seventh century CE). The Qur'anic texts used in support of the law are either not relevant or their interpretation conflicts with many other Qur'anic texts that emphasize religious freedom and the adoption of a faith as an individual choice. The book shows the diversity of opinion among early Muslims regarding the punishment and highlights an early lack of consensus on the issue. It highlights some of the many ambiguities associated with the meaning of apostasy and what constitutes it, as well as the problematic nature of key textual evidence in support of the death penalty. It also demonstrates the range of views among Muslims today on the question, and attempts to show why apostasy has become such a problematic issue.

The central task of this book is therefore to reread the relevant foundation texts of Islam and to show that the punishment of apostasy by death cannot be justified by an appeal to the Qur'an or the practice of the Prophet. It also places the punishment in the context of the current debate on human rights, particularly freedom of religion. It concludes that such a punishment conflicts with the ethos of the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet, as well as with the needs of the modern period.

A feature of this book is the exploration of how apostasy and the debate on its punishment are dealt with in a multi-religious Muslim majority society, in this case Malaysia. We chose Malaysia for a variety of reasons. It is one of those countries where the punishment of apostasy has attracted the attention of both scholars and politicians. Its population profile is typical of many Muslims nations in that it is multi-religious. It has a secular constitution, which provides religious freedom for all citizens. Malaysia is also important because many Muslims see it as a role model, not only for its recent rapid economic development and its championing of an enlightened Islam, but also for its relatively harmonious management of its multiracial and multi-religious society. It has not only a strong non-Muslim minority totally opposed to the law of apostasy and the death penalty, but also a Muslim segment equally insistent on the implementation of that law, which presents the government with a dilemma. Any solution Malaysia may find to the issue of apostasy could well be copied by other Muslim countries, and any step Malaysia takes in this respect is also important from a human rights point of view as Malaysia is a relatively ‘liberal’ Muslim country.
Structure of the Book

The book has two main parts. Since the discourse on apostasy is really a global one, the treatment of the subject in the first part of the book does not focus on one particular region. The discourse in its pre-modern as well as modern formulations can be found in almost all Muslim communities; therefore it seemed appropriate to treat the issue from a global perspective and include examples of apostasy cases from several parts of the Muslim world. The second part of the book presents a case study on Malaysia.

Several Arabic terms occur in the book. In order to make the text more readable, we have used a simplified system of transliteration. Arabic words used in the Malay language are often transliterated somewhat differently. For example, the term shari‘ah is written in Malay as syariah. In the second part of the book we have used the Malay transliteration of the word, rather than the standard one. For the sake of readability, we have kept footnotes and references to a minimum. Where dates are given, we have attempted to provide both the Islamic (hijri) and Gregorian dates. For instance, 1/622 means year 1 of the Islamic calendar and year 622 of the Gregorian calendar.

For quotations from the Qur‘an, we have adopted Muhammad Asad’s translation. His is one of the most readable translations by a Muslim and his critical comments in the footnotes seem highly relevant to the topic. In a few instances where Asad’s translation does not seem to do justice to the text, we have amended it.

Part I has eight chapters and focuses on the law of apostasy itself. Chapter One traces the historical development of the concept of freedom of religion. This also highlights the scope of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948) on which various human rights conventions of today are based. It then traces the diversity of approaches to religious freedom in the Muslim world. Chapter Two outlines the religious and political context in which the law of apostasy developed. Chapter Three explores the definition of apostasy and related terms. It highlights the high degree of fluidity in the understanding of what constitutes apostasy. Chapter Four provides an overview of the law of apostasy in pre-modern Islamic law, and examines critically the textual basis for punishment. Chapter Five brings together the most important Qur‘anic evidence against the death penalty for change of faith. It then explores other textual and historical evidence against the punishment. Chapter Six examines differing views among Muslims today on the issue of punishment. Chapter Seven highlights the potential for misuse of apostasy law, while Chapter Eight is an attempt to understand the reasons for apostasy and the level of fear of apostasy among Muslims.

Part II presents a detailed study of how some laws related to apostasy are debated, discussed and implemented, and the challenges these laws face in the Muslim-majority state of Malaysia. Chapter Nine provides a back-
ground to Malaysian society, including religion, the political and legal systems, and the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Chapter Ten explores the attitude of the two main political parties of Malaysia towards apostasy laws. Chapter Eleven looks at the question of jurisdiction in Malaysia regarding apostasy and related cases, and some of the legal problems involved. Chapter Twelve explores the future of apostasy laws in Malaysia, with particular reference to the two main political parties, UMNO and PAS, which have agendas for the further Islamization of Malaysian society.

Chapter Thirteen reflects on the need to rethink apostasy laws. Many have made suggestions for improvements to the book: Rachel Butson, Jacky Angus, Christina Mayer, Donna Williams, Redha Ameur, Domenyk Eades, Alex Radovanovic and Abdul Ghafoor Abdul Raheem. Any errors are, of course, the responsibility of the authors. We trust that this book will contribute to the ongoing debate on the need to rethink this area of Islamic law.

Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed
Chapter 13

The Need to Rethink Apostasy Laws

Within the broad debate on human rights in the Muslim world, one of the rights targeted for criticism by Muslims is that of freedom of religion for fellow Muslims. These critics argue that freedom of religion for Muslims as conceptualized in international human rights instruments is not in line with Islamic norms, values and laws, and therefore should be rejected. Other Muslims argue that the right to freedom of religion is perfectly in line with Qur’anic and prophetic guidelines. This latter group of Muslims includes an increasing number of intellectuals, scholars and even prominent religious leaders.

A careful examination of the human rights discourse reveals that today the discourse is not necessarily a ‘Western’ one; it is a concern of the vast majority of Muslims as well. Most Muslim states, as members of the United Nations, accept in principle the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and some even have ratified major human rights conventions. Moreover, as a sign of the global participation in this discourse, some Muslims have developed what they consider to be ‘Muslim’ human rights documents. On the whole, these are modelled on the UDHR or similar human rights conventions but use Islamic ideas and terminology and are often justified on the basis of Qur’anic texts.

This book has explored a particular aspect of the right to freedom of religion and how this right was marginalized in pre-modern Islamic law through the law of apostasy and the death penalty associated with it. It has sought to demonstrate the background against which the law of apostasy was formulated, in particular the political context and the intra-Islamic intolerance that played a significant role in the development of that law. What is critical is the high degree of fluidity and diversity in understanding what constitutes apostasy, a state of affairs that has been utilized by political and religious figures alike to control, oppress, persecute or eliminate opponents. For that reason the potential misuse of laws on apostasy has always been considerable throughout Islamic history.

An important characteristic of this book is that it challenges the view that the punishment of apostasy by death is based on clear Qur’anic or prophetic instructions. Discussion in chapters 4 and 5 has demonstrated that there is nothing in the Qur’an to justify a temporal punishment for apostasy, and little to justify many of the apostasy laws associated with it. Much of this law was developed from certain isolated (ahad) hadith and interpretations of those hadith, or on the basis of analogy (qiyas) and ijtihad. Since
none of these guarantee certainty of knowledge (‘ilm qāti‘i) as understood in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh), Muslims in the modern period have the opportunity to go back and rethink these laws. If these laws are no longer practicable or relevant for Muslims, there is a strong justification to reconsider them. The argument that these laws are backed by consensus (ijma‘) should not deter Muslims from going along this path. Numerous other laws on which there was consensus at some point in Muslim history have been subject to revision and in some cases, as with those connected with slavery and the caliphate, dropped altogether.

An important function of this book is to highlight the nature of the debate on apostasy and apostasy laws in a multi-religious and multicultural nation-state, Malaysia, where Muslims are in the majority. Some apostasy laws are in place in several states of the Federation. The case study in chapters 9–12 indicates the political nature of the discourse on apostasy there, and serves to highlight some of the problems and challenges faced by the Malaysian legal system in dealing with apostasy cases. That the issue is political is demonstrated by the fact that both main political parties, PAS and UMNO, attempt to win votes by manipulating the debate on apostasy laws. Given that Malaysia is somewhat typical of other Muslim-majority nation-states in terms of religious pluralism, the difficulties and challenges that apostasy laws face there can be used as a basis for understanding what may happen elsewhere in the Muslim world if similar apostasy laws are put in place.

A number of issues emerge from the discussion in this book. On religious freedom, it is clear that the Qur’ān supports the notion of religious freedom and religious faith as an individual choice. Religious freedom is presented in the Qur’ān in a variety of contexts and ways. However, in interpreting these texts, Muslim scholars of the pre-modern period largely limited the scope of freedom available to a Muslim in choosing and adopting a religion or a belief system. They opted instead for a narrow definition of religious freedom, confining it to a freedom given to non-Muslims to either remain under Islamic rule as ‘protected religious minorities’ (ahl al-dhimmah) or to convert to Islam. As for Muslims, once they became Muslims, conversion from Islam was not permitted. To prevent conversion, Muslim jurists developed the apostasy laws with the death penalty as the ultimate punishment, which was doubtless justified on the basis of certain isolated hadith. This attitude of early jurists should not surprise us as they functioned at a time when religious freedom and individual human dignity were perhaps not related in the way they are today. Moreover, in that earlier time and social environment, an individual became a ‘person’ by being associated with a particular religion or tribe. In the case of Islam it was the religion rather than the tribe. In joining Islam, an individual automatically became part of the community of believers. This ‘community of believers’ also functioned as a political unit: the caliphate or emirate. Thus there was a conjunction between corporate religious identity rooted in the community
and political identity. In general, as the concept developed in pre-modern Islamic law, if someone rejected the community of believers by converting to another religion, they were automatically excluded from the political community as well. This meant the complete loss of an individual’s basic rights as a person (such as right to life, right to own property) which had been conferred on becoming a Muslim.

Since an individual’s basic rights were dependent on being part of this community, the whole notion of apostasy and issues associated with it in the pre-modern period made good sense. By contrast, most Muslims today have moved away from this conjunction between religious community and political identity to a separation between the two. Today, a political community in the sense of a nation-state does not have to be based on a religious community and, in fact, most nation-states in the world, including the Muslim world, are not based on this strict identification. An individual can become a citizen of this political unit regardless of religious affiliation, which is the case in the majority of Muslim states, where modern constitutions guarantee religious freedom and equality before the law for all. Thus religious freedom, and freedom of belief in particular, has become a prima facie right in the modern period within the functioning of the nation-state. The pre-modern Islamic law of apostasy that depended on the meshing of religious identity and political community has therefore lost much of its meaning.

With few exceptions, today’s societies are not ‘closed’. People move from one area to another and from country to country in an unprecedented manner. Migration, travel and dual residence serve the purposes of education, business, recreation and employment in a world driven by highly developed communication networks. Muslims are migrating in large numbers to non-Muslim countries, and to a lesser extent the movement is the other way. Usually, even in the Muslim world, there are no ghettos or separate quarters for the followers of each religious tradition like those that existed in some regions in pre-modern times. Consequently people of all religious traditions in a given country may live side by side in the same neighbourhood, sharing the same space.

This unprecedented interaction and pluralism places substantial pressure on all Islamic scholars to offer new ideas about religious freedom relevant to today’s multi-religious and multicultural world. The reaffirmation of pre-modern laws developed for a different time, place and circumstance is not particularly helpful or practical. In any event, many Muslims have abandoned aspects of the pre-modern apostasy laws, particularly punishment by death. It is only in a few Muslim states the law is still in force. Despite this, and despite the unrealistic nature of much of the debate, the question of apostasy is still discussed. It still finds its way into contemporary Islamic legal texts and current discourse, with many traditionalists continuing to argue for implementation of this outdated law.

The discussion in this book shows that apostasy laws today have a huge potential for abuse. There is a high degree of diversity in Muslim
theological, legal or religio-political positions, and it is difficult to devise
one set of creeds applicable to and accepted by all. In addition to pre-
modern divisions, new divisions and groupings have emerged among
Muslims today. Muslims from one group still accuse other groups of
apostasy, heresy and unbelief. Similarly, in a number of Muslim countries,
the government assumes the responsibility of 'protecting' local orthodoxies
and those who do not adhere to the government-sanctioned orthodoxy can
be branded as deviants, heretics or apostates. The potential for abuse is all
the more real because governments in many Muslim countries are either
semi-authoritarian or fully authoritarian, and civil, political and religious
rights remain severely curtailed. Further, religion and religious institutions
in these countries are often subordinated to the government. Such govern-
ments can use their authority to persuade or, if necessary, force religious
officials and institutions to question the religious beliefs of political
opponents and dissidents. The authoritarian tendencies inherent in these
countries also mean that there are very few, if any, institutional safeguards,
such as accountability through elected representatives of parliament, or via
the courts, or through pressure from NGOs or the media, to check abuses.

For these reasons, it is essential to formulate an idea of religious
freedom that is in harmony with existential realities and can take into
account both Islamic belief and cultural diversity within nation-states. It is
rather premature to believe that nation-states in the Muslim world are
going to disappear or that a new single Muslim state will emerge with a
caliphal system in which one caliph leads the faithful. Even a cursory look
at the map of the Muslim world – with all its political, theological,
economic and cultural differences – reveals that there are considerable
divisions and differences among Muslims which would prevent the realiz-
ation of such an idea. It is inconceivable that these Muslim states can be
politically united under one umbrella, as some Muslims seem to believe,
or that all Muslims will be residing in a dar al-islam that accommodates
only Muslims as citizens.

If we are right about the way the world is moving, we will not be seeing
more compartmentalization of the world into religious blocs. On the
contrary, globalization will bring far more intensive linkages and mixes of
people from a variety of religious backgrounds into the same space. With
the increasing intensity of globalization, interaction and multiculturalism,
many of the pre-modern ideas that Muslims inherited appear to be imprac-
tical and unrealistic. Recognizing these new realities, many Muslim social
systems have adopted modern ideas associated with religious freedom.
However, tensions remain between the stated objectives and realities of life
in a modern Muslim nation-state, and these tensions reflect the disjunction
between the pre-modern and the postmodern world.

Today, almost all Muslim countries are multi-religious societies. Simi-
larly there is no Muslim state with a population who follow the same legal
and/or theological school. Even in Saudi Arabia, where all citizens are
Theoretically Muslim, there is a significant Shi'ite population. Several million Christians, Hindus and Buddhists are also long-term guest workers. The population of Yemen, for example, comprises Muslims (including Shafi'is and Zaydis), and small numbers of Jews, Christians and even Hindus. The Kuwaiti population comprises Sunnis and Shi'is, as well as Christians, Hindus and Parsis.

In addition, a substantial number of Muslims live as minorities elsewhere. Approximately 7 million Muslims live in the United States alone, and more than 15 million Muslims live in Europe as minorities. There are approximately 60 million Muslims in China and 140 million in India. Here apostasy laws have no meaning within the legal structures of these states. Muslims are free to convert or simply not to follow any religion at all, without detriment to their basic rights. In this context the pre-modern distinction between 'Muslim' territory and 'non-Muslim' territory is blurred. Categories in pre-modern Islamic law such as the 'abode of Islam' (dar al-islam) and 'the abode of war' (dar al-harb) are therefore not useful as categories that locate Muslims. Given globalization and increasing mobility, it is common for people of various faiths to live side by side. In a world of information exchange where proselytizing is widely practised, there is no doubt that conversions will occur across religious boundaries.

An important but rarely discussed challenge to laws on apostasy is the issue of 'silent apostasy'. In all Muslim communities there are what may be called both practising and non-practising (that is, nominal) Muslims. Practising Muslims themselves vary in their commitment to Islamic rituals, commandments and prohibitions. Some may be totally committed and devoted to both the fundamentals and non-fundamentals of the religion; others may adhere only to the fundamentals such as the five daily prayers, fasting, zakat, and pilgrimage. Some believers may practise many fundamentals but ignore others and be irregular in their practice.

Besides those practising Islam at varying levels there are the merely nominal or 'cultural' Muslims; that is, those who have only a minimal affiliation with Islam. Nominal Muslims may carry a name of Muslim origin, live in a Muslim community, and identify themselves with Islam when asked about religious affiliation. They may have a superficial, distorted or vague familiarity with what Muslims 'do'. Nominal Muslims are not usually interested in observing religious practices apart from occasional attendance at 'Id prayer or participation in community religious-cultural activities. They have little commitment to Islam, and do not abide by its commandments or prohibitions. In all Muslim communities, there are numerous such nominal Muslims though there are no reliable studies in this area and even estimates of numbers are hard to find. Even if we estimate conservatively a quarter of the Muslim population to be nominal Muslims, this still represents at least 300 million Muslims.

Nominal Muslims present a major challenge to the law of apostasy. They profess Islam outwardly and perhaps incidentally, but have no commitment
to it or its practices. From an Islamic legal perspective, one could argue that these nominal Muslims are akin to apostates if not actually apostates. In pre-modern Islamic law, it was widely held that anyone who did not, for instance, perform the obligatory requirements of the five daily prayers would fall into the category of apostate. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the Muslim who does not pray (the five daily prayers) must be ordered to do so; if he refuses, he must be put to death. He will not be washed before burial, no prayer will be performed for him, and he will not be buried in a Muslim cemetery. Ibn Taymiyyah's view is not isolated; as far as the fundamental religious obligations are concerned, many ulama would concur with him, at least in theory. In fact, many view Abu Bakr's (the first caliph) engagement in the so-called 'wars of apostasy' as fighting apostates whose crime was the refusal to pay zakat, a fundamental part of Islam like the prayers.

One reason why some Muslims and Muslim regimes feel the need to introduce apostasy laws today is to curtail conversions from Islam. However, Muslims also seek to convert non-Muslims. The fact that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world is indicative of this. In countries like Malaysia the number of people converting to Islam is far greater than the number of Muslims who renounce Islam. Therefore, it follows that if states were to introduce apostasy laws, Muslims could be prevented from converting non-Muslims to Islam. It would be inequitable to suggest that only Muslims should have the right to proselytize. Further, forcing Muslims to adhere to their religion would categorize them as hypocrites in the eyes of the Qur'an. People who remain as Muslims under threat of force are unlikely to have anything beneficial to offer to Islam. Criminalizing apostasy does not address the real issue; it only gives the impression that Islam is an imposed religion. It may only succeed in offending the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world who embrace Islam voluntarily, not by force. Therefore, a more effective and practical alternative needs to be found to prevent Muslims from renouncing Islam.

It seems that, with the exception of a vocal group of militants, ultra-conservatives and some extremists, a large number of Muslims throughout the Muslim world are moving away from the notion of an enforced religion to one of the profession of a religion as a covenant between an individual and God. This is closer to the Qur'anic idea of non-coercion in matters of faith and religion, which was so strongly emphasized in the Qur'an in a variety of contexts. Unlike the pre-modern period in which 'non-coercion in religion' was considered to have been 'abrogated', the modern view that is emerging among Muslims is that non-coercion remains a fundamental principle of Islam and that Islam guarantees religious freedom to all. Nevertheless, many Muslims have remained reluctant to take the logical step of examining apostasy laws and declaring them irrelevant to their life today. Others, although only a few, are arguing for doing away with apostasy laws that adversely affect the individual's basic rights as a person
and are pressing for reform in this area. Given that the religio-political context in which apostasy laws were first put into effect in the post-prophetic period has lost its meaning and relevance in the modern period, it is important to rethink the law of apostasy and its punishment. The weak textual basis of the law of apostasy provides a strong Qur'anic justification for embarking on the task of reforming this law.

Chapter 13


Appendix 1

1. This is an unofficial copy provided by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia.
Author/s: SAEED, ABDULLAH; Saeed, Hassan

Title: The need to rethink apostasy laws

Date: 2004


Publication Status: Published

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34571

File Description: The need to rethink apostasy laws

Terms and Conditions: Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.