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What Islam says on religious freedom

By **Magdi Abdelhadi**
BBC Arab affairs analyst**Afghan Abdul Rahman, who converted to Christianity, had been charged with rejecting Islam and potentially faced the death penalty.**

But what do Islamic teachings say about the issue?

Freedom of belief is enshrined in the Koran - the foremost textual authority in laying down the principles of Islamic law. But there is disagreement among Muslim scholars as to the limits of that freedom.

"There is no compulsion in religion" (al-Baqarah, 256); is one of the most quoted phrases from the Koran to back up freedom of belief.

There is no clear-cut text in the Koran, however, that calls for the killing of apostates. But those who call for the execution of Muslims who abandon their faith base their judgement primarily on the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, also known as the hadith.

These constitute a secondary textual authority - albeit weaker than the Koran itself -



There is no clear-cut text in the Koran calling apostates to be killed

“ If someone changes from Islam to kufr (unbelief), that has to remain a personal**AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE FEATURES AND ANALYSIS****Regional focus**

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used in formulating Islamic law, or Sharia.

Abdelsabour Shahin, an Islamist writer and academic at Cairo University, told the BBC that although Islam in principle enshrined freedom of belief, there were severe restrictions on that freedom.

"If someone changes from Islam to kufr (unbelief), that has to remain a personal matter, and he should not make it public," he said.

In other words, an apostate in a Muslim society, according to this view, forfeits his freedom of expression. If he goes public he should be executed, says Dr Shahin.

But if the Koran has not stipulated the killing of apostates, how does Dr Shahin come to this judgement?

He says there is an authoritative and unambiguous hadith (saying of the prophet) which calls for the killing of the apostate - "He who changes his religion should be killed", says Dr Shahin, quoting from the sayings of the prophet.

Others disagree. Professor Abdelmouti Bayoumi of the Islamic Research Academy in Cairo told the BBC that the generality of the aforementioned hadith has been restricted by another hadith from the prophet.

Dr Bayoumi says that according to that hadith changing one's religion alone is not enough for applying capital punishment.

He says the apostate has also to be found working against the interests of the Muslim society or nation - only then should he be executed.

Interests of the state

matter, and he should not make it public ”

Abdelsabour Shahin,
Islamist writer, Cairo University

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Abdul Rahman converted to Christianity 16 years ago

Dr Bayoumi's stance is a good example of modernisers, who try to reconcile between Islamic tradition and modern practice.

An apostate in this perspective is a traitor. He is punished, not for what he believes in, but for what he does and which could be harmful to the interests of the state.

But Dr Shahin says the mere fact that someone goes public with his apostasy "amounts to fitna (sedition, or civil strife), he is thus like someone fighting Islam, and should therefore be killed."

Writers like Dr Shahin derive their position from the interpretations of classical scholars, all of whom have endorsed the principle of capital punishment for apostates.

“ Each and every individual has the right to change his religion without any conditions whatsoever ”

Gamal al-Banna,
Islamic thinker

The question is, how have they adopted this stance in the face of abundant evidence from the Koran itself in favour of freedom of belief?

Gamal al-Banna - an Islamic thinker and brother of the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood - says the reason for that is political and has nothing to do with the Koran itself.

Mr al-Banna says the classical interpretations are more than 1,000 years old, and were formulated at a time of state building where conformity and social cohesion were deemed more important than personal freedom.

He adds that "each and every individual has the right to change his religion without any conditions whatsoever.

"That person has also the right to campaign for his views, provided he does so peacefully," he told the BBC.

Today, views like that of Mr al-Banna are in the minority.

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