



How Apostasy
& Blasphemy
Codes are
silenced

Choking
Freedom
Worldwide

Paul Marshall & Nina Shea

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*How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are
Choking Freedom Worldwide*

PAUL MARSHALL AND NINA SHEA

with a Foreword by

KYAI HAJI ABDURRAHMAN WAHID

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Renewing Qur'anic Studies in the Contemporary World

NASR HAMID ABU-ZAYD

Introductory Remarks

The events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist violence have stimulated tremendous interest, and concern regarding the socio-political and intellectual conditions of the Muslim world, and how they impact the West. Yet, confusion about the “true” nature of Islam, and the threat we are facing remains prevalent among Western policy-makers, journalists and the general public. To a substantial extent, this confusion among Western observers arises from the fact that Muslim fundamentalists deliberately and consistently promote a “reading” of Islam whereby every socio-political issue must be viewed through a suffocatingly narrow theological lens. As a result, all too many analysts in the West have displayed the unfortunate tendency to conflate the religion of Islam with “Muslims” and “the Muslim world,” employing these terms loosely and interchangeably when describing a variety of pathologies that afflict contemporary Muslim societies throughout the world. This, in turn, has the effect of converting socio-political controversies into theological ones, and thereby generating within non-Muslims a profound unease with and mistrust of Islam, and its adherents, as well as a blindness on how to address the problem of Muslim radicalism.

Promoting the notion of a single unified entity called the *ummah* (“the Community of Believers”), Muslim fundamentalists ignore the enormous social, cultural and theological diversity that exists both within, and between, the world’s various Muslim-majority states. Even within the Arab Middle East, Saudi Arabia’s official Wahhabi Islam is highly distinctive, characterized by numerous features completely at odds with the traditional Islam historically practiced by most inhabitants of Mecca, Medina and the wider Arab and Islamic world. The Wahhabis, like other Muslim fundamentalists, propagate the naive concept of an ideal and ahistorical Islam, which is narrowly defined, restrictive, legalistic, monolithic, compulsory and supremacist vis-à-vis not only those of other faiths,

but even the vast majority of Muslims, who remain traditional in their beliefs. This version of Islam is that of the “sword,” as prominently displayed in the flag of Saudi Arabia. The Islam of mercy, compassion and profound spiritual devotion, which regards the world’s cultural and religious diversity as a divine blessing, is far beyond the reach of the fundamentalists’ narrow vision.

Indonesia’s former president, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, rightly identified this “extreme and perverse ideology in the minds of fanatics” – widely propagated throughout the world, with the aid of Arab petrodollars – as the source of a compelling threat not only to the West, but to Muslims and Islam itself: “This crisis of misunderstanding – of Islam by Muslims themselves – is compounded by the failure of governments, people of other faiths, and the majority of well-intentioned Muslims to resist, isolate and discredit this dangerous ideology. The crisis thus afflicts Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with tragic consequences. Failure to understand the true nature of Islam permits the continued radicalization of Muslims world-wide, while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight.”¹

It is imperative that Muslims and non-Muslims alike free ourselves from the framework of the fundamentalists’ monolithic discourse on Islam. Otherwise, we will either misjudge Islam, by conflating it with the dominant discourse of the radicals – just as Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, in his video *Fitna*, mirrors the ideology of Osama bin Laden – or we will adopt an unrealistic and apologetic stance, de-contextualizing Islam from past and present circumstances, so as to convince ourselves that it is “purely a religion of peace,” divorced from the violence so often committed in its name.

The first view maintains that Islam is evil, dangerous and incapable of being reformed. This “anti-Islam discourse” mirrors and echoes the Islamist viewpoint, which is thus taken for granted as representing the one and only “true” Islam. The second approach is equally unrealistic, presenting Islam as a well-defined ethical, spiritual and purely idealistic a-historical religious phenomenon. The problem with this approach is that it totally ignores the reality on the ground in the Muslim world, where radicals have often succeeded in donning a mantle of religious authenticity, and are rapidly advancing towards their goal of “welding” Islam to their virulent socio-political ideology.

Rather than fall into the trap of either demonizing or idealizing Islam and Muslims in general, we must realistically assess conditions in the Muslim world, and develop a balanced, mature understanding of Islam itself, consistent with the needs of humanity and life in the modern world.

One highly effective way to accomplish these objectives is to reject the fundamentalists’ dogmatic framework and instead locate Islam within its historical context, in order to understand how it emerged, and how it developed within Arabia and other parts of the world. In particular, this requires us to approach the Qur’an, Islam’s foundational scripture, from an objective historical perspective, examining how it was transmitted, propagated, codified and ultimately canonized. Through this process, we can begin to determine the “spheres” and limitations of the meanings it provides, and

1. Wahid, Abdurrahman. “Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2005, <http://www.libforall.org/news-WSJ-right-islam-vs.-wrong-islam.html>.

thus ascertain its significance within the context of various contemporary societies, free of extremist dogma and the ideology of religious hatred, yet richly imbued with moral and spiritual import.

Such a mature, spiritual and “contextualized” understanding of the Qur'an will displace the fundamentalists' monolithic and ahistorical worldview. Widely disseminated, it will allow pluralism and tolerance to become the dominant discourse within Muslim societies worldwide. Such an understanding also represents an appropriate way to respond to criticism of Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet. Intellectually sound responses that convey the spiritual message of Islam should be employed rather than angry rhetoric, which only encourages violence.

The Sociopolitical and Cultural Contexts

According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an is the speech of God, which conveys the “message” revealed to humans through Muhammad, who was the messenger of God, and human himself. A message represents a communicative link between a speaker and recipient, delivered via a code or linguistic system. Without such a code, messages will not be intelligible to recipients. In the case of the Qur'an, the Arabic language – the human code of the recipient – is the code of communication between the Divine and humans, simply because the Divine code, if any, is unlikely to be comprehended by humans. Besides, the message was not intended for the recipient (Muhammad) alone; rather, it was meant to be transmitted to the recipient's community and beyond. Therefore, it had to be comprehended by the Arabic-speaking community of Mecca and the Arabian Peninsula in general. “We never sent a messenger but with the language of his people, that he might make it clear for them,” states the Qur'an (14:4).²

Since the speaker (God) cannot be the object of scientific study, it is only possible for scholars to approach the message as encoded in the language of the recipient and his community. To accomplish that objective, scholars need all available information about the first recipient, Muhammad, and his surrounding community. In other words, scholars must begin their analysis of the Qur'anic message by studying its contextual reality and 7th century Arab culture. “Reality” here refers to the socio-political conditions that encompassed those who were addressed by the Qur'an, including its first recipient, and which framed their lives, thought and actions. Culture includes the conceptual framework embodied in a language, in this case, the language in which the Qur'an is expressed.

To analyze the Qur'anic message by studying its socio-political and cultural reality is to start with empirical facts. The scholarly analysis of such facts can help us to achieve an accurate understanding of the Qur'an, including the realization that the Qur'an is a product of 7th century Arab culture.

The overarching reality, however, is far more complex than this. While arising within the particular culture of 7th century Arabia, the Qur'an was taken to heart by its recipients and in turn produced a *new* culture, imbued with profound spiritual as well as socio-political and cultural dimensions. The

2. See my lecture, “The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication,” inaugural lecture for the Cleveringa Chair at Leiden University (November 27th, 2000) http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/forum/01_1/onderzoek/2.htm.

Qur'an's linguistics exhibit a number of unique characteristics which were widely acknowledged and admired by contemporary Arabs, including some of Muhammad's opponents. From this uniqueness emerged the notion of the absolute "inimitability" - *i'jaz* - of the Qur'an.

Although it is necessary to analyse and interpret the Qur'an within the contextual environment in which it originated, the understanding of the Qur'an possessed by the first and subsequent generations of Muslims should by no means be considered absolute or final. The specific linguistic encoding dynamics of the Qur'an allow an endless process of decoding. In this process, we should not simplify or ignore its contextual socio-political and cultural meaning; in fact, this "meaning" is vital to indicate the direction of any "new" or contemporary message of the text. This direction facilitates our transition from the text's literal "meaning" to its "significance" in any given socio-cultural context, including the present. It also enables the interpreter to correctly and efficiently extract the "historical" and "temporal" elements of the message, which carry no significance in the present context.

In other words, the "deep structure" of the Qur'an must be reconstructed from the surface structure, which was specific to 7th century Arab culture. Subsequently, this deep structure must give rise to other, surface structures, including contemporary ones, suitable to successive generations of Muslim society in various regions of the earth. This entails an interpretive diversity - clearly seen throughout Muslim history, particularly as practiced by Sufis, or Islamic mystics - without which the Message would "harden" and degenerate, and the Qur'an would become, as it is now, subject to political and other forms of self-interested manipulation exercised by so-called "guardians" of Islam.

The innovative approach to Qur'anic study that I have long proposed in my various writings³ on the process of modern Qur'anic interpretation entails the use of traditional exegetical methods *and* modern linguistic methodologies, in addition to the analysis of socio-historical reality and culture. By recognizing the difference between the original contextual "meaning," which is virtually fixed because of its historicity, and the "significance" in a particular socio-cultural context, which is changeable, and furthermore, by realizing that the significance must be strongly related and rationally connected to the meaning, we can produce more valid contemporary interpretations. Of course, any interpretations of the Qur'an produced using such a methodology are not exempt from the reality that *every* interpretation is historically and culturally constructed.

Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws Stifle Progress and Hinder Peaceful Coexistence

In early Islam, there emerged a debate between a rational school of theology known as the Mu` tazial that claimed that the Qur'an is "created" not eternal and other theological schools of thought that

3. I have more recently pursued my work in this area in conjunction with LibForAll Foundation (www.libforall.org), through its International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS). The International Institute of Qur'anic Studies has its base of operations in Indonesia, where Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid and Dr. Syafi'i Ma'arif - former heads of the world's two largest Muslim organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, with a total of 70 million members - work closely with the IIQS, serving as its patrons and senior advisors.

held that the Qur'an is the "eternal" verbatim speech of God. In the Mu'tazilites' view, an "uncreated" Qur'an is inconsistent with the concept of pure monotheism, *tawhid*, a pivotal concept in Islam. Socio-historical analysis demonstrates that these schools did not hold their respective views in a vacuum; rather, they expressed in religious terminologies the different socio-political positions of their adherents. Eventually, the notion of an "eternal and uncreated" Qur'an became the dominant accepted dogma in Sunni Islam. Unfortunately, the history of this debate is either unknown or ignored by nearly all contemporary Sunni clerics and scholars. Instead, the doctrine of "eternity" is presented as the Truth, while the doctrine of "creation" is denounced as heresy.

As a result, the notion that religious texts, although Divine and revealed by God, are culturally constructed and historically determined is not only rejected by the Muslim establishment, but actively condemned as "apostasy." There is frequently no clear distinction made between heresy, blasphemy and apostasy within the Muslim world. Instead, Islamist radicals deliberately conflate these terms in order to attack any discourse that strays from the narrow bounds of their fundamentalist ideology. Having been at the receiving end of such allegations – and driven from my home in Egypt to exile in the Netherlands – I can state with conviction that charges of apostasy and blasphemy are key weapons in the fundamentalists' arsenal, strategically employed to prevent reform of Muslim societies, and instead confine the world's Muslim population to a bleak, colorless prison of socio-cultural and political conformity. There is little hope of escape from this imprisonment, as long as fundamentalists – and the opportunistic and/or authoritarian regimes that compete with them in a chase to the lowest common denominator of Islam – continue to serve as prison guards and wardens.

Laws penalizing blasphemy and apostasy exist in most Muslim-majority countries throughout the world, and act as a severe constraint upon the use of reason to explore and understand the contemporary significance of the Qur'an's profound message. By forcefully silencing critical inquiry, such laws play directly into the hands of Islamic radicals, who seek to unify and politicize Muslim societies not only against the West, but against the very concept and principles of modern life, such as freedom, justice, human rights and the dignity of man, which are themselves inseparable from the right to freedom of conscience and expression. Perhaps the greatest irony is that these core principles – which lie at the heart of any just and humane society – are deeply embedded in the message of the Qur'an itself, and yet ignored by Islam's most fervent, and violent, "defenders."

For although the Qur'an prescribes no earthly punishment for either blasphemy or apostasy, the historical development of Islamic law has widely, though not universally, prescribed the death penalty as punishment for both. A critical historical study of the Qur'an, *hadith* and *shari`a* would reveal the human origin of these interpretations, and hence their complete inappropriateness within a modern context.

This objective historical approach to studying the foundational elements of Islamic law is fiercely resisted by many clerics and mullahs. Yet it is absolutely vital, if we are to liberate the "deep substance" of the Holy Qur'an's message, which proclaims the Prophet Muhammad (and hence, by implication, Islam itself) to be "a blessing for all creation."

The late Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd was Academic Director of the International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS), a branch of LibForAll Foundation. He is the author of numerous scholarly works on Islam in both Arabic and English and is known for developing a humanistic interpretation of the Qur'an. Formerly Professor of Arabic Literature at Cairo University, he left when Egypt's highest court ruled that, because of his views, he was an apostate and must be forcibly divorced from his Muslim wife. He also received death threats from Ayman Al Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda. Abu-Zayd held the Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics in the Netherlands and was awarded the Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2005. He died in Cairo on July 5, 2010.