



## Apostasy in Islam and Christian Mission of Evangelization

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**Abstract:** *The Islamic law of apostasy has recently been a hotly debated issue among religious scholars. Several incidents have occurred that have raised concerns about the punishment for apostasy. In 1985, the Sudanese scholar Muhammad Mahmūd Taha was accused of apostasy and was executed for his interpretation of the Quran. In 1995, the Appeal Court in Cairo declared the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd an Apostate and ordered his separation from his wife. Similarly, two Iranian religious intellectuals, Hashem Aghajari and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, were initially sentenced to death for apostasy, but their sentence was later changed to imprisonment. (Akbar 2018, 666) In 2014, Mubarak Bala from Kano, Nigeria, was targeted after he renounced Islam. (Igwe 2022) The majority of Muslim jurists agree that apostasy in Islam is a serious offense, but the punishment for apostasy is a subject of intense controversy. Traditionalists argue that it is punishable by death, while progressive scholars disagree. This article will discuss the views of two scholars, Abul A'la Maududi, a traditionalist, and Abdullah Saeed, a progressive, on apostasy. We will provide an overview of apostasy, examine the perspectives of Maududi and Saeed, analyze the tensions between them, and explore the implications of apostasy laws. In conclusion, we will argue for reimagining apostasy laws to align with a modern, diverse society.*

**Keywords:** *Apostasy in Islam, Christianity, Mission and Evangelization, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The town of Gusau in Zamfara state has a predominantly Muslim population and has followed the teachings of Islam since its establishment. According to local traditions, the town was founded by Malam Sambo Dan Ashafa, a respected scholar whose father had roots in the Chad Basin (Kanem-Borno empire). This historical background explains why the people of Gusau actively supported and participated as warriors and craftsmen during the religious wars of the nineteenth century. As a result, Gusau became home to many Islamic scholars, Friday mosques, and daily prayer mosques located throughout the residential areas and marketplaces. (Chubado Umaru and Obajobi 2022) In 1999, Zamfara State became the first state in Nigeria to implement Sharia Law as the governing law across the entire state. (Nardi et al. 2019, 17) This means that all Muslims are subject to Sharia law in their daily lives. Given this strong Islamic background, apostasy is not only a crime but a heinous offense punishable by death.

Ishaka Daki (not real name) lived and worked in one of the very few Christian schools in Zamfara. In June 2000, the day began normally enough for Daki. But little did he know that was the last time he would set his eyes on his family. As usual, Daki kissed his aged mother goodbye and left for his place of work, where he taught Islam in a Christian High School. Daki had spent years teaching in Christian schools and gradually fell in love with Christian teachings.

On this fateful day, Daki approached me and announced that he had decided to convert from Islam to Christianity. Shortly after revealing his decision, Daki was declared wanted by the Muslim community for apostatizing. While some progressive Muslims believed Daki had the right to change his religion, the traditionalists insisted that he must renounce his new religion publicly or face the death penalty. There was a reward offered for anyone who could deliver Daki alive to the Sharia police. Fearing for his life, Daki fled to another city, leaving behind his elderly mother and his entire family.

The apostasy law is a challenge not only for Christians in Nigeria but also in many other countries. For example, Mariam Ibraheem, a Sudanese Christian, was imprisoned in December 2013 for apostasy and

blasphemy due to her faith. She was later sentenced to death because she refused to renounce her faith. Along with her 9-month-old son, Martin, she was imprisoned. The court sentenced her to 100 lashes for adultery because she had married a non-Muslim man. While in prison she discovered she was pregnant, and her sentence of execution was postponed until after her daughter was born. Mariam gave birth to her daughter, Maya, chained in a prison cell in May 2014. Mariam's story gained international attention, and many advocated for her release. Mariam and her children were released soon after Maya's birth and finally allowed to leave Sudan accompanied by the Italian deputy foreign minister. (Set My People Free International 2022)

My interest in studying Islamic apostasy stems from my personal experiences with apostates and the stories of people who have been expelled from their communities or even killed for changing their religions. These experiences have led me to reflect on the extent to which orthodoxy gives way in the face of developments in a tradition, especially when that development might imply letting go of a long-held view that jeopardizes the dignity and peace of individuals in a community.

This article is a methodological analysis of the Islamic law of apostasy and its implications for the Christian mission of evangelization, human rights, and religious freedom. The research is based on existing texts and literature. The analysis and conclusions drawn in the article rely solely on secondary data obtained from historical records and scholarly interpretations of those records. By utilizing qualitative and descriptive-analytical methods, the research provides invaluable insights into how Islam and Christianity can pursue their mission of evangelization without infringing on each other's rights to life or freedom.

### 2. ISLAMIC LAW OF APOSTASY- SYNOPSIS

Apostasy originates from the Arabic verb *Radda*, which means "turning back."<sup>1</sup> *Riddah* and *Trinidad* are two other terms that denote apostasy: turning back from Islam to another religion or to unbelief. An apostate is referred to as a '*murtad*.' For example, *Radda-yard* implies turning back on one's faith after embracing it. (Cottee, 2015, pp. 12–14.) According to Islamic teaching, apostasy denotes the renunciation of the Islamic faith or the abandonment of the very epistemological and moral tenets of the Islamic faith. (Cottee, 2015, p. 14) Further, some modern Islamic scholars tend to define apostasy as rejecting the fundamental beliefs in Islam. (Wajis & Norazman, 2018). The center of the debate about apostasy revolves primarily not around its meaning but on the punishment for apostates. Some Islamic scholars argue that apostates should be punished by death, while others say that "To simply kill anyone who chooses to follow a religion other than Islam is against the fundamental teachings of the Qur'an." (Kutty, 2023). Opponents of capital punishment for apostasy wonder about the prescribed penalty, if any, for apostasy in Islam and how this relates to the demand for religious tolerance as stipulated in the following Suras of the Qur'an. "There shall be no compulsion in matters of faith" (Sura 2:256) and "Don't be in a hurry to fight; God will allow evil people to destroy themselves."? (Sura 19:83, 84)?<sup>2</sup> Muslim scholars view apostasy as a serious offense, but there are differing opinions between traditionalists and progressives on how the punishment for apostasy should be implemented. This article explores the perspectives of Maududi, representing the traditional view, and Saeed, representing the progressive view, and their implications for apostates and the Christian mission of evangelization. These two scholars have been chosen for their significant contributions to Islamic scholarship in their respective fields. The following sections will explore Maududi and Saeed's views on apostasy laws.

#### 2.1. Abul A'la Maududi's View on The Law Of Apostasy

Maududi was a Sunni Indian/Pakistani journalist, theologian, political philosopher, and Muslim revivalist leader. He founded a movement called *Jamaat-e-Islam*, the Islamic revival party. (Vahdat,

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<sup>2</sup> In the Qur'an:

Mirza Tahir Ahmad suggests that these verses indicate that anyone who, out of fear of punishment or death, decides to renounce Islam has the right to do so, but no one else can declare them an apostate. The right to declare oneself an apostate belongs solely to the individual. The Quran does not grant this right to others. In other words, one is free to leave one's own religion but cannot force others to do the same. According to Islamic teachings, religious scholars, clergy, or any intolerant individuals or governments cannot declare someone an apostate. (Ahmad 1989)

2015, pp. 57–92) He believed Islam should be restored to its pristine state, which meant eradicating all other forms of religion in Pakistan and making Pakistan an Islamic state. Maududi argues for an uncompromising defense of the death penalty for apostasy and a return to the era when apostates received the harshest capital punishment. (Ahmad, 2003) One of the reasons why Maududi believes apostates should receive capital punishment is because such a severe consequence deters people from leaving the faith. For Maududi, therefore, the legitimacy of the execution of apostates is not negotiable, and there is no alternative. Maududi declares that apostates must be executed to prevent the spread of unbelief in Islamic states. (M. Z. Khan, 1984, p. 55) In order to construct his argument, Maududi utilizes the Qur'an and Islamic tradition.

### 2.1.1. *The Qur'an and Tradition on the Penalty for Apostasy*

In defense of Maududi's position, he cites Sura 9-11-12: "And if they break their oaths after their treaty and defame your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief, for indeed, there are no oaths (sacred) to them; (fight them that) they might cease." Other Quranic verses that are used to support capital punishment include the following: "For those who disbelieve in their Lord is the chastisement of hell, and an evil resort it is" (Quran 67:6) and "Whoso seeks a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the losers" (Quran 3:84–86). Maududi uses these quotations in the Quran to argue for capital punishment for apostates.

Maududi provides further evidence to support his claim by citing the first and the third successors of Muhammad (caliphs), Ab Bakr and Uthman, stating that: "He who changes his religion, kill him." (Saeed & Saeed, 2004b p. 35) Maududi also cites a report that states that Muhammad is said to have allowed the killing of a Muslim in three cases: Murder, adultery, and apostasy. (Brown, 2020 Another narrative about the Prophet used to justify capital punishment for apostate states.: "Whereas Ibn Khatal, who was, without doubt, one of the four executed on the fall of Mecca, was an apostate, he had also committed the crime of murdering his traveling companion..."(Ahmad 1989). Based on these sources, Maududi concludes that capital punishment was prescribed for apostates. His position on apostasy is reflected in the following statement: "In our domain, we neither allow any Muslim to change his religion nor allow any other religion to propagate its faith."(Ahmad 1989) This statement reveals Maududi's zero tolerance for apostates. Mirza Tahir Ahmad thinks that Maududi's ideas on apostasy originate from an interpretive error of the Qur'an and early Muslim jurisprudence.(Ahmad 1989) Mirza argues that neither the Qur'an nor the tradition lends support to the death penalty for apostates, as Maududi claimed.

### 2.1.2. *Analysis- Maududi's Viewpoints-*

I would like to highlight three major issues with Maududi's stance on apostasy. Firstly, his argument seems to be based on his subjective interpretation of the Islamic tradition, making it difficult to consider new and unforeseen events or cultural circumstances. Further, it seems Maududi is unwilling to give attention to such circumstances in his discussion of apostasy, or when he does, he believes that the Islamic tradition should interpret them rather than objective analysis. As a result, Maududi's argument lacks an "objective interpretation" or the inability to think outside of his viewpoint. Lee H. Yearly asserts that the inability to think outside one's religious viewpoint leads to insensitivity and impatience towards differing moral views and satisfaction with the caricatures of those views. (Yearly 1990, 196) In addition, Anil Kumar, Ashutosh Pandey, Safiullah Ansari, and Jitendra Prasad Yadav point out that stepping outside our own religious frameworks and engaging with unfamiliar religious traditions with an open mind and a genuine desire to learn can help us overcome ethnocentrism and cultural bias. (Kumar et al. 2023, 116)

Maududi's argument for capital punishment for apostates inaccurately draws from the Islamic tradition, based on his interpretation of the hadith, "As for he who changes his religion, kill him." Maududi interprets this statement as a religious and moral duty to kill apostates. However, Mohamed S. El-Awa disagrees with Maududi's interpretation of this hadith. He argues that there are counterarguments made by progressive Muslim scholars regarding the mentioned hadiths. These scholars question the reliability of the transmission of the hadiths mentioned above, while others believe that the hadith stating "whoever changes his religion, kill him" is too general and lacks specificity. The hadith does not provide any details on the circumstances in which this punishment should be applied and could be interpreted to mean that anyone who changes their religion should be executed, regardless of which religion they

convert to. This could even include non-Muslims who convert to Islam or Jews who convert to Christianity. (El-Awa 1982, 53)

Second, there is a significant hermeneutical issue when examining the evidence in the Islamic tradition that contradicts Maududi's position. Scholars like Christine Schirrmacher and Muhammad Zafrulla Khan have criticized Maududi's narrow-minded interpretation of Islamic law and his uncontextualized approach to it. Every religion is contextual, bound by time and space. As Ali Akbar notes, "Contextualization, in general, maintains that the Quranic teachings that concern social, political, and legal matters are context-specific." (Akbar 2018, 669) Some proponents of the death penalty for apostasy may argue that Islamic teachings are unchanging and not influenced by context or culture. They may also argue that the door to the discussion on the punishment for apostasy has been closed with "the Sword of 'Consensus.'" (Alalwani, 2011, p. 2) In other words, the death penalty for apostates is considered irrevocable. However, Abdolkarim Soroush challenges this claim by asserting that there are distinctions between religious beliefs and religious knowledge. While the former is sacred and unchangeable, the latter is subject to context and human interpretation. (Soroush 200AD, 31) Therefore, Maududi failed to understand that while dogmatic teachings are unchangeable, interpretations vary in every given context. Furthermore, Ahmad Shafaat asserts that those who argue that the death penalty for apostasy cannot be revoked do so because they tend to cling to traditional views that are no longer suitable for a diverse society. (Shafaat, 2006).

Third, there is a distinction between individuals' religious affiliations and their political identities. As society becomes more diverse, membership does not depend on one's religious affiliation but on the right to life, which is everyone's right. (Human Rights Commission, 2019, p. Section 16) Furthermore, accepting or denying a faith tradition is an individual right (Muzaffar, 2007), and there is absolutely no doubt regarding the right to choose any faith of one's preference. (Raysunī, 2009) Opponents of the death penalty for apostasy continue to argue that apostasy and anti-blasphemy laws are regularly abused. They explain that these laws are inherently vague and applied arbitrarily, and neither the Sharia nor international human rights law sanctions their application. Maududi's assertion that capital punishment must be meted out at all costs without opening the formulation of his arguments to the discourse on human rights raises another layer of complexity. As mentioned earlier, one may ask, to what extent does orthodoxy give way in the face of developments in a tradition, especially when that development might imply letting go of a long-held view that jeopardizes the peace of a community?

In the previous section, we discussed Maududi's assertion regarding the death penalty for apostates. He uses the Qur'an and Islamic tradition to support his argument. However, scholars have refuted Maududi's assertion, arguing that it lacks substance and that it is a misinterpretation of the Qur'an and hadith regarding the penalty for apostates. The next section will discuss Saeed's perspective.

### 3. ABUDULLAH'S SAEED'S VIEWPOINTS ON THE LAW OF APOSTASY

Saeed received his education from both the Pakistani and Saudi Arabian educational systems. However, he found a new home in a Western democracy that values a multi-religious society and complete religious freedom (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a). As a result, Saeed has developed a differentiated attitude towards the universal duty of applying resolutions from the early Islamic legal community and society, particularly in a society where Muslims are the minority. He evaluates legal sources against the reality of the society in which he currently resides.

In contrast to Maududi, Saeed assesses legal sources by comparing them to the actual practices and language of rights in Western societies (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a, p35). Saeed argues against the death penalty for apostates. He asserts that individuals should be able to choose their religious beliefs without the fear of being killed. The killing of apostates not only deprives them of their rights but also undermines their integrity as human beings. Saeed emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Qur'an and hadiths in a way that acknowledges the human right to life and freedom of religion. (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a, p. 35) Furthermore, Saeed points out that the Quran and Islamic traditional sources are often misinterpreted to support the concept of capital punishment for apostates. However, a close reading of these texts reveals that there are no prescribed punishments for apostates. In the following section, Saeed draws attention to the Qur'anic and traditional narrative on apostasy, emphasizing the lack of evidence for death penalties for apostates.

#### 3.1. *The Qur'an and Tradition on the Punishment for Apostates*



Advocates who support the death penalty for apostates often cite these Quranic verses in favor of their claims:

*O ye who believe, whoso from among you turns back from his religion, let him remember that in place of such a person, Allah will soon bring a people whom He will love and who will love Him, who will be kind and considerate towards the believers and firm and unyielding towards the disbelievers. They will strive hard in the cause of Allah and will not at all take to heart the reproaches of fault finders. That is Allah's grace; He bestows it upon whosoever He pleases. Allah is the Lord of vast bounty, All-Knowing. (Qur'an 5.55)*

*Whoso disbelieves in Allah after he has believed, excepting the case of one who is forced to make a declaration of disbelief while his heart rests securely in faith, but one who opens his mind wide to disbelief; on him is Allah's wrath and he shall have a grievous punishment. (Qur'an 16.107)*

*Muhammad is but a Messenger; of a surety, all Messengers before him have passed away. If then, he dies or be slain, will you turn back on your heels? He who turns back on his heels shall not harm Allah a whit. Allah will certainly reward the grateful. (Qur'an 3.145)*

Saeed argues that the Qur'anic verses mentioned above do not specify capital punishment for apostates in either case. Instead, it talks about severe punishment for apostates after death. (Syed, 2005). The punishment for apostasy is, in other words, God's responsibility. Furthermore, Saeed opines that such statements require more justification and clarification because the notion of a prescribed punishment for apostasy in the Qur'an is contested among Islamic scholars. (Rudolph & DeVries, 2009, p. 5)<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Saeed argues that those who advocate for capital punishment for apostates often overlook the Quranic and traditional teachings that advocate for individual religious freedom. Such as:

*In the Bukhari collection, the Hadith records the story of a man who converted to Islam and, after a while, asked Muhammad for permission to return to his former religion. Muhammad granted his request without prescribing any capital punishment. (Subhani, 2005, pp. 23–24)*

*Abu Qalabah reports on the authority of Anas that the Holy Prophet told the people of Akal or Uraynah to go and stay among his she-camels outside Medina. These people killed the keeper of the camels and ran away with the herd. Although it is true that these people had become apostates, their punishment was not a result of their Apostasy but of their murder of the keeper of the she-camels. (Ahmad 1989)*

Saeed explains that those who advocate for the death penalty for apostasy are misinterpreting the traditions about the Holy Prophet to an extreme degree.<sup>4</sup> These traditions do not provide any support for their argument. In fact, many traditions clearly indicate that there is no punishment for apostasy in this life. (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a, p. 35)

Other Islamic scholars, such as S. A. Rahman, support Saeed's view. He asserts that Islam does not specify punishment for apostasy. (Rahman, 1996.6) Additionally, Hesham A. Hassaballa corroborates Rahman, stating, "The Qur'an could not be any clearer that apostates are not to be killed" (Hassaballa, 2006). Furthermore, Hisam Hellyer adds that the jurists knew the Qur'anic verse on no death penalty for apostates and had no reason to ignore it. (Hellyer, 2008) Additionally, the silence of the Qur'an on the death penalty for apostates shows that there is no prescribed penalty for apostasy. (Badawi, 2022) There is also no evidence that Muhammad imposed capital punishment on apostates. (Halim, 2022) If there were such evidence, it would have been made available to the public, especially to Islamic jurisprudence. One also finds examples in the Islamic tradition of people who embraced Islam, later renounced it, and then returned to it without being apostatized. p. 6 (Arlandson, 1994) Saeed argues that there are statements in the Qur'an that contradict the hadith, often cited to support capital punishment for apostasy.: "Whoever changes his religion, kill him." (Bukhari, 1997, p. Volume 9, Book

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<sup>3</sup> Rehman Javaid argues that there are well-publicized disagreements among the four Sunni Schools of Islam regarding the penal punishment for apostates. The Hanafis do not agree to the execution of women apostates, while the Shafi'is and the Malikis allow a period for repentance before implementing the death penalty. (Rehman 2010)

<sup>4</sup> During the last ten years of Prophet Muhammad's time in Medina, some people pretended to be Muslims but secretly rejected Islam and tried to undermine the community from within. They took advantage of every opportunity to oppose the Prophet, but he never ordered them to be killed.". (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a, p. 35) According to Maududi's argument, these people should be considered "apostates.

83, no. 17) It is argued that the Quran 2:256, "There shall be no compulsion in (acceptance of) the religion," directly contradicts the above hadith. Since the Qur'an, the highest authority for Islam, does not prescribe the death penalty for apostasy, any contrary statement attributed to the Prophet in this manner should be taken with caution. Second, Saeed notes that these passages are subject to different interpretations. Some scholars argue that it does not apply to apostasy in a strict sense, while others say that it only applies to group apostasy and not to individual apostasy. (Akbar, 2018)

Third, Saeed is curious why the Qur'an doesn't mention this sensitive issue and why individuals like Ibn Abbas and Ali, who had close contact with the Prophet, never provided clear statements on the punishment for apostates. Also, Sunni and Shi'a scholars, the two major branches of Islam, have differing positions on the punishment for apostates. The four Islamic schools of thought also differ in their approaches to dealing with apostates. For example, the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools of Islamic law advocate for the separation of apostate couples, while the Hanafi school holds the view that they should not be separated. (Istifanus 2023, 141) Opponents of the death penalty for apostasy argue that "a change of religion is a personal matter and should not lead to any form of punishment, let alone the death penalty." (Akbar & Saeed, 2020, p. 2) Further, they assert that the Qur'an reserves the judgment for apostasy for God alone. (Beg, 2006) Thus, the sentencing to death of apostates goes against Qur'anic decrees on apostasy and is therefore un-Islamic. (Hamit, 2006, p. 32) Furthermore, Arzt maintains that the *Qur'anic* 'verses cajole the Muslim into adhering to the faith to avoid the temptation to convert, but the exhortation is moral, not penal.' (Arzt 1996)

Fourth, Saeed reiterates that the statement that "whoever turns away from Islam and leaves the community, kill him" is a misinterpretation of the text. He argues that to interpret this text to mean that apostates should be killed is not reading the text correctly. This is because the political situation in Medina in 622 CE is different from the political situation of today. For instance, in the early days of Islam, religion and politics were interwoven. Prophet Muhammad was considered to be both a religious and a political leader. (M. Khan, 2014) Muhammad remained a religious and political leader after the migration from Mecca to Medina. (Al-Olaqi, 2015, p. 65) He was a statesman whose political leadership had a significant influence in shaping the community. (Cook, 1983, p. 106) Muhammad's successors adopted this paradigm as both religious and political leaders. However, today, the situation has changed. As the Islamic community grew, the demands and challenges for leadership increased, and politics and religion were separated. (Cook, 1983, p. 8)

Lastly, Saeed draws attention to a quote often used to support the death penalty for apostates, "A man who leaves Islam and engages in fighting against God and his Prophet shall be executed, crucified, or exiled." (Saeed & Saeed, 2004a p. 95) Some Islamic scholars have emphasized the difference between apostasy and treason, noting that taking arms against the community is distinct from simply leaving Islam. (Mohammad Omar Farooq, 2007) Saeed explains that the death penalty in this context should be viewed as the right of the Islamic community to kill their opponent in war. The society today is different from what it was then.<sup>5</sup>

In the preceding section, Saeed refuted Maududi's argument. First, he pointed out that the hadith often used to justify the punishment for apostasy contradicts the Quranic verses that promote religious freedom. Second, the Quran, the highest authority in Islam, does not stipulate a punishment for apostates; rather, it indicates that apostates will be punished in the afterlife. In essence, it is God's responsibility to punish apostates, not that of humans. Furthermore, individuals have the fundamental human right to choose their religious beliefs, and this right should not be denied to them. In the above sections, we discussed the general concept of apostasy, noting the disparity between Maududi and Saeed regarding the specific punishment for apostates. Maududi contended that according to the Qur'an and hadith, the punishment for Muslims who leave Islam is death. However, Saeed countered Maududi's arguments by asserting that these texts do not mandate death as punishment for apostates. Instead, Saeed

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<sup>5</sup> Critics of punishment for apostates argue that the absence of a specific punishment prescribed by the Qur'an, the hadiths, and the different schools of thought has led to the misuse of the apostasy law. For instance, in 1984, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, a religious reformer and political opponent of President Jaafar Nimeiry of Sudan, was executed on fabricated charges of apostasy. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa (legal opinion) against the British author Salman Rushdie, sentencing him to death for his portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed and his wives. (Rehman 2010)

argued that the apostate's punishment is left to God in the afterlife. We also discussed some of the consequences of the law of apostasy, including the infringement of individual rights to change religion and the right to life. One consequence of the law of apostasy that is often overlooked is the pastoral challenges it presents to Christianity and its mission of evangelization. In the next section, we will examine the Christian mission in detail and explore how the law of apostasy poses a challenge to it.

### 4.0 CHRISTIAN MISSION OF EVANGELIZATION AND THE ISLAMIC LAW OF APOSTASY

#### 3.1. The Meaning and Content of the Christian Mission of Evangelization

The Church describes evangelization as a means of “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new...” (Pope Paul VI 1975, 18) In other words, evangelization is a way of making Christ’s name known such that it permeates every fiber of society. The basic principles of evangelization involve “the simple presence and witness of the Christian life... the service of mankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structure that produces it.” (Machado 2000) Thus, evangelization is at the heart of the Church’s mission, a mandate received from Christ, “Go make disciples of all the nation...” (Matthew 24). This mandate makes evangelization an intrinsic part of the Church’s mission. In other words, the Church, by nature, exists to evangelize. Pope John Paul, in *Redemptoris Mission*, puts it more succinctly, saying, “The Church's fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of Christ.” (John Paul II 1990, 4) Pope John Paul II explains that the mystery of Christ is expressed in the Incarnation, Christ becoming human so that humans can share in his very life.<sup>6</sup> Sharing in God’s very life implies the fullness of life is experienced not only after death but also here and now. *Evangelium Viatae* captures it better, “Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. (Paul II 1995, 2) This incredible gift of sharing in God’s life (life eternal) through the paschal mystery forms the central theme of Christian proclamation and passion for witnessing on every occasion. In view of this understanding, *Evangelium Nutiandi* explicitly states that the content of Christian evangelization is Christ crucified. Thus, true evangelization involves the proclamation of the name, the teaching, the life, and the mystery of Jesus. (Pope Paul VI 1975)

The content of the Christian message makes evangelization in Muslim dominated community challenging. For example, the basic tenets of Christianity are in direct conflict with Islamic central beliefs. While Jesus holds an important place in both traditions, for Christians, Jesus is more than a good prophet. He is the Word Incarnate who takes flesh and becomes man. On the other hand, Muslims see Jesus as a good prophet and the greatest after Muhammad. It is considered offensive to refer to Jesus as a God in Islam. Thus, renouncing one's faith and converting to Christianity is considered a serious betrayal, bringing shame to the Muslim community. (Phipps 2016, 1)

Another challenge that the law of apostasy poses to Christian evangelization in a Muslim-dominated community is the association of Christian services with the act of proselytization. For Christians, evangelization is not just verbal preaching; it includes services that promote human flourishing. However, Christian services have been directly associated with the act of proselytization. Genuine attempts by Christians to build schools and hospitals in Muslim communities have often been resisted. This is because Muslims think that Christian activities are subtle tools to lure Muslims to convert to Islam. This misinterpretation and misperception of Christian activities have left the northern part of Nigeria underdeveloped, uneducated, and impoverished. The association of Christian institutions with the attempt to convert Muslims has many times led to the burning of Christian schools and hospitals. For example, Idris, a staunch Muslim, and members of his community live in an area where there is no access to good drinking water. *The Christian Aid Mission*, an independent organization that provides goodwill services, offered to drill a borehole for the community. Idris fears that such service may lead to the conversion of his people to Christianity. Idris opposed the building of the borehole and ordered his family not to drink from any boreholes drilled by Christian missionaries. (Koh 2020)

The law of apostasy poses a challenge to Christian missions because individuals who convert from Islam to Christianity often face threats to their lives. In 2021, Shuaibu Yohanna, the pastor of New Life

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<sup>6</sup> Sharing in God’s life is important because humans will live forever. It is only in the Christian faith that God offers eternal life to his followers by inviting them to share in his life.

for All Nation Church, was reportedly killed in Kano for allegedly converting a young man from Islam to Christianity. The attackers not only killed the pastor but also burned down his house and church. (Adebulu 2021) In another incident, Boko Haram killed two children of a former terrorist who had converted to Christianity. (“Nigeria: Recent Reports Regarding the Treatment of Persons Who Convert from Islam to Christianity. Recent Reports on Sharia Law in Relation to Religious Conversion.” 2012) These cases illustrate the dangers faced by apostates who choose to convert to Christianity. Threatening the life of converts to Christianity is a way of devaluing the most important task of the church: evangelization. As Pope Paul VI puts it, “The task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.”(Pope Paul VI 1975) In other words, the deepest identity of the Church is to evangelize; she exists in order to evangelize. To threaten the lives of converts to Christianity is to diminish the mission that defines the Church and its teaching on the sanctity of life.

Furthermore, another challenge of the law of apostasy is that those who convert to Christianity often lose the connection with their family and their new Church community. As J. Herbert Kane affirms, For Islam, “conversion is a one-way street.” Even when death is not a real threat, losing the bonds of community and family are huge costs.”(Kane 1982) For instance, in Nigeria, there was a case involving Nabila Umar Sanda and Simput Dafup who were imprisoned and tortured in 2018. Nabila Umar Sanda, a Nigerian university student, converted from Islam to Christianity after being introduced to the faith by Simput Dafup. Both individuals were arrested by state security forces. They were released after 10 days, but not before enduring torture. Nabila was returned to her parents and kept under surveillance. After two months, she escaped and went into hiding. Subsequently, she posted on Facebook about her free choice to convert to Christianity. Nabila managed to escape her pursuers and went abroad to further her education. While studying, her institution requested her WASSCE original certificate, and the school demanded that she come back to Nigeria for it. Since March 2019, she has been unlawfully detained, causing a forced hold on her studies. It is distressing to see her being detained due to her faith in a democratic country like Nigeria, where freedom of religion is a constitutional right. The amended Constitution from 1999 (Sections 35, 38, and 39) has been abused, violated, and relegated in Nigeria.(Set My People Free International 2022)

In the preceding section, we discussed the meaning, content, and significance of the Christian mission of evangelization and why the law of apostasy presents a challenge. Christians strongly believe in the divinity of Christ, which is contrary to the Islamic faith. Therefore, converting from Islam to Christianity is considered a grave offense in Islam and brings shame. Conversely, Christians consider the endangerment of converts to Christianity as an assault on a faith that promotes the sanctity of all human life. Any assault on individuals who have converted to the Christian faith is viewed as undermining the efforts of spreading the Christian message. Conversion is a personal decision, and no one's life should be endangered because of their choice to embrace a specific religious belief. Kane mentions, "All religions, including the broadest of them - Hinduism - look with disfavor on the devotee who changes his religion," (Kane 1982) but he emphasizes that this should not warrant the killing of those who renounce their faith.

### 3.2. Consequence of the Law of Apostasy

Given our discussions so far, imposing the death penalty for apostasy violates the rights to religious conversion and life.<sup>7</sup> According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.* (“Universal Declaration of Human Rights” 2015, Article 18) In recent times, restrictions on religious conversion have become a significant human rights concern in many countries. (Fischer 2018) According to reports from the Pew Research Center, as of December 2015, 42 countries had restrictions on converting from one religion to another, an increase from 31 countries in June 2007. In 25 countries, there were incidents of social hostility related to conversion that did not involve physical violence, and in 27 countries, there were incidents that included physical violence. (Fischer 2018) The death penalty for apostates not only violates their right to freedom of religion but also serves to provoke conflict within the community and

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<sup>7</sup> Twelve Northern Nigerian states with Muslim majorities have enacted Sharia laws that have been used to persecute Muslim apostates, particularly those who have converted to Christianity.(Oraebunam 2012)



disrupt its peace. Javaid Rehman affirms that the law of apostasy has led to religious intolerance and discouraged rational and tolerant discussions about religious matters. (Rehman 2010)

It's important to note that the severe punishment affects not only apostates but also Christians, who may provide assistance to the apostate. In December 2005, Nigerian pastor Zacheous Habu Bu Ngwenche was attacked for allegedly sheltering a convert from Islam to Christianity. Sometimes, these kind-hearted pastors are either killed or have their churches destroyed. As previously mentioned, killing apostates or Christians who shelter apostates goes against the constitutional order, and the government has not been able to fully control violence against apostates. This has allowed the northern Muslim-dominated states to implement their own laws without safeguarding the constitutional rights of citizens affected by Sharia law. (Harnischfeger 2008, 106)

### 3.3. How Should Muslims Approach the Issue of Apostasy in Today's Diverse Society?

First, Muslims of all schools of thought may want to reconsider the application of the law of apostasy. The law of apostasy has had a significant negative impact on the credibility of the Islamic religion. ISIS's harsh punishment for those considered apostates has led to widespread disgust among both non-Muslims and Muslims worldwide. This has caused many Muslims, both in Muslim-majority countries and in the West, to undergo crises of faith or even lose faith entirely due to the violence committed in the name of Islam. ISIS's execution of apostates is often cited as a major factor contributing to these crises. (Brown 2020) Jonathan Brown adds that in Shariah, the aim of punishing apostasy from Islam is to protect the communal faith and social order of a Muslim state. If severe punishment for apostasy is driving Muslims away from their religion, then this policy undermines its own purpose. Furthermore, Brown notes that it is unclear what "order under heaven" maintaining harsh punishments for apostasy would be upholding in a world that has enough trouble for itself. (Brown 2020)

Second, Saliu Olumide, the Humanist Global Charity Advisor for Nigeria, suggests how Muslims should deal with apostasy:

*We must carefully encourage more moderate interpretations of Islamic scripture—focusing on the Prophet Muhammed's early career in Mecca, for example, and amplifying the voices of moderates and reformers. Humanists need to appeal to their religious compatriots by stressing common goals, such as peace and prosperity, and by pointing out how an ethnically and religiously diverse society like Nigeria could benefit from secular governance.* (Areo 2022)

Olumide asserts that it is imperative to reexamine the background, reason, establishment, and content of the law of apostasy. Some Islamic scholars, such as Maḥmūd Shaltūt (Shaykh al-Azhar, d. 1964), Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, and the late Iraqi-American scholar Ṭāhā Jābir al-'Alwānī (d. 2016), have re-examined how apostasy should be viewed in the context where religious identity is not a state matter. These scholars argue that what was considered criminal about apostasy was its public dimension and the threat it posed to public order based on confessional identity. They explained that it is this public element, not the question of a person's private decision to follow their conscience in changing their religion, that Islamic law should focus on. (Brown 2020)

Third, some Islamic countries have re-examined the law of apostasy and its implications for a diverse society and decided to abolish it. For instance, on July 14th, 2020, Sudan abolished the death penalty for apostasy. Previously, Sudan was one of only 14 countries to impose capital punishment for leaving Islam and was ranked as the ninth worst country in the world for its treatment of the non-religious by Humanists International's 2019 Freedom of Thought Report. Humanists UK has welcomed this reform as a significant move towards freedom of religion or belief in Sudan. (Humanists UK 2020) Also, in Morocco, the High Religious Committee in charge of issuing Fatwas (Islamic rulings) released a book in 2012 where it articulated its position on apostasy and argued that a Muslim who changes his or her religion should be punished with death, drawing on a widespread jurisprudence tradition. In 2017, however, the same entity issued a document titled "The Way of the Scholars," in which it backtracked on its position of killing apostates. Instead, it redefined apostasy not as a religious issue but as a political stand more closely aligned with "high treason." In "The Way of the Scholars," Muslim scholars argue that the view that the apostate should not be killed in Islam is not new and can be found in the teachings of Sufyan al-Thawri in the first century AH. (Jabrane 2017) Additionally, Indonesia's new Criminal Code (KUHP) includes Article 302, which prohibits coercing someone to abandon their religion or belief through violence or threats of violence. (Republic of Indonesia 2023)

It is worth noting that more and more Islamic countries are advocating for no death penalty for apostates, and more and more Muslim scholars today are speaking out against the traditional doctrine of apostasy. Also, the international community is working hard to ensure that the rights of all people are protected, and rightly so. The problem of apostasy, however, will not disappear overnight. Individuals will continue to have their lives threatened either by the state Sharia police or by their local communities. It is crucial for the Church to publicly condemn the killings of converts to Christianity because the sanctity of human life is the foundation of its teaching. According to Catholic Social Teaching:

*Human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. (Catholic Community Services 2023)*

In light of these principles, the church must vocalize opposition to any violence that degrades its members and robs them of their human dignity. The Church needs to develop concrete plans to ensure that all its members are protected and their dignity upheld.

### 3.4. Synopsis

Maududi and Saeed both turned to the Qur'an and hadith for evidence in support of their theses. However, I disagree with Maududi's exclusive understanding of the law of apostasy, which is based on the understanding that Islam is the only religion and, once a member, always a member. The problem with the exclusivist approach to religion is the belief that all other religious claims are invalid and that only one's religious tradition is true. (Gnanakan 1992, 88) Exclusivist view is problematic because it disregards other religions and prevents mutual learning between different traditions. Scholars argue that even religious beliefs like the Bhagavad-gita and the Bhagvatthate that are considered erroneous have taught valuable principles like undivided devotion to God, giving up worldly attachments, humility, and forbearance.<sup>8</sup> In other words, religions can learn from each other even when they disagree on doctrinal grounds. However, because exclusivism has a closed mindset, it has little or nothing to share or learn from other religions, nor is it prepared to listen to others. Kay Lindahl notes that "when we learn how to listen to ideas that conflict with our own without becoming defensive, then we start to see each other as part of one family, the human family; we also learn the art of conversation; it is this type of conversation that can transform our world." (Kay 2017, 85) The implication of exclusivist approach is that people are ignorant of the other and that could lead to suspicion. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. puts it more succinctly, "people fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other". (News Center 1962)

Exclusivist understanding, like those of Maududi, have led to much religious intolerance and violence. This mindset can cause intolerance and the belief that truth is one-dimensional, even though truth can be complex and multifaceted. Moreover, we must acknowledge that even if our tradition holds the fullness of truth, our interpretation may not be entirely accurate. (Chia, 2018, p.174) Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that the hadith and Qur'an are intended for Muslims and should not be applied to those who do not practice Islam or have chosen to leave it. Additionally, Maududi's stance on the punishment for apostasy needs to be redefined, considering several passages such as Qur'ans 2:217, 5:54, and 47:25, which suggest that it is God's responsibility to punish apostates. I do agree with Saeed that the penalty for apostasy is a violation of the right to life.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In this article, I argue that the law of apostasy raises concerns for Muslims and Christians. To support my argument, I provide an overview of the general Islamic understanding of apostasy. While there is a consensus that apostasy is a heinous crime, Islamic scholars differ in how apostates should be punished.

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<sup>8</sup> Quote from *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*, as cited by (Marbaniang 2007, 8)(Dominus Iesus 200AD, 8)

I point out that conceptual clarity is necessary to eliminate the inconsistency of the law of apostasy. Islamic scholars must explicitly formulate the law of apostasy to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. To better understand the conflict between traditional and progressive views on the punishment of apostasy, I analyze the perspectives of Maududi and Saeed. Maududi, a traditionalist, believes that apostasy should be punished by death, whereas Saeed, a progressive, asserts that individuals have the right to religious conversion. I analyze Maududi and Saeed's perspectives and argue that imposing the death penalty on individuals who convert to Christianity infringes on their right to freedom of religion and life. Additionally, I emphasize one consequence of the death penalty in the law of apostasy, which is often overlooked: executing converts to Christianity is an attack on Christian principles, and the church has a responsibility to speak out to protect its members from indiscriminate killing. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) I suggest re-evaluating how Islam deals with the issue of apostasy within a diverse religious society. Firstly, it's important to reconsider the purpose and content of the apostasy law. Islam has gained a negative reputation due to the harsh punishments associated with apostasy. Secondly, some Islamic scholars have started to speak out against these severe penalties. It's crucial to encourage more scholars to oppose the death penalty for apostates. Furthermore, certain Islamic nations, such as Morocco, Sudan, and Indonesia, have already reconsidered their stance on the apostasy law. These countries have abolished the death penalty for apostates and recognized individuals' rights to change their religion and their right to life. As Haris Aziz rightly states, upholding the fundamental human right for everyone is crucial if Muslims wish to rediscover the true essence of Islam. (Aziz, 2006)

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