

Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out

by Ibn Warraq, Prometheus Books, 2003, 471 pp.

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Growing up in Pakistan, Ibn Warraq ‘learned to read the Koran in Arabic without understanding a word of it – a common experience for thousands of Muslim children.’ [1] He discarded religious dogmas as soon as he was able to think for himself, and that would have been that, had it not been for ‘the Rushdie affair and the rise of Islam.’ [2] The two events galvanized him into writing *Why I Am Not a Muslim* in 1995. *Leaving Islam* is a collection of testimonies from ‘apostates’ of Islam. Apostasy – the leaving of Islam – is a crime potentially punishable by death in many parts of the Muslim world.

In his introductory chapter, Ibn Warraq reproduces a pronouncement on apostasy in Islam from ‘the ultra-conservative Tehran daily *Kayhan International*’ in 1986. It includes this observation.

The antiapostasy punishments of Islam are proper laws to rescue mankind from falling into the cesspool of treason, betrayal, and disloyalty and to remind the human being of his ideological commitments. A committed man should not violate his promise and vow, especially his promise to God. (p. 32.)

A more wrong-headed idea is difficult to imagine. To define changing one’s mind about any particular set of ideas and truth claims as treason, betrayal, and disloyalty is to forbid thinking itself. Making the human being’s ideological commitments a permanent, irrevocable matter of loyalty is to impose ossification, dogmatism, conformity, and plain mindless stubbornness on an entire society, or, worse, an entire global ‘community of believers.’

This idea, and the dogmatism and simplistic binary thinking (us-them, believers-unbelievers, halal-haram, Dar al-Islam-Dar al-Harb) that issues from it, unsurprisingly make up one of the recurring themes of the book. Witness after witness tells of frustration – in childhood, adolescence, adulthood – at being told not to doubt, not to ask questions, not even to think. In chapter 15 Abul Kasem of Bangladesh says of his childhood attendance at the Eid prayer:

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I did not understand a single word of what the *imam* was saying or why the people were doing their body movements. When I asked my dad any question he used to tell me to keep quiet and that Allah will punish those kids who ask too many questions. Thus, I was introduced to the fear from the very beginning of my childhood. (p. 181.)

The individual accounts are many and various, but particular themes recur: the status and treatment of women; the hatred of outsiders, non-Muslims, ‘unbelievers’; the vainglorious exclusivism (only Muslims are perfect, only Muslims are going to heaven); the memorisation of the Koran without understanding it; the shock of reading it in translation and understanding it at last; dogmatism and intellectual narrowness; violence and coercion.

It’s painful reading, for the most part. There is often a sense of relief at escape and freedom, but only after a suffocating sense of claustrophobia leading up to the escape, along with an inevitable sense of distress about the many who must feel the same claustrophobia but will never be able to escape. The reader gasps for air in a closed world filled with hatred, force, and boasting. One doesn’t want to think that, one would much rather think that ‘normal’ Islam is relatively free and benevolent and only political Islam is coercive and dogmatic – but when reading these experiences of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis and Iranians, that hope is hard to sustain.

That’s not to say that there is no such thing at all. Taner Edis, for instance, grew up in Istanbul without religion himself and with very mild versions around him.

Few of our relatives and family friends were visibly religious, and when so, they seemed very liberal about it ... Most others in our circle were nominal, unobservant Muslims. They believed in God and that the Koran was in some way a divine message giving a good moral foundation, but they didn’t read the scriptures or care about doctrine.

But Edis (half-American half-Turkish, a physicist at a Midwestern US university, author of the excellent *The Ghost in the Universe* and *The Illusion of Harmony*) notes that things are different now, and he is not optimistic about the trend. Nor is Ali Sina of Iran, who had a similar upbringing.

[T]he majority of Muslims who have some education believe that Islam is a humanistic religion that respects human rights, that elevates women and

protects their status. Most Muslims still believe that Islam means ‘peace.’ (pp 137-8)

Ali Sina shared such beliefs, but he read the Koran, and he now considers them a dream.

Azam Kamguian, editor of the Bulletin of the Committee to Defend Women’s Rights in the Middle East, also grew up in Iran; her father was ‘relatively open-minded’ but her mother indoctrinated the children. There was one bit of luck however.

We had a big study with all kinds of books, including science and other non-fiction as well as fiction. That room was an important part of my world, a part that helped save me from the harm of religion, from the harm of Islam and superstition. (p. 213)

It didn’t save her favourite brother though. He had been interested in music, cinema, and reading books; he was learning to play a musical instrument and was one of the top students in physics and maths in Iran.

All of a sudden he started to read the Koran ... My brother also began to take part in activities harassing and intimidating Bahais. Gradually, I became familiar with one of the ugly faces of Islam. (p. 214.)

The sense of stifling entrapment, uniformity, drabness, of the blotting out of all the rich possibilities of life in exchange for dogma, obedience, and submission, can seem intolerably bleak. Samia Labidi of Tunisia, who grew up ‘in a comparatively tolerant milieu, which only paid lip service to Islam,’ found herself in such a trap. She was introduced to Islamism by an older sister’s husband when she was eleven, and at first she embraced it with enthusiasm. But then it began to close in.

I had to say good-bye to outings for pleasure, to the beach in a swimming costume, to my friends who refused to follow me in my religious activities, to mini-skirts, to bursts of laughter, in short, to all the pleasures of life. I resembled a shadow more than a living being worthy of the human condition. I saw my sisters around me sinking one after another into the madness of this interpretation, purely human and masculine, of the so-called divine texts. (p. 323.)

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Islam failed to answer her questions – and it kept on closing in.

I felt more and more chained up and crushed by the dogma that interfered in the smallest detail of one's daily life. My mind was sterilized gradually, unable to have access to freedom of thought, to myself... Uniformity did not suit me. The ordinary did not resemble me. Everyone had to dress, talk, and behave in the same manner, like a herd of animals. Monotony invaded space and became burdensome, and my life was devoid of all originality. (p. 324.)

That was especially true for women.

Women continued to be treated like incapable beings who need to be systematically under the guardianship of a close male relative in order to move, to exist, or even to breathe. I realized gradually that the promises of equal rights and duties they dazzled us with were but bait that lured us into a premeditated trap that closed over us immediately. (p. 324.)

The exclusivism and exceptionalism are another kind of bait and also a trap, as the account of Syed Kamran Mirza of Bangladesh indicates.

I was proud and happy to be a born Muslim, since I learned from mullahs, learned men, and my elders that Islam is the ultimate truth and best religion in the whole world. The Koran is the infallible words of Allah, who loves only the religion of Islam, and all other religions are simply bad, people of other religions are all kafirs and destined to go to hell. Muslims are impeccable human beings, and Allah loves only Muslims. Only we, the Muslims, are supposed to go to heaven and nobody else can enter the gate of heaven. (p. 240.)

A cheerful sort of belief on the surface, until one thinks seriously about all those other people destined to go to hell, and about the dangers of thinking that 'people of other religions are all *kafirs* and destined to go to hell.' Faisal Muhammad of Pakistan was interested in Sufism for a time but then he realised his Sufi master, despite his pretensions of being a scholar and a mystic, was a fanatic and a bigot.

Whenever he talked about the Hindus who had lived in Lahore before 1947, he forgot his message of human love and the fanatic in him would take over. During unguarded moments he would acknowledge that many Hindus and

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Sikhs were good people, but whenever I directly probed the subject he would give the standard version of all Hindus being kafirs and therefore killing them or turning them out of Lahore was all right. (p. 226.)

Syed Kamran Mirza was told the same thing.

[D]uring the partition (1947), there was a Hindu-Muslim riot in our area and many Hindus were killed because they were a very tiny minority in that area of densely populated Muslims ... [L]ater I learned from the seniors that Hindus are *kafirs* and bad people, so they have to die. (p. 240.)

Anwar Shaikh and his friends were also told that murdering non-Muslims was an act of *jihad*. One August day in 1947 he saw a train pull in from East Punjab which was full of the mutilated bodies of Muslim men, women, and children. He went home to pray and then he took up a club and a knife, and went out in search of non-Muslims. He found two Sikhs, a father and son.

The father was perhaps not more than fifty, perhaps younger, and his young son. I killed both of them ... I encountered another Sikh at Darabi Road and I killed him too. Often memories of those terrible days haunt my mind; I feel ashamed and many times I have shed tears of remorse. If it had not been for my fanaticism, engendered by the Islamic traditions, these people might have been alive even today. (p. 286.)

Abul Kasem was taught the same lesson in his school days.

I witnessed the slaughter of a dear friend of mine (along with his entire family) in Chandpur, Bangladesh ... But more shocking was that many Muslims were actually happy about that slaughter ... It was also declared by some Muslim clerics that killing of non-Muslims is an act of *jihad* and therefore anyone participating in *jihad* will be rewarded with heaven. (pp. 182-3.)

He describes his experience of the Pakistan army attack on what was then East Pakistan in 1971, especially an attack on university residential halls on the night of March 25: gunfire, explosions, shattering windows, hiding under his bed all night, and at 3 in the morning watching a tank firing on a slum next to the halls. 'As the slum-dwellers came out to escape the fire, the Pakistani Islamic soldiers started shooting them with a machine gun.' (p. 184-5.)

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Kasem went to Thailand in 1973 to do postgraduate studies in engineering. There were many Pakistani as well as Bangladeshi students there, and they discussed what had happened in Bangladesh in 1971. The Pakistani students dismissed most of the claims of the Bangladeshis – the numbers killed were exaggerated, there were no rapes at all, not one.

Now, the interesting point was that whenever the atrocities of the Pakistani Islamic army were mentioned to them, they were all adamant that we (the Bengalis) were to be blamed for that. Why? Simply, because we were not good Muslims. How? If we were good Muslims, we would not have voted for the Awami League ... Therefore, they opined that the genocide was not really a genocide! It was getting rid of the non-Muslims. After all, the non-Muslims were not really human beings. (p. 195.)

All religions of course carry within them this tendency to hate the other (yes, even Buddhism), and during Partition Hindus slaughtered Muslims as eagerly as Muslims slaughtered Hindus. The riots in Gujarat in 2002 were a case of Hindus raping and murdering Muslims, with the complicity and even encouragement of the state and national governments. [4] Furthermore, in the nature of the case the writers of a book about leaving Islam will not be writing as fans of it. Nevertheless the repeated accounts of the very broad prevalence of this at best insular and at worst genocidal way of thinking do carry some weight.

There are moments of humour though. Shoaib Nasir of Pakistan was a rebellious child when it came to what he calls ‘Muhammad’s ideology.’

My mother always asked me to carry Muhammad’s book above my head respectfully. I always carried it above my head when I was in sight. Once I neared the cabinet, I would put the book on the floor and step on it before I put it in the assigned place. (p. 252.)

A book of this kind is necessary for Islam in particular because other religions no longer make leaving a capital crime. Critics of Islam and ‘apostates’ are subject to fatwas and death threats, prison and murder, in many parts of the world. It is necessary to record that it is at least possible, if not always safe, to leave Islam.

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References

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- Warraq, Ibn (2003) *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, New York, Prometheus Books.

Notes

- [1] Warraq 2003 [1995], p. xiii.
- [2] Warraq 2003 [1995], p. xiii.
- [3] Warraq 2003, pp. 184-5.
- [4] Nussbaum 2007, p. 2.