

The following commentary was also published in the Leader-Post on March 31, 2006.

Muslims have duty to advocate justice

By Kashif Ahmed

Special to The Star Phoenix

Thursday, March 30, 2006

The Qu'ran says: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error." Hence my confusion when I learned that an Afghan court was trying Abdul Rahman for converting from Islam to Christianity.

Apparently, the case against him has now been dismissed citing lack of evidence. Nonetheless, he did face the death penalty under Afghan law.

And so the world witnessed another political controversy, with the United States, the European Union, and our own Prime Minister Stephen Harper expressing their dismay to Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Amidst the voices of concern was some *j'accuse* directed toward the Muslim community. As one radio commentator demanded: "Where is the outcry from the same self-flagellating apologists so upset about the cartoons of Mohammed?"

It's a question worth posing. The mainstream Muslim community had some perspective to offer -- no less than the Fiqh Council of North America, an association of Islamic legal scholars that interprets Muslim religious law. The council recently affirmed that Islam supports both freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

In Islam, religious belief is a clear personal matter and not in the domain of state interference. For Muslims, faith imposed by force is not indicative of sincere belief but rather of coercion. Consequently, several Muslim organizations in North America including the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations called for the unconditional release of the Afghan Christian.

But why did an Afghan court decide even to try Rahman for changing his religious faith? The answer can be traced to the country's age-old "apostasy" statute, and a draconian and parochial interpretation of Islamic law.

Several Afghan religious leaders passionately maintain that he should be executed. They insist that Islam does not tolerate anyone who leaves the faith. Is this the supposed new democracy that Canada is supporting?

The contention that Rahman should be put to death completely ignores the Islamic message of mercy and compassion, let alone the teachings of the Qur'an.

The *ahadith*, the recorded traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, relate an interesting situation. In one incident, the Prophet pardoned a man named Abdullah bin Sa'd, after he renounced Islam. After spending some time with the early Muslim community in Medina, and acting as a personal scribe for the Prophet, the man recanted and returned to the polytheistic Arab religion that was widespread at the time. When he was brought before the Prophet, however, he was unconditionally forgiven.

The example of the Prophet, coupled with the clear message of the Qu'ran on freedom of religion, proves to be a powerful counterweight against those who insist on the death penalty for any Muslim who renounces Islam. The Islamic tradition is not the black-and-white system often portrayed. In fact, Islam has a rich history of diversity and debate on the issues of human affairs.

However, Rahman's case demonstrates something beyond an internal Muslim religious question. The realization of true democracy in the Muslim world cannot be simply imposed by others, namely the West. It must be nurtured and achieved internally through a gradual social and political process. Indeed, Afghanistan is a prime example.

As for Abdul Rahman, who still faces mortal danger within his own country, the desire for freedom of conscience and religion may just be too progressive for his fellow citizens. For Muslims, standing up for justice now becomes even more important. It is not only a moral obligation, but also our duty.

Ahmed is communications director of Muslims for Peace & Justice (MPJ).

© The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon) 2006