

An Apostate, Not Quite There

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Omar Mahmood is an apostate from Islam who has bravely declared his apostasy in US Today. He claims, as the title of his piece says, that "[Islam needs Islamophobia right now.](#)"

In Pakistan, a mob killed a journalism student because he didn't believe. That could have been me.

Last week, a 23-year-old journalism student was beaten to death by a mob outside the cafeteria of Abdul Wali Khan University in northern Pakistan. Video shows dozens of enraged students dragging Mashal Khan into the street, where he was kicked and bludgeoned to death. His crime? The mob thought he had made fun of the prophet Mohammed.

This brutal spasm of violence in the country where some of my family still live is the latest reminder that Islam has lost its way. Even though I was born in Chicago, I can imagine the same thing happening to me.

Here is where one starts to feel a bit unsettled by the mostly quite admirable Omar Mahmood. The beating to death by a mob in

Pakistan of Mashal Khan for having mocked Muhammad is not some deviant act by Muslims who have “lost their way” (from the presumably true Islam), but rather, merely the latest in a long line of such punishments that began with Muhammad himself. For it was Muhammad who called for the death of an elderly Jewish man, Abu ‘Afak, who had mocked Muhammad in verse. His call was answered by one of his followers; the murder of Abu ‘Afak was pleasing to Muhammad. And when the poetess Asma bint Marwan mocked Muhammad in verse, Muhammad asked “Who will rid me of Marwan’s daughter?,” and another of his followers promptly complied. And then there was Ka’b ibn al-Ashraf, who wrote verses about Muhammad, who asked aloud: “Who will kill Ka’b bin Al-Ashraf? He had maligned Allah, and His Messenger.” No sooner said than done, yet again. these are not the only examples of Muhammad wishing out loud that someone be killed for blasphemy, and his wish being fulfilled – from Islam’s earliest days, the blasphemer was to be killed. In following these examples, did those Pakistanis who beat Mashal to death follow the model of the great exemplar, Muhammad, or were they practicing an Islam that “had lost its way”?

But let’s get back to the brave apostate Omar Mahmood:

I am a 23-year-old aspiring journalist working not far from Washington, D.C., and I am an apostate from Islam. I have been for years. I grew up going to a Muslim school in the town of Franklin, Mich., learning the Quran and classical Arabic.

Looking back, I would not have had it any other way. I was immersed in a worldview and a literature that has shaped the world for a millennium and a half. I understand the Muslim ethos, and I am proud of where I come from. Although I no longer believe, I can remember what it means to be enraged when someone mocks the prophet. Fundamentally, Muslims are like everyone else. It is not easy to accept honest criticism of deeply held faith.

Is it true to describe Islam as offering a “worldview and a literature that has shaped the world”? That Islam has been responsible for a great deal of destruction, and of human misery – not just of those conquered and killed by Muslims, but also those conquered and subjugated, living as dhimmis under Muslim rule – is certainly true. But Mahmood’s phrasing doesn’t strike quite the right note. One might say that Islam is responsible for the Renaissance, in the sense that when the Seljuk and then the Osmanli Turks conquered Anatolia and Constantinople, they caused Greek scholars to flee, carrying manuscripts from classical antiquity, with them to Italy, leading to the “Revival of Learning” that contributed to what we call the Renaissance. And it is true that had the Muslims not conquered Constantinople, and sealed off the trade routes to the East from use by Christians, Columbus might not have sought another route to Asia and in so doing, discovered the New World. So one might give the Muslims credit, in a backhanded sort of way, for the discovery of the New World and the Renaissance.

And is it true, as Omar Mahmood chooses to believe, that “Fundamentally, Muslims are like everyone else”? In what way are they “just like everyone else”? What believers, in what other faith, exhibit anything like the hysterical hate so many Muslims at the slightest perceived affront, to Muhammad, to Islam, to themselves, exhibit? When Muhammad says “if anyone changes his (Muslim) religion, kill him,” is that “just like everyone else”? Did Jesus or Buddha ever say something like that? Is that what Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists are told by their clerics? When Muslims are told in the Qur’an that non-Muslims are the “vilest of creatures” (98:6) and they, the Muslims, are “the best of peoples,” (3:110) and they believe, deeply, in the truth of both, are they being “just like everyone else”? When they are told to “strike terror” in the hearts of the Miscreants (8:60), and they do their level best to do so, are they being “just like everyone else”? When Muslims take as the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and Model

of Conduct (*uswa hasana*) someone who ordered the torturing of Kinana of Khaybar, to extract information about hidden treasure, and who consummated his “marriage” to little Aisha when she was nine years old, and Muslims think both acts are just fine, that whatever Muhammad does is right, in what way are Muslims “just like everyone else”? Or are they not a horrifying exception to the moral codes of Believers in all other major religions?

Omar Mahmood claims that “It is not easy to accept honest criticism of deeply held faith,” but does he really think that the Muslims who threaten to kill, and do kill, those who are accused (often wrongly, by an enraged mob) of criticizing some aspect of Muhammad’s behavior (say, his marriage to little Aisha), or tearing a Qur’an or being insufficiently respectful of Islam, are they behaving “just like everyone else”?

Today, however, unlike any other major faith, Islam is in crisis. Our religion’s association with terrorism is the most unnerving product of this crisis. When a suicide bomber blows himself up or a jihadist plows a truck through a crowd, or a mob murders someone for blasphemy, the standard response is to deny that it has anything to do with Islam, and to ring the #Islamophobia alarm bells.

Is Islamic terrorism simply a product of “this crisis” of Islam that is implicitly a new phenomenon, as Mamood insists, or has Islamic terrorism always been there, but never before have the worlds of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb so overlapped and Believers and Unbelievers so intermingled, giving rise to the perceived need for terrorism, by some Muslims living in the lands of the Miscreants but desirous of conducting violent Jihad against them, to “strike terror” in their hearts? Is this really a brand-new response to a current “crisis” in Islam? Were there not 14 centuries of terror attacks before this, beginning with the Kharijites and continuing in ninth and tenth century Baghdad, with Sahl ibn Salama and Barbahari,

in seventeenth-century Istanbul with the Qadizadelis, and right up to the Wahhabis in eighteenth-century Arabia? Does it not say in several places in the Qur'an to "strike terror in the hearts" of the Unbelievers? Did Muhammad not say in an authentic hadith (Bukhari 4.52.220) "I have been made victorious through terror"? Was "terror" not used by Muslims, in the Middle East and North Africa and in India, long before today, when cars and trucks and explosives, rather than swords and scimitars, are used to murder the Miscreants? Why does this bespeak a "crisis"? Muslims are doing what they have always done. Only now they have been allowed to settle in large numbers behind what they have always been taught to regard as enemy lines. So the terrorism they inflict is deep within Dar al-Harb itself. But this represents only a change in opportunity, not in ideology. The Qur'an and hadith and sira have not changed one whit.

One might have thought that Omar Mahmood would see a different "crisis" at hand. And that "crisis" is caused by Muslims, but felt by Infidels. It is they who seem unable to recognize the Islamic roots of Islamic terrorism, preferring instead to find every sort of other explanation – poverty or ignorance of the terrorists, American foreign policy, Israel, "colonialism" – for what is mandated by the texts and teachings of Islam. The technology of murder is different. It is now cars and trucks and planes, and explosives, that are used in place of sword and scimitar, but the ideology has not changed. The "crisis" is that as the Muslim population increases, the West seems capable only of floundering about, and people are so fearful of recognizing what is staring them in the face. Omar Mahmood seems to think that at some point – exactly when, or exactly why, we are not told – modern Islam became a victim of its own "crisis" and Muslims started to behave in a way that they never had before. Is this true? Or is he, despite being an apostate, still unwilling to recognize the essential violent core of Islam, a faith that justifies rape and pillage and slavery, because he cannot quite make the complete break that

facing the truth would require of him? Are Muslims today behaving differently from the way they have behaved over the past 1400 years, as they conquered many lands and subjugated many peoples? They were not in a “crisis” then and they are not, alas, in a “crisis” now.

But it is dishonest to blame everything from gun laws to climate change as cause for terrorism, all so we can avoid opening the book on Islam. To run from this discussion now is an insult to Khan’s memory. Only if we foster a culture of open inquiry will we have a more liberal society where things like this are unthinkable. It falls on Muslims to address two widely noted tensions in our religion. One is the belief that the Quran is the literal word of God and that Mohammed only spoke the truth. The other is that there can be no division of church and state in Islam.

All true. So why don’t we “open the book on Islam,” with Omar Mahmood himself locating the Qur’anic verses and stories in the hadith that justify terrorism, and admitting that as the Qur’an is the uncreated immutable word of God, and Muhammad the Perfect Man, there is no way out, and that it would be better to recognize that the problem with Islam is not something tangential or temporary, and that only a full-scale assault on the ideology of Islam will allow the West to deal with its own “crisis.”

Literalism is an immediate issue. Mohammed sanctioned sexual slavery, encouraged his followers to kill anyone found committing homosexual acts, and prophesied a climactic battle between Jews and Muslims in which the Jews would be exterminated. Of women, he said: “Is not the witness of a woman equal to the witness of half a man? ... This is the deficiency in her intellect.”

Again, it is deeply satisfying to have this apostate express home truths about Islam that many non-Muslims are hesitant to

state publicly.

When faced with problematic narrations like these, our scholars today resort to rationalizations and semantics. On the matter of a climactic battle between Jews and Muslims, we are told that because “righteous Christians, Jews and Muslims ... will be united under one creed” by then, they will be spared. This is the ridiculous argument of no less than Omar Suleiman, a popular American Islamic scholar who tours on college campuses. Cold comfort to Jews who would rather not convert. Being Mohammed’s PR agent will not make the plain facts any more pleasant. Unless we call into question the core doctrine that the Quran is the inerrant word of God, Muslims will face a dangerous cognitive dissonance. And thankfully, there is precedent within shariah for abrogation – even Saudi Arabia outlawed slavery in 1962.

Saudi Arabia formally outlawed slavery in 1962, but only under terrific pressure from the West. This does not constitute “abrogation within sharia.” This is a phrase that, I confess, I do not understand. Sharia has not changed, only the practice of some Muslim Arabs because of pressure from outside. That does not constitute “abrogation.” The doctrine according to which slavery is licit remains even if the practice of slavery has – halfheartedly, and late – been curtailed. Yemen outlawed slavery in the same year; and under the same pressure. And slavery was abolished on Oman only in 1970. But slavery – and especially sexual slavery –are still, as it were, on the books of Islam.

And even if slavery was formally abolished, most reluctantly, in Saudi Arabia, the condition of many workers in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf, especially of Filipino, Thai, and Indonesian domestic servants, is in many cases hardly distinguishable from that of slaves, given the harsh treatment, the pathetic wages that are sometimes withheld, the reports of frequent rape, and the inability of many of these

servants to leave their masters (their passports having been confiscated), a plight that becomes clear to us only when these servants accompany a Saudi or Kuwaiti or Emirati family abroad, and every so often manage to make their escape and can tell their story to the Western press. Inside Saudi Arabia it is much more difficult to know what is going on. But there are reports that Saudi masters have killed servants and gone unpunished, which suggests a slave-like status, even if slavery is officially abolished.

The sanction of Islam is claimed for slavery at present in the predominantly Islamic countries of Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, and Sudan. Prominent clerics have in recent years reiterated that slavery is licit in Islam. The Islamic State has upheld slavery as allowed by the Qur'an. While the Qur'an does have verses suggesting that masters should treat their slaves well, and in places manumission is encouraged, that is not the same thing as denouncing or forbidding slavery. Muhammad owned slaves, bought and sold them, and as the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and the Model of Conduct (*uswa hasana*), Muhammad's example is enough to justify slavery. As for that subset of "sexual slavery," there is no doubt that that practice is upheld in the Qur'an: Muslim men can take "captives of the right hand" (Qur'an 4:3, 4:24, 33:50). It was recently publicly justified by a "moderate" female professor at Al-Azhar, who argued that the systematic rape and sexual enslavement of Jewish women was justified according to Islam.

Omar Mahmood seems to think that "abrogation" can take care of the problem. He writes that "abrogation" of "parts of the Sharia" has already taken place. The only "abrogation" (*naskh*) of which I am aware is that which takes place when Qur'anic verses are in contradiction; in that case the verse that is later, from the harsher, "Medinan" verses, is the one that applies; the earlier, milder, "Meccan" verse is said to have been "abrogated." I do not know of any parts of the Sharia that have been "abrogated." Perhaps Omar Mahmood means that

not all Muslim states impose the full Sharia, or that some Muslims do not observe parts of the Sharia, but in neither case have the contents of the Sharia' been changed.

Omar Mahmood is wildly optimistic when he writes that "[u]nless we call into question the core doctrine that the Quran is the inerrant word of God, Muslims will face a dangerous cognitive dissonance." But if Muslims "call into question the core doctrine that the Quran is the inerrant word of God," then what is left of Islam? The Qur'an, as the uncreated and immutable and always-correct word of God, is essential to Islam. Once the Qur'an is no longer regarded as "innerant" (that is, incapable of being wrong), and the possibility of mistake in what are believed to be God's words is recognized, there is nothing certain for Muslims to hold onto. That's not modifying Islam, but dismantling it.

Mahmood again:

The second major tension in Islam today is that Mohammed never got around to saying, "Give unto caesar what is caesar's, and give unto God what is God's." He was an emperor while he was a prophet. He prescribed taxation and redistribution, and instituted a legal system. Islam was the state. Even today, Muslim-majority countries often have the qualifier "Islamic" in their official names, from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, where Mashal was beaten to death. Liberal values do not fare so well in these countries.

Liberal values do not exist in these countries.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, more than 40 people in 2015 were on death row or serving life sentences for blasphemy in Pakistan, more than anywhere else in the world.

Mashal's death is a reminder to us in the West how precious

our freedom of speech is. But even in America, I have lost some of my closest friends for criticizing the prophet's edicts on homosexuality at the University of Michigan. And although we are far away from lynching a student for criticizing Islam,

"Far away" because the U.S. is still firmly in the hands of non-Muslims.

our college campuses are perhaps the last place one can hear honest criticism of Islam.

Yes, this cannot be said too often – the Brownshirts are alive and well in these places and trying to prevent critics of Islam from speaking.

It has been said that Islamophobia is "a word created by fascists, and used by cowards, to manipulate morons." It is hard not to see reason for this definition nowadays. A political double standard has made Islam a hallowed victim – criticizing this religion, maybe even suggesting that Mashal's lynching had anything to do with Islam, will get you labeled an Islamophobe.

All excellent stuff, especially his assault on the use of "Islamophobia" as – borrowing a piercing definition – a "word created by fascists and used by cowards, to manipulate morons." But then there is this:

I do not call for an overthrow of Islam. Even as an atheist, I love this religion.

Here is where one is stopped cold.

I still feel the call to prayer in my heart when it rings out from minarets. I long for a return to glory in the Muslim world, when we translated treatises on math from Sanskrit to

Arabic and fables of wisdom from Arabic to Spanish. When we built the Taj Mahal, when gay court poets dazzled their kings. That was not too long ago.

If 375 years, and counting, can be considered “not too long ago.”

He doesn't call for the overthrow of this Islam that he no longer believes in and that he's proved himself adept at mercilessly criticizing, Why not? Why does he feel he must say that “I love this religion”? What could he possibly mean? For most of us, there is a giddy disconnect here. I assume that he is confusing pleasant memories of childhood, where listening to the muezzin and going to the mosque would be part of those memories. Possibly his affection for pious parents, or other relatives, also plays its part, with an imperfectly-understood Islam as a backdrop to these memories of affection and family ties. Or is it something he thinks he should say – “I love this religion” – in order to win over, or at least not completely alienate, Muslims who might be willing to listen to his arguments about what must be done to bring Islam out of what Mahmood calls its “crisis” (and some of us think ought instead to be called its “situation”) if he reassures them of his love for the faith in what he claims is its true, un-crisis guise – presumably, tolerant, peaceful, art-and-science loving, with those treatises on math, that Taj Mahal, those gay court poets? And “I still feel the call to prayer in my heart,” a fond memory for some, but for this kaffir, the muezzin's amplified wail is disturbing to hear, and the sight of hundreds or thousands of people simultaneously prostrate in prayer is not inspiring, but scary, a horizontal Nuremberg rally.

Mahmood's romanticization of Islam's past also disturbs. He talks about a “return to glory in the Muslim world.” That “glory in the Muslim world” turns out, upon closer inspection, not to have been quite so Islamic as Muslims allow themselves

to believe. Much of what has been attributed to Islamic civilization turns out to have been, in whole or in part, the product of others. Algebra may be an Arabic word, but algebra as a branch of mathematics was the creation of many different peoples, including Sanskrit mathematicians (Mahmood, to his credit, does allude to them). Paper-making and gunpowder, sometimes attributed to Muslim inventors, were not the products of Muslims, but borrowed from the Chinese. The translators of Greek classics, both into and out of Arabic, were almost entirely Jews and Christians, such as the Christians Huneyn ibn Ishaq and Abu Ali Isa Ibn Zur'a. Should "Islamic civilization" be credited for their work?

Omar Mahmood says nothing about art in Islam. Could it be because in one hadith Muhammad says he will not enter a house that has a "dog or pictures" in it, and "pictures" was taken to mean all depictions of living creatures, effectively reducing Muslim artistic expression to Arabic calligraphy and architecture? And as to music, in another hadith Muhammad condemns musical instruments, which has not eliminated, but certainly reduced, the role of music in the lives of Muslims over the past 1400 years.

When one looks at the list of Muslim scientists in the "Golden Age of Islamic Science" one is struck by the appearance always of the same dozen names, compared with hundreds of equal eminence, in the same period, in Western Christendom. Europe. Should we give Islam credit for those who, though nominal Muslims, were actually freethinkers, like the logician Al-Razi (Rhazes), or the mathematician Omar Khayyam? One wonders if Omar Mahmood has given any thought as to why modern science developed in the West, instead of in China or, more to our present point, in the Islamic East? Toby Huff devoted two books – *The Rise of Early Modern Science* and *Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution* – to this very subject: Mahmood should find them enlightening.

There are many reasons why science in the Islamic world fell

behind. The Muslim distrust, even hatred, of *bid'a* (innovation) in religion extended into all areas of life, stifling intellectual progress. The God of Islam is a whimsical god, subject to no laws, while the Christian God submits to the laws of nature. Finally, Islam discourages free and skeptical inquiry, but encourages the habit of mental submission, which naturally has consequences for the enterprise of science. Omar Mahmood might want to revisit accounts of the "Golden Age of Islamic Science" to see how many of those "Islamic" scientists were orthodox Muslims, and how many were freethinkers, like Rhazes. There is also debate as to how Islamically "correct" was the philosopher Averroes. Still another consideration is just how many of those celebrated Muslim scientists recently came out of a non-Islamic milieu, perhaps as the children or grandchildren of non-Muslims. Possibly Omar Mahmood will conclude, on further inspection, that the large claims made for strictly Muslim contributions to an Islamic Golden Age have been exaggerated.

It might be argued that, having come so far, as an apostate, Omar Mahmood should only be lauded for his trenchant criticisms of Islam, that we should not churlishly insist that he distance himself even further from Islam. Why should he not be left to enjoy the consolations of a partly mythical past? And if, having left belief in Islam behind, he wants to cling to belief in something comforting about Islam, i.e., its evocation of his childhood, of his parents and grandparents, that leads him to declare "I love this religion," why not allow him to do so?. Or should we instead wish, knowing how far he has come, for him to arrive at the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about Islam.

Omar Mahmood ends his account by writing that "[t]oday, in a part of the world where Muslims lived the height of that glory, a student is beaten to death for blasphemy. Islam owes him honesty."

Might we say, because Omar Mahmood is so impressive in his

devastating criticisms of Islam, that he should continue on the path of truth, not to be confused with *fi sabil Allah*, that not only does Islam “owe honesty” to the memory of the murdered Mashal, but he, Omar Mahmood, owes himself the complete honesty about Islam that, for now, he continues, out of misguided filial piety, to withhold?

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