

# Apostasy is a weighty word

In some countries, turning your back on a faith can result in condemnation and discrimination, possibly even death

BY MIRKO PETRICEVIC  
RECORD STAFF

Hidden in a small room inside the University of Waterloo's Student Life Centre, Eric Michell and Daniel Gardner start their meeting. Gardner recites a prayer. Michell then sings one from The Hidden Words, a devotional book used by members of the Baha'i faith.

The two met this week to talk about how to support fellow Baha'is in Iran who are barred from equal access to universities because of their faith.

More than 300,000 Baha'is live in Iran, birthplace of the faith.

A chorus of international agencies — they include the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International — have reported on state-sanctioned oppression of Baha'is by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Many Muslims consider the two founders of the Baha'i religion to have been apostates — someone who renounces the Islamic faith — because they declared themselves to be God's prophets. Such claims violate a basic tenet of Islam that Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad, was God's last prophet.

The Iranian government at the time considered their growing movement a threat. One founder was executed in 1850. The other died in exile in Acre, a prison city in the Holy Land, in 1892.



University of Waterloo students Daniel Gardner (left) and Eric Michell are trying to build local support to help fellow Baha'is in Iran who face barriers to higher education. In Iran, the two founders of the faith are considered to have been apostates.

MIRKO PETRICEVIC, RECORD STAFF

Apostate is a word that is not heard often these days. But for some, the decision to not keep the faith is a matter of life and death.

Apostasy is as old as the Scriptures, if not older. Judaism in biblical times and Christianity in Europe have histories of deadly retribution against apostates and heretics.

These days, there's little talk of apostasy in Judaism or Christianity. But "apostate" does spring up in conversations about Islam.

In addition to the troubles facing Baha'is in Iran, a man who converted to Christianity in Afghanistan was put on trial for apostasy last year. The judge ruled he was mentally incompetent and acquitted him.

In 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a death warrant for author Salman Rushdie for blasphemy against Islam in his book, *The Satanic Verses*. Khomeini's followers have repeatedly called Rushdie an apostate.

Militant Muslims, including Osama bin Laden, sometimes slap the label of "apostate" on fellow Muslims they disagree with. Bin Laden, for example, has condemned as apostates those Muslim-dominated governments that co-operate with the United States.

The Qur'an clearly backs freedom of conscience with regard to religious belief (2:256 and 10:99) and says punishment for unbelief is to be meted out by God on Judgment Day.

Abdulaziz Sachedina is a professor of Islamic and Shiite studies, theological and juridical studies, and a former visiting professor at both universities in Waterloo.

In an attachment that he e-mailed to *The Record* from Iran, where he is currently travelling, Sachedina writes that the Qur'an also bestows on Muslims a moral duty to protect the well-being of the community.

That clash of responsibilities — that God punishes unbelief, but that it's the duty of humans to maintain order on Earth — poses a dilemma for Muslim jurists.

The basis for severe punishment for apostasy stems from efforts throughout Islamic history to prevent sedition and to foster social tranquility and public order.

The dilemma for jurists continues today.

"There is a self-evident problem in any Islamic criminalization of apostasy defined in the strict sense of public abandonment of an institutionalized religion for another," Sachedina writes.

"A mere expression of religious dissent against the established community, which the Qur'an grants as a basic individual right, cannot constitute a criminal act punishable in this world."

In modern times, many Muslim-majority countries base their civil laws on the various schools of Islamic law. And different Muslim-majority countries prosecute apostasy to different degrees.

In his e-mail, Sachedina wrote that "most influential jurists (religious scholars) in Iran oppose the death penalty for apostasy at this time."

Some contemporary Muslim scholars challenge whether Islamic governments can legitimately impose the death penalty.

Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim scholar at the University of Oxford in England, tries to highlight the common ground in Islamic faith and western culture.

Ramadan has said that non-Qur'anic references that are used to justify capital punishment for apostasy are either weak or not reliably authentic.

In 2005, Ramadan called on Muslims around the world to agree to a moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty.

Muslim scholars, intellectuals, leaders and the public should debate the validity of such harsh penalties in modern times, he argued.

Ramadan said he was challenging the validity of harsh punishments meted out in many Muslim-majority countries because access to justice doesn't exist for many of the accused.

His calls for a moratorium were not successful.

In general, there is broad consensus among Muslim scholars that the penalty for apostasy is death.

In the Sunni tradition, men and women who have turned their backs on Islam can escape the death penalty by recanting.

Shiite teachings call for women apostates to recant, or be flogged and imprisoned until they recant, even if that takes a lifetime.

Men raised in other faith traditions who convert to Islam but then renounce the Islamic faith can avoid the death penalty by returning to Islam.

But Shiite men who are born into families with at least one Muslim parent, then willfully accept Islam after reaching the age of maturity but renounce their faith, cannot escape the death penalty by recanting.

In Shiite Islam, if a Muslim converts to another religion and keeps it to himself or herself, it's not punished by the authorities, said Saleem Bhimji, a Shiite imam who lives in Kitchener.

"As Muslims, we believe that he or she will be accountable for their own actions with God on the Day of Resurrection."

However, the Islamic legal system gets involved when the actions of the apostate "upset the balance of society," Bhimji said.

Even so, he said, there are many conditions that need to be met before the death penalty would be carried out. And, he added, within the Islamic legal code there are always mechanisms to be lenient.

For example, the punishment for

adultery is death. But to convict a person of adultery requires four witnesses to testify they actually saw penetration during sexual intercourse.

"From an Islamic point of view, I think it's almost impossible for that penalty to be carried out, although it's there in the books."

It's similar with apostasy, Bhimji said.

"The rule is there, but the conditions are so strict that it's almost, at least in the Shia tradition, it's very difficult for that to be carried out."

For cases of apostasy, the accused must be living in a just Islamic country. He or she would have to go for legal trial in front of a Muslim judge. For some, repentance would wipe out the ruling of apostasy, he said.

And if a judge finds the person leaving the faith won't upset the balance of society, "he's basically left alone," Bhimji said.

Those who clearly attack Muslim society, such as Rushdie, can be tried in absentia.

Although all Muslims were called to kill Rushdie, people must "first and foremost" follow the laws of their country unless the law of the land compels them to perform a forbidden act.

So according to Islamic law, Bhimji said, Rushdie's execution can't be legally carried out in a country that's not governed by Islamic laws.

However, it's the responsibility of Islamic jurists to clarify a position on a particular issue, even if Muslims can't legitimately carry out the sentence.

In part, it's to act as a deterrent to others who might attack Islam and destabilize Muslim societies or confuse Muslims who are weak in the knowledge of their faith and lead them from away from their religion, Bhimji said.

Bhimji acknowledged that some Muslims are quick to label their opponents as apostates.

"Unfortunately, it's a very easy word to throw around," he said.

"But unfortunately when people use it they don't understand the ramifications behind it. They don't really understand the legal code."

Abdul Mannan Syed, a Sunni imam of the Muslim Society of Waterloo and Wellington Counties mosque in Waterloo, said Muslims in Canada are free to follow whatever faith they like.

But he conceded there are often social consequences for Muslims who convert to another faith.

"That is in every religion or every community," Syed said. "That happens. Lots of times even to Christians. I know a lot of Christians, they converted to Islam and their families did not welcome them back after that."

Despite the strict measures for prosecuting apostasy that were outlined by Bhimji, a United Nations human rights representative in 2004 reported that Iran's judiciary had consistently failed to ensure due process and fair trials for people accused for violating freedom of expression and opinion laws.

And the high standard for prosecuting apostasy, as outlined by Bhimji, aren't a comfort to Michell and Gardner, the two Waterloo students.

They plan to set up a public information booth on campus and try to win support for Baha'is in Iran from the university's president and senate in the form of letters to the United Nations Secretary General.

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Saleem Bhimji, Shiite imam

## 'Pluralism Sunday' looks beyond mere tolerance of other faiths

BY FRED KINSIE

A new spin on the celebration of the Holy Spirit moving among us has germinated in the United States.

Sponsored by the Center for Progressive Christianity, Pluralism Sunday is being touted as an "evangelism" opportunity by Rev. Jim Burklo, the event's co-ordinator.

"We believe Pluralism Sunday is an opportunity for progressive churches to reach some of the many people who are turned off by Christianity because of exclusivist claims some Christians make about it," Burklo says.

On a blog, he explains that there are three general ways that religions can relate to each other, giving credit to Pluralism Project founder Diana Eck for this concept.

The first is exclusivism, the idea that my religion is right and all others are wrong. The second is inclusivism, where my religion is the only true one, but yours is interesting. And the third, the one being promoted this Pentecost Sunday (May 27), is pluralism, the idea that your religion may be just as good (and valid) for you as mine is for me.

Moving beyond tolerance is not a new idea in our community.

Just last year, Rev. Brice Balmer, an ordained Mennonite minister and chaplain at the House of Friendship in Kitchener, published a book titled *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors* that encourages us to be respectful of other religions and to engage our multifaith neighbours in conversations that can lead to a transformative deepening of our own faith.

There are other examples. Interfaith Grand River, conceived by the Kitchener-Waterloo Council of Churches, held its first meeting on Sept. 13, 2001, timely in that it was just two days after the events of 9/11.

Today its meetings include representatives of all the major religions and many other faiths worshipping in our community. Its objectives include "promoting dialogue among our different traditions, leading to understanding and respect" and "acknowledging and celebrating the religious and spiritual diversity of our community."

The three-decade-old K-W Community Prayer Breakfast has matured from being a Christian-only event to including participants from other faith traditions, most recently from the Sikh and Hindu communities.



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And the Encounter World Religions Centre, based in Guelph, offers courses locally in which participants not only learn about the religions in our community, but experience worship with

people of different faiths in their traditional settings. My wife and I have taken the first part of this experience. It has invigorated our spiritual journey.

This is the first year in which the Center for Progressive Christianity has promoted Pluralism Sunday. More than 40 churches across the United States plan special services on May 27.

As the event is brand new, it hasn't yet caught on in Canada, but Gretta Vosper, chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity and minister at West Hill United Church in Toronto, will be bringing an interfaith message to her own congregation that Sunday morning.

As May 27 is also Pentecost Sunday, it represents an intriguing choice for launching an interfaith celebration.

Originally a Jewish festival, Pentecost has additional meaning for Christians. The Book of Acts in the Bible describes the Holy Spirit breathing energy into the apostles, empowering them to spread the good news of Jesus "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

But lifted to a broader, more inclusive interpretation, Pentecost can be seen as hope for all humanity as we cel-

brate God's work being done by God's people from every faith tradition.

In spite of the popularity of recent books by critics such as Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great: How Religion Spoils Everything*), there are still many people in this community who are on a personal quest to be centred, to be grounded, to be connected to the "other," and who believe wholeheartedly that there are many paths to follow to get there.

Fred Kinsie is executive director of the Independent Living Centre of Waterloo Region and an active member of Preston Mennonite Church in Cambridge.

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- www.tpc.org
  - The Centre for Progressive Christianity
  - www.progressivechristianity.ca
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