

Where freedom is still at stake

Wanted: Islam's Voltaire



Corbis

To most Western ears, the very idea of punishing heresy conjures up a time four or five centuries ago, when Spanish inquisitors terrorised dissenters with the rack and Russian tsars would burn alive whole communities of ultra-traditionalist Old Believers. Most religions began as heresies. Today the concept of “heresy” still means something. Every community built around an idea, a principle or an aim (from fox-hunting enthusiasts to Freudian psychotherapists) will always face hard arguments about where the boundaries of that community lie, and how far the meaning of its founding axioms can be stretched. But one of the hallmarks of a civilised and tolerant society is that arguments within freely constituted groups, religious or otherwise, unfold peacefully. And if those disputes lead to splits and new groups, that too must be a peaceful process, free of violence or coercion.

How depressing, then, to find that in the heartland of one of the world’s great religions, Islam, charges of heresy are still being bandied about in a violent and threatening way, in the hope of silencing critical voices. The latest figure to face such an accusation is an Egyptian scholar, Sayed al-Qimani, whose profile has risen since he agreed to accept a prize from his country’s semi-secular cultural authorities (see article). Mr Qimani’s work—which would be unremarkable in any Western context—applies the familiar techniques of empirical research to early Islamic history.

As so often these days, he faces not punishment by his own government but the potentially lethal consequences of being denounced as a heretic by several influential groups in the quarrelsome world of Egyptian Islam. To the ears of a zealot, such a denunciation sounds like an invitation to go out and claim a heavenly reward by slaying the offender.

The deadly effects of heresy charges are only part of the broader problem of fundamentalist Islam’s incompatibility with human rights. At its sternest, Islamic law prescribes the death penalty for anybody who commits “apostasy”—or abandons the faith. In its most obvious sense, that refers to people who openly convert to another religion. In many Muslim countries, law or social pressure makes such a choice almost impossible. That is a severe limit on religious freedom.

An insidious charge

But liberty is abused in an equally insidious way when accusers conflate apostasy with heresy—by alleging that somebody claiming to be a Muslim has erred by advancing false

interpretations. This is almost impossible for the "offender" to disprove. However strongly the accused may protest that he or she remains loyal to Islam, the accusers can still find some ground on which to prove guilt.

So who will speak up for Mr Qimani and similar outcasts? Statements in his defence would carry huge weight if they came from prominent Muslim figures, especially those who happened to disagree with his ideas on Islamic history.

Perhaps people living in the repressive atmosphere that prevails in much of the Islamic world can be forgiven if their courage falters. But what of the Muslim diaspora? So far, just a handful of Muslims living in the West have spoken out unequivocally for the rights of coreligionists with dissonant views to live in safety (see article). There should be more of them. Indeed, there is an opportunity here for somebody. It turns out the French thinker Voltaire probably never uttered the words so often ascribed to him: "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it." So the way is clear. Let some Western Muslim sage be the first philosopher to make that pronouncement, and mean it.

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