AN INQUIRY INTO IGNORANCE: A JIHĀDĪ-SALAFĪ DEBATE ON JAHL AS AN OBSTACLE TO TAKFĪR

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Introduction

If one were to search the word “takfiri” on Google and read some of the material that turns up, one would get the impression that “takfiris” are particularly zealous and single-minded Muslims who rather randomly accuse their fellow believers of being apostates (murtaddūn) and infidels (kuffār) in order to fight them through jihad.1 To a lesser extent, this description can also be found in the writings of some Western scholars of Islam.2 These impressions are certainly not entirely inaccurate. The practice of takfīr—the accusation against other Muslims that they are guilty of unbelief (kufr)3 and, as a result, should be condemned as infidels (and perhaps even be killed)—was (and is) a major part of the ideological justification for armed attacks against other

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1 One website, for example, speaks of the Jordanian-British radical scholar Abū Qatāda al-Filastīnī as “a misguided, bloodthirsty takfiri”. The article accuses him and like-minded people of being only interested in “killing Muslims whom they deem apostates” and of “excommunicat[ing] whole Muslim societies” which “leads to the justification of the killing of innocent men, women and children”. See www.islamagainststextremism.com/articles/bqael-abu-qatada---a-misguided-bloodthirsty-takfiri.cfm (accessed 28 October, 2009). Although there have indeed been instances in Algeria in the 1990s when entire villages were labelled as apostates and subsequently killed by radical Muslims, these practices were roundly condemned by Islamists and radical Muslims around the world. It would therefore be an exaggeration to equate the actions of a small number of extremely radical people with those of a much larger group who “only” excommunicate and fight their own regimes. Although this also often leads to bloodshed, it is a far cry from the kind of random killing described above.


3 As Izutsu points out, the root of the term kufr (k-f-r) is said to have had the basic meaning of “to cover” and came to be associated with “covering” or “consciously ignoring” benefits one received and hence may be interpreted as “being ungrateful”. In Islamic tradition, the word seems to have been taken as denoting ingratitude towards the benefits that God bestowed upon people or, more simply, a rejection of God’s religion of Islam. Since a person who rejects Islam can be seen as an unbeliever (kāfir), kufr therefore took on the meaning of “rejecting Islam” or “unbelief”. It is also as such that the term is used in the Qurʾān. See Toshihiko Izutsu, Ethico-religious concepts in the Qurʾān, Montreal, 1966, 119–55, especially 119–38.
Muslims by several radical Islamist groups in countries such as Egypt and Algeria. The legitimising role of takfīr in radical Islamists’ attacks against Muslim soldiers, politicians and—in some cases—even civilians is therefore not in doubt. However, while it appears that modern-day radical Muslims apply takfīr more easily than the classical scholars of Islam (ʿulamāʾ), the idea that they do this randomly or even casually ignores the highly detailed debates about this issue among radical scholars. This paper focuses on one such debate.

Among the issues that feature in the debates on takfīr between radical Muslim scholars is the question of whether ignorance (jahl) of the sinfulness of an act of kufr can be used as an excuse (ʿudhr) for committing it and, subsequently, as an objection (māniʿ) or obstacle (ʿārid) for others to apply takfīr to that particular sinner. The idea behind this is that God will not hold a person responsible for acts that he or she did not realise were sinful and human beings should therefore also not condemn such a person. Although some authors have questioned

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8 It is important to realise that not all sins in Islam amount to the level of unbelief. Some sins are less serious and do not turn a person into an unbeliever. For an overview of when a sin becomes an act of kufr from a Jihādī-Salafī point of view, which is largely—but not entirely—shared by many other Muslims, see Wagemakers, “Transformation”, 97–9.