Abandoning Prayer and the Declaration of Unbelief in Imāmī Jurisprudence

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Reports from the Shiʿī Imams, as found in the early Imāmī collections of akhbār, assert that the one who abandons prayer (tārik al-ṣalāt) is an unbeliever (kāfir). The same assessment is, of course, known from Sunni ḥadīth and debated in subsequent juristic discussion.1 The appropriate characterisation of the relationship between failure to observe the prayer ritual and the categorisation of unbelief (takfīr) involves a complex interaction of theological and legal issues. First, there is the discussion over what constitutes “abandoning prayer” (“Must it be habitual, or is a single instance sufficient?”, “If done unintentionally, does this affect the ruling of unbelief?” and so on). Next, there are larger theological issues at stake. Whether actions (aʿmāl)—either the commission of a prescribed act, or the omission of an obligatory act) constituted an element of belief (īmān, iʿtiqād) was a well-known dispute in early Islam with many different views and formulations of positions from the Murjiʿī to the Khārijī. The various views over whether the tārik al-ṣalāt is a kāfir, as the ḥadīth reports indicate, are inevitably linked to views on the īmān-aʿmāl debate. The dispute continues in Salafī circles in the modern period, causing not a little friction between various strands of Salafism.2

In this contribution, I examine the disputes over the tark al-ṣalāt = kufr equation in the statements of the Shiʿī Imams (akhbār) and subsequent Imāmī juristic literature (mainly fiqh), focussing on a detailed examination of the issue in a late Imāmī fiqh book from the Akhbāri tendency. The discussions in the non-Shiʿī traditions (Sunni, Salafī, Ibāḍī) display both similarities and differences with the Imāmī Shiʿī fiqh tradition, demonstrating nicely the need for both comparative and tradition-specific elements of any analysis of Shiʿī legal thought, though a full comparative analysis will not be attempted here.

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1 Katz, Prayer, pp. 162–164.
2 Lav, Radical Islam, pp. 86–119.
1 Abandoning Prayer and Unbelief in the Imāmī hadīth Corpus

By my reckoning, there are fifty or so reports in the Imāmī hadīth corpus which explicitly reference one who abandons prayer, and either describe him as an unbeliever, or use a similar locution. Within this corpus, one can identify in some reports legal and theological sophistication and development; other reports appear purely hortatory, encouraging action with rhetoric and hyperbole rather than legal analysis. The reports fall into three formulaic structures, though within each category there are groupings of fewer reports.

1. Our intercession will not be conferred upon anyone who does not take our prayer seriously (mustakhiffan bi-l-ṣalāt).³

In some reports the phrase stands alone, attributed to the Prophet⁴ or one of the Imams, Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/732 or 126/743)⁵ or Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765).⁶ At other times it is set within a narrative, such as:

Abū Baṣīr said, “I visited Umm Ḥamīda, and I consoled her over the death of al-Ṣādiq. She cried, and I cried with her. She then said, “O Abū Muḥammad, when I saw [Ṣādiq] close to death, I witnessed an amazing thing: he opened his eyes and said to gather around him everyone with whom he had had a close relationship.” She continued, “We did not leave anyone out, and he looked at them and said, “Our intercession will not be conferred upon anyone who does not take our prayer seriously.””⁷

Since, in Imāmī hadīth literature, the intercession of the Prophet and the Imams is available for all true believers, the exclusion of the tārik al-ṣalāt from intercession is, in effect, a declaration of unbelief on their part. This is confirmed in some versions where the phrase is supplemented by the phrase “and [the mustakhiff] will not encounter al-Ḥawḍ. No! By God,”⁸ indicating that he will not gain the benefits of Paradise. In one version, attributed to

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⁴ Barqī, Maḥāsin, vol. 1, p. 80.
⁸ Kulaynī, Kāfī, vol. 6, p. 401.