Denying God: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic and Christian Historiographical and Scriptural Approaches to Apostasy and Martyrdom

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Matthew Holter was born in Missoula, Montana and raised in nearby Lolo, Montana. He earned his BA in History from the University of Providence (Great Falls, Montana) in fall 2020, where he was on the track and cross-country teams. During college, he worked as a public history research intern. Presently, he is discerning pursuing religious life in the Catholic Church and/or obtaining a MDIV. His interests include early Islamic and Christian history, exegesis, as well as comparative religious identities. He would like to dedicate this paper to his late grandfather Robert Holland of Butte, Montana.
DENYING GOD: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND SCRIPTURAL APPROACHES TO APOSTASY AND MARTYRDOM

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Islamic and Christian beliefs and early historical struggles with apostasy, “a kind of disbelief” manifested through action or deed, and martyrdom ameliorates religious discourse between the faiths.¹ Jesuit theologian and progenitor of contemporary Comparative Theology Francis Xavier Clooney celebrated detailed “learning from one or more faith traditions” because the discipline solidifies ecumenical concords across religious boundaries.² Clooney opined that Comparative Theology transcends anodyne interreligious observations. Instead, Comparative Theology “is a theological discipline confident about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition.”³ Clooney’s emphasis on interreligious

¹ This is where you can put the author’s attributions.
3. Ibid.
Dialogue derived, undoubtedly, from the landmark papal encyclical *Nostra Aetate*. The Vatican II conciliar document marked a turning point in Church history, recognizing that other faiths “reflect a ray of...[t]ruth which enlightens all.”⁴ *Nostra Aetate* references Islam’s similitudes with Christianity, although recognizing past “quarrels and hostilities” between the two faiths.⁵ Alongside some doctrinal similarities, both Islam and Christianity overcame persecutions during their respective nascent years. However, despite these persecutions, both faiths increased their followings, attracting the marginalized, downtrodden, and destitute.

Accordingly, Islam and Christianity codified analogous teachings on martyrdom and apostasy but differed on apostates’ culpability if their “heart contradicts” their tongue or deed.⁶ Although Islam distinguishes between the internal intent and external action of apostasy, this distinction does not compromise the faith’s sincerity because of the religion’s early martyrs and Scriptural expositions about retaining Muslim piety during upheavals.⁷ Nevertheless, despite these perpetual misunderstandings and differences, historical and Scriptural developments influenced Islam and Christianity’s compatible teachings on apostasy. During the two faiths’ respective inceptions in the first and seventh centuries, systemic religious and governmental forces tortured adherents, aiming to ossify the opposing teachings’ disseminations. Islamic and Christian historiographies and Scriptures paint brutal, ungarnished scenes of men and women dying for their religions. Moreover, illustrious early Islamic and Christian leaders apostatized because of covert and overt pressures. Appreciating Islam and Christianity’s shared early obstacles with persecution strengthens religious solidarity, granting both faiths’ adherents a mutual understanding of the other’s history and theology. Although the religions differ on the irreverence of apostasy when undergoing torture, Islam and Christianity’s early hardships spurred salient theological commonalities on apostasy and martyrdom. Specifically, both faith traditions’ early historiographies and Scriptures’ disapprobation of apostasy reveal a mutual commonality evident

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⁵ Ibid., section 3.


⁷ *A Shi’ite Encyclopedia* (Ahlulbayt Islamic project, 2014), 899.
in both religions. A comprehensive analysis of Islamic and Christian historiographical and Scriptural approaches to apostasy and martyrdom evinces both faiths’ shared early hardships and religious earnestness.

A. Islamic Historical and Scriptural Positions on Apostasy and Suffering

Primary and secondary *siras* (Muhammad biography) describe the acute trials and persecutions of the inchoate Islamic community, the *Ummah*.\(^8\) Persecutions began soon after the Islamic Prophet Muhammad’s revelations in circa 610. Islam’s soteriological universality appealed to the destitute and societal outcasts. Consequently, fearing the erosion of its political and religious authority, the Quraysh, the dominant pagan mercantile tribe tasked with maintaining order in Mecca, persecuted vulnerable Muslims such as Bilal Ibn Rabah and Sumayyah bint Khabbat, knowing their vulnerability and hoping they would apostatize. Contemptuous Quraysh leader Abu Jahl spearheaded the early persecutions against the unprotected *Ummah*, hoping “to seduce them [the Muslims] from their religion.”\(^9\) Medieval Islamic exegete and historian Ibn Kathir inveighed against Abu Jahl’s turpitude, maintaining that he imperiously imposed cruel tortures to get the Muslims to “do whatever their persecutors incited.”\(^10\) Although “[s]ome gave way [and recanted] under [the] pressure of persecution,” many societal outcasts, viewed with contempt and disdain by the pre-Islamic world, remained steadfast, resolutely professing the oneness of God (*Taqwa*) despite torture.\(^11\)

Religious scholars know frustratingly little about Sumayyah’s life before her conversion and eventual martyrdom. Islamic traditionalist Muhammad al-Bukhari’s canonical ninth-century Hadith Sahih al-Bukari highlights Sumayyah’s destitution: “My [Muhammad’s Companion Ammar Ibn Yasir’s] mother and I were among the weak and oppressed. I from among the children, and my mother from among the women.”\(^12\)

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Al-Tabari’s laconicism speaks volumes about Sumayyah and her devotion to Islam. Despite being an Abyssinian slave and, in the words of erudite early-ninth-century Muslim scholar Muhammad Ibn Sa’d, “a very old and frail woman,” Sumayyah ultimately found freedom in Islam. Ironically, however, Sumayyah’s violent death epitomized the apotheosis of that freedom.

Sumayyah’s torture narrative elicits potent images of femininity, piety, and resolve. Sumayyah endured the horrors of being tortured, pressured to apostatize under duress, alongside her family and other “weak and unprotected converts.” Primary *siras* referred to Sumayyah simply as Ammar Ibn Yasir’s decrepit mother. Ninth-century-historian Ibn Hisham’s *sira* noted that the Quraysh “used to take Ammar Ibn Yasir out along with his father [Amir] and mother [Sumayyah], who had all embraced Islam, in the heat of the day and make them lie on the burning sand of Makkah.” Despite being “exposed, in the glaze of the mid-day sun, upon the scorching gravel of the [Meccan] valley,” and suffering from “intolerable thirst,” Sumayyah “escaped the shame of renunciation,” refusing to apostatize. Obviating “the shame of apostasy” prompted Abu Jahl to murder Sumayyah “by shooting her in the vagina with a spear” because he regarded her fortitude as intransigent defiance. Dying in such a vivid manner alongside

her husband and child evinced the Quraysh’s extreme antipathy toward the incipient Islamic sect. However, due to her fortitude, Islam commemorates Sumayyah as “the first martyr (shahidah) to meet her death in Islam.”

Islam also venerates an African slave named Bilal Ibn Rabah for his refusal to abjure Islam during torture, a tangible testimony of Muhammad’s radical commitment to egalitarianism. Bilal’s origins resembled Sumayyah’s. Ibn Sa’d noted that before Bilal’s eventual manumission, he was a slave, “his mother was Hamama… [, and] was one of the first of the Abyssinians.” Because of his lower-class status, the Quraysh victimized Bilal and one day ordered “a huge boulder to be placed on his chest.” Al Tabari detailed how the Quraysh tempted Bilal by saying, “You will stay like this [suffocating under the boulder] until you leave the faith of Muhammed.” However, despite undergoing torture, Bilal reaffirmed his belief in the oneness of God, impervious about “what was done to him for the sake of Allah.” Bilal’s courage personified the indomitable ethos of the persecuted Islamic sect, for he, like other victims, possessed an ardent love of God that superseded the perennial fear of death. Before the Quraysh could kill him, however, Muhammad’s affluent father-in-law Abu Bakr manumitted Bilal. Despite Muhammad’s connections, however, not every victim could be emancipated, spared from having to either publicly profane Islam or undergo torture.

Muhammad encountered society’s obloquy and mollified various victims’ disquietudes, imbued with compassion and “ensuring them that God would bring this matter [i.e., the tortures] to an end.” Muhammad held martyrs in high regard, professing that they “shall be pardoned every


22. Ibid.


fault but debt.”\footnote{27} During the persecutions, Muhammad consoled apostates and other victims, exuding commiseration and encouraging them “to dissemble in order that they might escape torment.”\footnote{28} However, when the persecutions intensified, and when the Prophet saw “the affliction of his companions,” concrete exhortations replaced Muhammad’s oral pacifications. Muhammad encouraged his followers to seek refuge under Negus, a religious tolerant Christian Abyssinian king who would eradicate all fears of apostasy. Although Muhammad’s uncle Abu Talib provided him with physical protection, after the unprotected Muslims’ first exile to Abyssinia, the Quraysh verbally profaned the Prophet, accusing “him of sorcery, soothsaying, and madness.”\footnote{29} After Abu Talib’s death, slanders dissolved into physical threats against Muhammad, and the Quraysh went to “greater lengths in molesting him than they had ever done during his lifetime.”\footnote{30} “Suppress[ing] his hurt,” Muhammad fled to Medina (\textit{Hegira}), proselytized the Islamic faith, acquired a large following, and victoriously led the Muslims against the Quraysh during the seminal Battle of Badr (ca. 624). Badr forever changed Islam’s position from a persecuted sect to a powerful geopolitical player, but the persecutions of Islam’s nascent years were codified in the Koran, Islam’s sacred text, subsequently inspiring myriad Muslim theologians.\footnote{31}

Islamic Scriptural teachings on suffering and apostasy proceeded from historical developments. Islam holds that God (\textit{Allah}) revealed chapter (\textit{surah}) 29 of the Koran, entitled \textit{The Spider} (\textit{Al-Ankabut}), during the Meccan persecution of Muslims. \textit{The Spider} details past Prophets’ persecutions and rejections. Overcoming evils, trials, tortures, and slanders, while challenging, during the Meccan persecution aligned with God’s
omniscient prescience. After all, God is “the All-Hearing, All-Knowing” creator of the universe.\textsuperscript{32} Individuals, polities, and nations can deprive Muslims of their material happiness and even kill them. However, struggling for the faith accentuates Muslim piety, guiding them towards God’s ineffable benevolence.

Numerous Islamic scholars used their theological erudition to exegete Koranic teachings on suffering. A 2018 exegetical (\textit{Tafsir}) commentary explicates the underlying theme of \textit{The Spider}: “Mere lip-profession of faith,” the text explains, “is not enough. Individuals and communities have to go through… fire and tribulations to achieve their ends. The greater and harder the sacrifice, the more glorious and enduring the success.”\textsuperscript{33} Enduring hardships and refusing to apostatize validated Islam’s theological appeal because many Muslims proved their unfeigned faith and died before recanting. \textit{The Spider} also invokes past Prophets’ rejection in the material, provisional world. However, despite these obstacles, the Koran reassures Muslims that “God … [will] never wrong them.”\textsuperscript{34}

Renowned Muslim exegetes propounded God’s support of the Muslims during the Meccan persecution. Eleventh-century Koranic scholar Imam al-Wahidi lambasted feigned believers “who declared [the Islamic faith] with their tongues… [but] when Allah tested them with trials or calamities regarding their own persons [Prophets], they succumbed.”\textsuperscript{35} Al-Wahidi’s commentary demonstrates that, while not sinful when the heart contradicts the tongue, casting aspersions about the sacred, Prophets, God, [and] engaging in idolatry, even during duress, inadequately reflects Muslim piety. It was important for the Muslims suffering from systemic persecutions from 610-622 to remember that God “tested those who were before [them]… [and] knoweth those who feign.”\textsuperscript{36} For the Muslim, internal piety trumps physical wellbeing, and whoever “is true to Allah,” preeminent twelfth-century Muslim theologian Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali contended,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Sura 29: 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Hadrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, \textit{The Holy Quran with English Translation and Commentary}, vol.4 (Pakistan: Islam International Publications, 1960), 2029 (Surah 29:4 commentary).
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Sura 29: 39.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Alī ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī, \textit{Asbāb al-Nuzūl}, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 125.
\end{itemize}
“will be delivered... and secure from apostasy.” The profundity of these Koranic commentaries about suffering and deliverance from apostasy transcend the historical circumstances of seventh-century Arabia. Instead, the invitation to submit to God’s will continues to be a hermeneutic that applies to Muslims in various locations and eras.

Islam continues to ruminate about how the perennial issues of suffering and apostasy apply to contemporary Muslims. “Life is a test,” twentieth-century Islamic cleric Mohammed al-Ghazali noted, “a trial, which we all have to undergo. Once we pass from this life into the next we will find out how we have fared and whether we have passed the test or not.” Whether these tests manifest in momentous matters or benign ones, orienting one’s life towards God comprises a Muslim’s principal task on earth. Being compelled to recant one’s deepest-held religious beliefs via torture represents the apogee of trials, for piety is not some abstract notion but a living testament that forms a person’s identity. Koranic expressions about standing by one’s religious convictions testify to that aphorism, informing and guiding Muslims encountering earthly hardships. Christianity’s fraught origins mirrored Islam’s. Moreover, like Islam, Christianity codified profound Scriptural expositions on suffering and apostasy in the Gospels, granting early Church adherents a model for prioritizing and conducting both their interior and exterior lives.

B. Christian Historical and Scriptural Positions on Apostasy

Christianity’s first-century obstacles with apostasy and martyrdom authenticated the faith’s legitimacy. Although Christianity’s historical origin’s validity pales compared to Islam’s, most scholars agree about the relative authenticity of Christ’s death and the Christian sect’s subsequent persecution because of the embarrassment criteria. Christian scholars define the embarrassment criteria as those “embarrassing... tradition[s] of the church” included in the canonical Gospels. Including the crucifixion of its founder illustrates the uniqueness of Christianity, for Jesus entered the

world not to achieve temporal power but to deify humans, “assimilating… [them]… to the invisible Father [i.e., God].”  

Like Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, Jesus encountered disdain, hate, and public rejection. Gospel explications about dying and encountering first-century society’s antipathy not only exemplify Christianity’s distinctive theological sympathies for the marginalized; they comforted the early Church during various systematic persecutions. Palestine’s religious authorities and the Roman government martyred Christianity’s founders, just as the Quraysh killed, tortured, and casted aspersions on Muslims. Like Islam, these hardships effectuated analogous Scriptural and exegetical teachings about the follies of apostasy and prioritizing exterior material happiness over an interior love of God.

Christ’s teachings about “suffering for the sake of righteousness” antedated His death. Despite envisioning his death, the Gospels depict Christ as prioritizing God over all material goods, including finances, family relations, and even the His followers’ lives. “Whosoever shall confess me before men,” Christ said, “[to] him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven.” Like the Koran, the Gospels teach that loving God entails a two-way relationship between humans and the divine. Speaking on divine-anthropomorphic relations, Jesus chided an inquiring disciple, saying, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

Famous fifth-century Church Father, exegete, and theologian St Jerome compared being in a state of sin to death. Remaining in a sinful state and withdrawing from God, according to St. Jerome, is tantamount to death, for if one shows “solicitous…[concern for] the dead [while not amending their sinful state], …[they] too may be called dead.” As Islamic scholars interpreted Koranic teachings on martyrdom to lead one to a purer love of God, patristic commentators, also, understood Christ’s words to elucidate the importance of loving God, even over dead loved ones.

Christianity’s distinctiveness rests in Christ’s willingness to die for the remission of sins. While the Islamic tradition produced numerous hagiographical historiographies detailing Muhammad’s victimization in Mecca, the Christian Scriptures hold Christ’s Passion as one of its definitive

40. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 16.2.
41. 1 Peter 3:14.
42. Matthew 10:32.
43. Matthew 8:22.
theological teachings. God, in the person of Christ, became man to deify humans. Moreover, God, in the person of Christ, understood humans’ sufferings, their rejections, and their humiliations, dying on the cross atop Mount Cavalry. Christ experienced ignominy, exposed to an angry mob after His flogging. St. Augustine, the esteemed fourth-century Bishop of Hippo and famous Church Father, described the scene, sparing no detail but candidly detailing Christ’s despondency. He wrote: “[H]e has been scourged, crowned with thorns, clothed with the garments of derision, jeered at with the bitterest insults, struck with the open hand; his ignominy is at the boiling point.”45 The Roman civil authorities proceeded to crucify Christ. However, following His death, the Apostles, Jesus’ followers, propagated the nascent faith, adamantly believing that Christ overcame death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.46 Nevertheless, persecutions continued after Jesus’ death. Subsequently, the Palestinian religious authorities and the mighty Roman Empire martyred Christians like Stephen and Peter for refusing to acquiesce to the first-century’s prevailing animosity towards the faith.

Stephen’s death typified early Christians’ ardent piety and docility. Christianity’s Scriptures and hagiographies credit Stephen, an early first-century Jewish Christian, as being the first Church martyr. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the temple religious authorities of first-century Palestine, and the Roman civil authorities viewed the early Christian sect as both novel and dangerous. Therefore, various religious leaders and political authorities sought to extirpate the faith by killing its adherents. As Islamic historiographies venerated Sumayyah for being the first Islamic martyr, early Christian exegetes commended Stephen as the first Christian martyr who died for his unfailing religious convictions. After he gave a loquacious, telling oration about the Pharisees’ acute hypocrisy, the religious authorities stoned Stephen. Despite being stoned, fourth-century theologian St. John Chrysostom posited, Stephen refused to comprise his faith, confessing and preaching “even in death.”47 Stephen ultimately found freedom in Christ, and that freedom, like Sumayyah’s in Islam, culminated in his death.

St. Peter, an early influential apostolic evangelist, transitioned from a timid disciple to a redeemed devoted martyr, emulating his Teacher’s

passion. Before his martyrdom in Rome, Peter expiated for apostatizing and denying knowing Christ three times during Jesus’ trial before the temple guards, proclaiming to Christ three times that he loved him.  


50. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 123.5.


53. Leo the Great, Sermon 82.6.

Abandoning and forsaking Christianity would have spared their lives. However, denying Christ assaults the integrity of a Christian’s identity and interior conscience, desecrating the belief in the sanctity of the person that governs every believer’s motive, thought, and deed.\textsuperscript{55} Undoubtedly, the Islamic-Christian tradition agrees that loving God supersedes all other tenets. However, during the Church’s institutionalization at the Nicene Council (325), an ecumenical meeting convoked to end Church disunity, the council’s framers prohibited the justification of apostasy under any circumstances, imposing penalties for ecclesial and lay apostates.\textsuperscript{56} Whereas Christians adopted an absolutist position on the sinfulness of apostasy at Nicene, refusing to justify the action based on a strict interpretation of the Gospels, Islamic scholars, conversely, embraced a consequentialist approach to abjuration, inspired by Koranic teachings, Hadiths, and \textit{siras}.

\textbf{C. Differences: Comparing Islam’s Internal Intent Classification and Christianity’s Absolutism}

Muhammad exhorted his followers to apostatize without compunction because the heart, not the tongue, determines a believer’s piety. The Quraysh’s tortures engendered many apostasies. “If they [Muslims during torture] were asked, ‘Are al-Lat and al-Uzza [pagan deities] gods in their own right other than God?’ they would reply, ‘Yes; they are.’”\textsuperscript{57} Muslims apostatized “just to avoid torture.”\textsuperscript{58} Muhammad’s companion Khabbab ibn al-Aratt decried the Muslims’ sufferings. However, Muhammad responded that prior believers in God “used to be combed with iron combs so that nothing of his flesh, or nerves would remain on his bones; yet that would never make him desert his religion.”\textsuperscript{59} Although Muhammad prioritized retaining piety during torture, obliquely chiding Khabbab for forgetting pious believers’ past torments, he ensured fellow Muslims that God


\textsuperscript{57} Kathir, \textit{The Life of the Prophet Muhammed}, 359.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Sahih al-Bukari 5.63. 3852.
disregarded their apostasies “because of the contempt and extreme pain they suffered.”

Despite the faith’s early tension with internal intent and external action, Islam’s efficacious nuanced approach to public renunciation ensured that “only five converts returned to paganism.”

Sumayyah’s son and companion of the Prophet Muhammad Ammar Ibn Yasir’s apostasy predominantly produced Islam’s tension between internal intent and external action. Contemporary Muslim historian Sadruddin Sharafuddin al-Amili’s biography of Yasir explained that Ammar, despite witnessing the horrors of his parents’ murders, “remained steadfast and firm in his faith.” Despite the admission that Ammar’s faith “remained steadfast,” Islamic historiographies unanimously concurred that Ammar, as well as other persecuted Muslims, calumniated Muhammad and Islam. “The idolaters took Yasir and did not leave him until he had maligned the Messenger of Allah and spoke well of their [pagan] gods,” Muhammad Ibn Sa'd wrote. Yasir felt remorse for defiling the Messenger of Allah, the person whom he valued above everybody and who formed his identity. “’By Allah,” Yasir confided, “I did not leave [the scene of the torture] until I maligned you and mentioned their gods well.” Muhammad, however, assuaged Yasir because his heart remained steadfast and contradicted his tongue during his abjuration, reassuring him that God disregarded these invectives because Yasir uttered them during duress. Moreover, Muhammad encouraged Yasir to repeat the blasphemies if the Quraysh resumed their tortures. Yasir’s concealment of his faith precipitated a commonly misunderstood Islamic precept known as Taqiya: the concealment of internal piety during upheavals.

Islam, inspired by Yasir’s predicament, instituted the theological doctrine of Taqiya in the Koran, attempting to protect Muslims from harm. Yasir’s renunciation of Islam influenced the Koran’s conditional exception to apostasy. The Koran explains, “Whoever renounces faith in God after having believed—except for someone who is compelled, while his heart rests securely in faith—but whoever willingly opens up his heart to

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64. Ibid., 191; Ishaq, The Life of Muhammed, 145.
disbelief—upon them falls wrath from God.”

This verse does not constitute relativism. Contrarily, Muhammad preferred martyrdom to the shame of renunciation, and the Koran warns that apostates face God’s wrath. According to Ibn Abbas, an acclaimed seventh-century exegete and uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, Surah 16:106 castigates “whosoever utters words of disbelief willingly.” However, the verity of proper worship did not apply to “the person who is coerced into disbelief.”

Undoubtedly, the Islamic Scriptures, Hadiths, and historiographies express aversion to apostasy and preferred martyrdom. Nevertheless, unlike Christianity, Islam adduced the Koran to formulate a conditional approach to apostasy, permitting believers to ostensibly cede the faith while internally remaining pious.

_Taqiya_ appeals to consequentialism. Allegations that Ammar renounced his faith stupefied Muhammad. “‘Never would Ammar apostatize,’” Muhammad exclaimed. “‘Ammar is filled with faith from his head to his toes.’” Despite knowing Ammar recanted externally, Muhammad did not consider Ammar’s actions sinful because he retained his internal piety. Muhammad and Islamic Sacred Scriptures never permitted apostasy. However, publicly profaning God, Muhammad, or the sacred does not constitute apostasy when extenuating circumstances threaten a believer’s life or property. “[I]f anyone is compelled and professes unbelief with his tongue, while his heart contradicts him, in order to escape his enemies,” Al-Tabari argued, “no blame falls on him.” Moreover, Al-Tabari proceeded to explain the internal and external facets of piety: “Belief is expressed by heart, tongue, and hand…. Observance of the heart is absolutely necessary. But if it is probable that… an injury will befall him, his property or one of his co-regionalists, then he is released from the obligation to intercede for the faith with [the] hand or tongue.”

Whereas Islam extricates Muslims from the duty to profess their faith in God if doing so induces harm, Christianity holds that both a Christian’s internal intent and external action composes a desideratum that bounds a believer’s grace.

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66. Surah 16:106.
68. Abbas, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’an, 296.
Gospel elucidations told the persecuted inchoate Church about the harmonious relationship between the interior and exterior. Peter’s denial of Christ correlates with Ammar Ibn Yasir’s denial of Muhammad, as both regretted their actions. However, Peter expiated for his apostasy. Church Fathers refused to justify Peter’s denial because “[a] prudent reader knows how frivolous the interpretation is.”Peter, like Yasir, experienced acute shame for apostatizing. After his denial, Peter fled the chief priest Caiaphas’ courtyard, ashamed of his actions. Patristic commentaries about the episode conveyed less sympathy towards Peter than Islam did towards Ammar Ibn Yasir. After Peter’s apostasy, St. Jerome wrote, “[H]e could not do penance. So he goes outside from the council of the impious in order to wash away the filth of a cowardly denial with bitter weeping.”Tears flowed from the faces of Yasir and Peter. However, whereas Muhammad commanded Yasir to repeat calumnious invectives if his heart contradicted his words, Church Fathers lambasted Peter’s “cowardly denial” because the exterior and interior are mutually compatible.

Early Church clerics embraced these exegetical Gospel commentaries to apostates who succumbed to prevailing pressures that compromised a believer’s proper religious expression. While systemic persecutions manifest in various ways, a similar motif included an unjust pressure on Christians’ freedom to exercise their religious beliefs. Canonized third-century Saint Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria described the moral dilemma Christians faced during the third-century Decian persecution. He wrote:

Summoned by name they approached the unclean, unholy sacrifices. Some came white-faced and trembling, as if they were not going to sacrifice but to be sacrificed themselves as victims to the idols, so that the large crowd of spectators heaped scorn upon them and it was obvious that they were utter cowards, afraid to die and afraid to sacrifice.

Labeling apostates as “cowards” for fearing death corresponds with Christianity’s animus towards believers such as Peter who abjured because of various pressures. The decisive Nicene Council (325) espoused the

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73. Ibid., 308.
absolute prohibition against public apostasy and promulgated that “when they [ecclesial apostates] are discovered [to have apostatized,] they shall be deposed” and “[lay apostates] shall be dealt with mercifully… if they heartily repent.” The institutional Church showed mercy towards Christians that heartbreakingly immolated animals and recanted, although they had to expiate to revert to the Church. However, inspired by Scripture and tradition, at the Nicene Council, the Church upheld the objective categorical principle of worshiping God publicly, proscribing apostasy regardless of any ends that recanting may produce—even the preservation of one’s sensible life.

However, claiming that Islam employs Taqiya merely as a geopolitical tool to acquire material power while Christianity’s absolutist position transcends anthropomorphic amendments fails to account for the Church’s employment of consequentialism in other arenas. Islam would also maintain that it completely prohibits apostasy. However, denying God during torture does not constitute apostasy. Hence, if external pressures threaten Muslims’ livelihoods, God does not require expiation, since no sin has been committed. Although Christianity differs from Islam on apostasy in this regard, not accounting for an apostate’s competing internal intent, the faith employs consequentialist reasoning on other weighty issues. Consider renowned thirteenth-century Dominican theologian and scholastic Thomas Aquinas’ justification for killing in his distinguished disquisition The Summa Theologica. The Church, according to Aquinas, always condemns murder, considering it “the gravest of the… sins that are committed against one's neighbor.” However, Aquinas distinguished between killing and murder, permitting the former when a “public authority… [acts]… for the common good.” Orthodox Christianity’s utilization of consequentialism in grave moral matters accounts for the greater good. Hence, embracing Thomistic consequentialism helps Christians understand the Islamic approach to public apostasy better. Ultimately, both faiths put conditional parameters on identifying intrinsically wrong actions, prioritize submission to God as paramount, and both religions extol martyrdom as the paradigm of religious fidelity.

78. Ibid., 64.3.
Conclusion

Religious intolerance assailed both the Islamic and Christian faiths, yet both faiths’ adherents died for the respective religions and felt intense shame for apostatizing. Clooney’s insistence on strengthening interreligious relations not only helps people from different faith traditions respect another’s similar dogmas and histories; it reinforces other faiths’ sincerity. When analyzing Islam and Christianity’s shared struggles with persecution and apostasy, it becomes evident that both religions’ adherents did not privatize their respective faiths, considering it a vital component that established their identity and prepared them for life after death. Ultimately, people do not die for empirical things. Conversely, people die for religions and political ideologies, beliefs that the naked eye cannot measure. In various environments of religious bigotry, individuals and polities cling to tribalistic impulses. However, those tribalistic impulses regress inevitably into religious prejudice, the same prejudice that blighted Islam and Christianity during their respective nascent years. Both Muslims and Christians, followers of the world’s two largest religions, share a joint religious sincerity that helps believers conquer the vicissitudes of temporal life. Despite the faiths’ differences on internal intent versus external action, both religions admonish apostasy, regarding the action to impinge divine-human relations. Islamic and Christian commonalties on apostasy and martyrdom exemplify the solace of religion, a solace evident in both faith traditions.