

Hamza Yusuf's retraction of his praise for Maulana Muhammad Ali

by Zahid Aziz

1. In July this year (2012) my attention was drawn to an audio recording by Shaikh Hamza Yusuf, the Islamic scholar and speaker from the US, available on Youtube, in which after rejecting the widespread opinion that Lahori Ahmadis are *kafir* he had gone on to express high praise for the services rendered by Maulana Muhammad Ali to the religion of Islam. He told his audience that Maulana Muhammad Ali did some of the best work of defence of Islam that any Muslim had done against Christian attacks, and that this was an assessment which he had reached after reading a wide range of Muslim writings of this type. He added that many Muslims had "borrowed heavily" from Maulana Muhammad Ali's original work, without attributing it to him, "even though it is very clear where they took it from". He ended by saying that the Maulana has "definitely made his impact on the English speaking Muslim community whether they realise it or not ... I wish the best for him. He seemed like a very devout Muslim."

I quoted his comments on my blog at <http://ahmadiyya.org/WordPress/> and repeated them in my [Eid-ul-Fitr khutba in August 2012](#) at the Lahore Ahmadiyya Centre in London.

2. Hamza Yusuf has now issued a statement, dated 6th October 2012, retracting his comments above as an "error" and requesting that they be removed from the Internet. Here is the link to his statement on a website of his own:

<https://www.sandala.org/blog/sticks-and-drones> (His statement was moved to this link later.)

He writes:

"My error was in differentiating between the status of the two groups – the Lahoris and the Qadianis – of the Ahmadiyya movement, and stating that the Lahoris are not outside the fold of Islam."

He claims that he was misled into thinking that Lahori Ahmadis are Muslims because of:

"Al-Azhar University's approval of Muhammad Ali's *Religion of Islam* as well as his insistence in the introduction to his Qur'an translation that he was a Muslim who accepted the finality of the Prophet Muhammad".

But now: "several fatwas and statements of various scholars I trust stating the contrary opinion have come to my attention and convinced me of my error".

Since I had quoted Hamza Yusuf's earlier views on my blog and in my *khutba*, I feel under an obligation to pass comment on his new statement. Regrettably, I find that his statement is often irrational, ambivalent, has many inconsistencies, and applies different standards to himself from those he applies to Lahori Ahmadis.

3. Hamza Yusuf opens by quoting a hadith report and statements of classical scholars urging the utmost caution in declaring a Muslim as *kafir*, one such opinion going so far as to

say that it is preferable to make the mistake of declaring a thousand *kafirs* as Muslim than to make the mistake of declaring one Muslim as *kafir*. Yet the object of Hamza Yusuf's whole statement is to express his agreement with scholars and friends whom he consulted that Lahori Ahmadis are outside the fold of Islam!

4. However, it turns out that the reason he is quoting all these warnings not to declare Muslims as *kafir* is that: "Recently, certain Muslims have been attempting to "expose" me as a deviant Muslim by highlighting mistakes I have made in my talks that are on the Internet."

So it seems that *takfir* (declaring self-proclaimed Muslims as unbelievers) must **not** be applied by his critics against Hamza Yusuf, but he himself may, in concurrence with others, declare us as *kafir*. Hamza Yusuf has adduced a wonderful reason why he cannot be declared as *kafir*:

"In refutation to those accusing me of disbelief or questioning my faith, I would like to clarify something that is obvious to most people who know me: I am an orthodox Muslim. I follow the Maliki school of law; I believe in and accept the creeds of... [omitted for brevity]"

So although it is "obvious" to people who know Hamza Yusuf that he is a Muslim, yet when Maulana Muhammad Ali writes several voluminous books on Islam, which are spread throughout the world, from which it is "obvious" that only a Muslim could have written them, he can still be declared a *kafir*. And what Hamza Yusuf calls the Maulana's "insistence in the introduction to his Qur'an translation that he was a Muslim who accepted the finality of the Prophet Muhammad" is of no value!

These last words of Hamza Yusuf create the impression that all Maulana Muhammad Ali did in regard to the finality of prophethood was merely to write that he accepts this doctrine, and even this he did only to mislead his readers such as Hamza Yusuf himself. Yet if he read these books he mentions, namely the *Religion of Islam* and the Maulana's Quran translation, he would find that the author puts forward and argues a most powerful case to establish the finality of prophethood. Can any sensible person accept the notion that Maulana Muhammad Ali did not believe in the finality of prophethood but at the same time he tried hard to convince the whole world to believe in it!

5. When it comes to defending himself against the charge of apostasy, Hamza Yusuf quotes a classical scholar as follows:

"Anyone who fears God, the Exalted, will deem it an enormity to accuse someone who says, "*La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasulullah*" of being a disbeliever. Indeed, this is an affair most grave and dangerous, because the one who calls another [Muslim] a *kafir* is really saying, "I know he will be forever in the hellfire; his blood and wealth are permitted in this world ... So *takfir* should be reserved for one who clearly falls into apostasy, states it openly, chooses it as his *din*, rejects the testimony of faith, and leaves the religion of Islam altogether."

Yet he does not apply the same standard to Maulana Muhammad Ali as to himself, and considers it right to declare him as a *kafir*. Do Lahori Ahmadis fulfil the conditions listed in the last sentence above — the conditions without fulfilling which, a person cannot be subjected to *takfir*?

6. At the same time, Hamza Yusuf wishes not to take responsibility for regarding us as *kafir*. He writes that he is accepting and deferring to the judgments of others in this matter because he respects them:

“I request that my statements about the Lahoris be removed from the Internet, as I am not qualified to have an opinion about the matter and cannot make *takfir* of a group or individual on my own, as that is a judicial responsibility in Islam.”

However, it is a clear teaching of the Quran that people who follow their leaders and authorities in holding some belief *are still themselves responsible and accountable* for holding that belief (of course, that responsibility is in proportion to an individual’s level of knowledge and capacity of understanding). Their plea that “we were only following our leaders”, and thus bear no responsibility, is not acceptable in Islam. Please refer to the Quran 33: 67, 34: 31–33, 40: 47–48.

We are not suggesting by any means that Hamza Yusuf has to give a judgment as to whether we are Muslims or not, or that he must be forced to enter this controversy. However, not entering the controversy does not require accepting the position of those who call us *kafir*.

7. Hamza Yusuf also tells us how “frightful” this controversy, whether Ahmadis are Muslims or not, can be:

“Many modern Muslims are probably unfamiliar with the great loss of life this particular fitna caused in the past. In 1953, Pakistan was shaken by protests aimed at removing the Qadiani minister, Zafar Allah Khan. The protests succeeded, but over ten thousand Pakistanis lost their lives in the process.”

It appears that he has merely repeated what he has been told by his “trusted scholars”, without applying any thought or checking the facts.

Firstly, we ask Hamza Yusuf: Why is it justifiable to demand the removal of a Qadiani minister simply because Qadianis are non-Muslims? It would mean that under Islam no non-Muslim, whether Christian or Hindu, can become a minister of the government. Is this the Islam of tolerance he is preaching in the USA? And how did Zafrullah Khan become Foreign Minister of Pakistan in the first place?

Secondly, the protests did not succeed but failed because the government did not agree to the demands to declare Qadianis as non-Muslim. Zafrullah Khan remained Foreign Minister for about one and a half years after the 1953 disturbances had ended. Over the next twenty years, several Ahmadis, both Qadianis and Lahoris, who were quite active within their Ahmadiyya organisations, were appointed to the highest offices of the land in Pakistan.

Thirdly, the figure of ten thousand Pakistanis losing their lives is a gross exaggeration. He means, of course, the protestors killed by the police and army. We recommend Hamza Yusuf to read the report of the Punjab government's Munir Court of Inquiry of 1954, from which he will find out about the violence of the protestors, the plans of their leaders against Pakistan, and the replies these religious leaders gave to the Court regarding their concept of an Islamic state which they wanted to establish in Pakistan.

Anyhow, this bloodshed has now been dwarfed by the loss of life in the past ten years in Pakistan in the violent conflict of the religious extremists versus the authorities and the civil population of Pakistan. If the solution to the anti-Ahmadiyya agitation was to bring peace by acceding to the demands of the opponents of the Ahmadis, as Hamza Yusuf appears to be saying, then one may ask whether the solution in the present conflict is for Pakistan to surrender to the religious extremists?

8. While retracting his praise of Maulana Muhammad Ali, Hamza Yusuf writes:

“According to a hadith, to praise deviants and innovators is to aid in the destruction of Islam. I seek refuge in God from that and ask forgiveness for anything done unwittingly to that disastrous end.”

When you praise someone, you praise him for some particular acts or qualities of his. It does not mean that you accept and approve of everything he did, nor that you are aiding and abetting him in achieving some nefarious objective. Any person or group, regardless of their religion, could have done good things and have good qualities. This is why we commonly find Muslims praising some aspects of Western countries and society, while hotly disagreeing with them in many issues of morality and politics. That is a mature attitude. The result of Hamza Yusuf praising, for example, Maulana Muhammad Ali's defence of Islam against Christian attacks would, at the most, be that some people would read his books and benefit from them. Hamza Yusuf should reconsider his judgment, namely, that to praise Maulana Muhammad Ali is to “aid in the destruction of Islam” because the Maulana belonged to a group of “deviants and innovators”.

9. We agree with Hamza Yusuf when he writes about Muslims:

“Our community is currently dealing with many grave matters: suicide bombings, sectarianism, civil wars, our great scholars of the past having their bodies dug up from their graves and desecrated, mentally challenged adolescent girls accused of blasphemy, embassies destroyed and ambassadors killed or under threat, ... the list continues. As a result of the madness in our community, increasingly, for the first time since I became Muslim thirty-five years ago, I am hearing pleas such as, “Help my son – he has left Islam; help my daughter – she is having a crisis of faith.” I now receive letters and emails requesting that I talk to Muslim youth who no longer identify with our faith. Sadly, harsh-hearted haters among our community are driving people from the mosques and making the most beautiful teaching in the world appear ugly.”

Hamza Yusuf should ponder that those Muslims and their leaders responsible for this “madness in our community” are the very people who are in the forefront of declaring Ahmadis as *kafir*. In 1974, following a violent campaign by the anti-Ahmadiyya groups, the government acceded to the demands of religious leaders to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim. However, this appeasement only emboldened them to make demands of other kinds. Later they succeeded in getting the notorious and much abused blasphemy law introduced. And now we have the situation well described by Hamza Yusuf in the above extract.

Apostasy in Islam

I wish to comment on Hamza Yusuf’s views on the general issue of apostasy as expressed in his article and draw a contrast with the Lahore Ahmadiyya position which is based on the Quran and Hadith, interpreting Hadith in subordination to the Quran.

At the outset of his article, he raises a question in order to give advice about it:

“When a Muslim suspects a fellow Muslim of apostasy, how should he or she act?”

The simple answer is: It is wrong to suspect a fellow Muslim of apostasy! When a prominent Companion of the Holy Prophet Muhammad expressed before him his suspicion that there were people who, from their words, appeared to be good Muslims but entertained bad intentions in their hearts, the Holy Prophet replied: I have not been commanded to open up hearts and look inside them. Another Companion related to the Holy Prophet that, during a battle in which he was fighting, an unbeliever who was overpowered recited the *Kalima* to claim that he had now become a Muslim. Nonetheless that Companion proceeded to kill him, suspecting that this was a false claim. The Holy Prophet was greatly displeased and reprimanded him strongly, and he rejected the Companion’s repeated pleas that the unbeliever was only trying to save his life. (Both these reports are in Sahih Bukhari.)

Islam does not create a society like that in a totalitarian state, or like that during the McCarthy era in the USA, in which each member is expected to keep a check on his fellows for any signs of ideological deviation and report any suspects to the authorities for correction or punishment.

As to the common belief (which we reject) that Islam prescribes the death penalty for apostasy, Hamza Yusuf gives his interpretation in a footnote in this article as follows:

“Punishment in this world for apostasy is not mentioned in the Qur’an; however, some sound hadiths indicate that it is a capital offense. These are not absolutely certain (*mutawatir*) traditions, and some scholars, such as al-Nakhi’ and others, argued against it. Imam Abu Hanifah’s school does not mandate capital punishment for a female apostate due to the *mutawatir* tradition prohibiting killing women or children, which he saw as limiting the singular hadiths enjoining capital punishment on apostates. Today, it could be strongly argued that the aim (*maqsad*) of considering apostasy a capital offense, which was to protect the faith, is lost in application, given that modern people suffer a crisis of faith due to such applications.”

This is just ambivalent. Compare this with the following unequivocal statement by Maulana Muhammad Ali in the *Religion of Islam*:

“... the general impression among both Muslims and non-Muslims [is] that Islam punishes apostasy with death. If Islam does not allow the taking of the life of a person on the score of religion, and this has already been shown to be the basic principle of Islam, it is immaterial whether unbelief has been adopted after being a Muslim or not, and therefore as far as the sacredness of life is concerned, the unbeliever and the apostate are at par.”

Hamza Yusuf writes, as quoted above: “Today, it could be strongly argued that the aim (*maqсад*) of considering apostasy a capital offense, which was to protect the faith, is lost in application, given that modern people suffer a crisis of faith due to such applications.”

This statement suggests, firstly, that Islam did originally prescribe the death sentence for apostasy, and it did so “to protect the faith”. This strengthens the allegation of the critics of Islam that the Prophet Muhammad kept Muslims within the fold of Islam by threatening anyone who left it with the death penalty. Secondly, in this whole sentence Hamza Yusuf seems to be telling Muslims that *to act on what they believe to be a prescribed commandment of Islam* is counter-productive in the present day and age. We cannot understand how a Muslim who holds that Islam requires apostates to be executed would accept that this punishment must be abandoned because, in modern times, instead of protecting the faith it makes people have a crisis of faith. Far better and vastly more effective it is to prove to them that Islam does not prescribe the death, or any other, penalty for apostasy, which is what Maulana Muhammad Ali did.

It is quite an incredible state of affairs that **that person is Muslim** (i.e. Hamza Yusuf) who advises other Muslims to continue believing that a certain teaching is a part of Islam but not to act upon it in the modern age, but **that person is kafir** (i.e. Maulana Muhammad Ali) who exhorts Muslims to act upon every teaching, in every age, that can be authentically established from Islam!

Lastly, we invite everyone reading this response to make up their own minds by reading through the literature produced by Maulana Muhammad Ali, which is readily accessible on the Internet, and judge whether the original opinion of Hamza Yusuf is nearer the truth or his revised one.

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