

International Conference: “Takfir: A Diachronic Perspective,” 24-26 October 2011, organized by Camilia Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke as part of the project “Rediscovering Theological Rationalism in the Medieval World of Islam,” at the Center for Human and Social Sciences (CCHS), Madrid-Spain

Takfir, the act of accusing an individual or group that self-identifies as *mu'mins*/believers of in fact being *kāfirs*/unbelievers because of their beliefs and/or acts, is not simply a practice of naming. Rather, it has serious theological, legal, and social consequences. Thus branding someone as an unbeliever entails that that person will be subject to the special laws governing unbelievers, including prohibitions against marrying or remaining married to a Muslim, inheriting from a Muslim, being buried in a Muslim graveyard when he/she dies, and so on. Therefore, the practice of *takfir* should not be undertaken lightly. It should be kept in mind that the act of naming someone as *kāfir* in *takfir* is a label given by the other, and is not a self-appellation. Faith and unbelief are, however, inner states, and cannot be known by other individuals. To declare that someone is an unbeliever is to claim to know his/her inner beliefs, sincere thoughts, and feelings. However, how could that be possible for a human being? If it is not possible, why issue the accusation of unbelief? Because *takfir* is a useful weapon, which allows someone to get rid of his/her opponents instead of having to encounter them intellectually. Declaring that someone is an unbeliever trivializes what that person says or suggests regarding religious issues.

Furthermore, individuals or groups that falsely seem to be believers are seen as uniquely dangerous to the Muslim community, more so even than open unbelievers. Therefore, *takfir* can be used to legitimize the use of violence, making it a useful tool for radical groups (both historical and present-day) that wish to take violent actions against their Muslim or non-Muslim rivals. At the same time, these potentially violent consequences have caused the majority of Muslim community to see *takfir* as a questionable practice in its own right, and many have attempted to restrict the limits of *takfir*, although what beliefs and acts justify the use of *takfir* been controversial and vary from scholar to another as well as from sect to another. Never-

theless, despite these efforts, individuals and groups continue to suffer from the alienation caused by *takfir*.

The international conference “Takfir: a Diachronic Perspective,” which took place at the Center for Human and Social Sciences (CHSS) in Madrid on 24–26 October 2011, was concerned with *takfir* as an ongoing phenomenon from the beginning of Islam to the present day, including the historical roots of *takfir*, such as its emergence and theoretical foundations; individuals and groups that suffered from *takfir*; the understanding of *takfir* by prominent figures in and schools of Islamic thought; and the contemporary manifestations of *takfir*.

The twenty-nine papers presented at the meeting’s eleven sessions bore out the conference’s diachronic/historical focus, covering *takfir* from the beginnings of the practice up to modern times. Below, I have tried to provide some brief insights about these papers in separate paragraphs following the order of the sessions.

Takfir was first practiced by the Khārijīs when they denounced ‘Alī, his followers, and all-non Khārijī Muslims as infidels. The Khārijīs also believed that a Muslim who commits a capital sin becomes an unbeliever and should be expelled from the Muslim community. Hussam S. Timani discussed the religious and political foundations mostly referring to modern literature on the Khawārij. Ersilia Francesca traced the doctrine of *takfir* and its practical, mostly political, aspects in Ibādism, a sect that emerged from the Khārijīs, focusing on the concepts of *walāya*, friendship towards individuals who follow the rules of religion, and *barā’a*, hostility towards those who fail to be good Muslims by committing a capital sin or persisting in a minor sin.

Takfir has been used against many groups since the inception of the practice. As an example of this practice, Steven Judd discussed the Umayyad-era Qadarites, examining how they were treated by later Muslim thinkers and the larger Muslim community. Miklos Muranyi surveyed the hostile relationship between Sunnīs and Shī‘īs in the history of Qairawān and the use of *takfir* by that city’s Sunnī population toward other theological and juridical groups. Istvan Kristo-Nagy focused on the use of *takfir* against the Zanādiqa, a label usually applied to dualists such as the Manicheans.

Zoltan Szombathy provided literary samples from medieval Muslim poets and writers that led their authors to be declared unbelievers, and questioned the principles and circumstances underlying such accusations. Sebastian Günther studied *takfīr* in the 9th century Ḥanbalī Sunnī circles. In doing this, he introduced the *Kitāb sharḥ al-sunna*, a theological treatise attributed to Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Bāhili (better known as Ghulām Khalīl), which is probably the earliest extant attempt to explain what *sunna*/orthodoxy in Islam means. The attendees were gratified to learn that this book has been edited by Günther based on its unique manuscript and will be published very soon. Sonja Brentjes' paper was devoted to the relationship between 'Muslimness' and 'scientific identity' of mathematicians and medical scholars in biographical works. Some accounts set these identities in opposition to each other, whereas others suggest that faith played a positive role in the scholars' scientific activities.

Maribel Fierro pointed out that accusing someone of unbelief – “falsely,” of course – is included by some authors in lists of improper actions that can lead believers to misbehavior and even sin. She analyzed the traditions that criticize the use of *takfīr*, and dealt with the relevant cases. Camilia Adang focused on Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), the famous Andalusian theologian and jurist, who held that *takfīr* has serious results and therefore should only be used with extreme caution.

Eric Chamount explored the relationship between *ijmāʿ*, meaning the unanimous agreement of the community, and *takfīr*, here understood as exclusion from the community, in Sunnī Muslim legal theory, drawing on the examples of Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083) and al-Sarakhsī (d. 483/1090). He also explored the practice of *takfīr* in contemporary political Islamism. Another interesting paper was presented by Robert Gleave, who questioned the possibility of *takfīr* in theory and practice, with a particular focus on its interaction with the Shīʿī practice of *taqiyya*, i.e., hiding one's true beliefs to avoid persecution from the Sunnī majority. He traced discussions of this issue in the statements of the Shīʿī Imāms and in the writings of subsequent medieval Shīʿī jurists. Both Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke dealt with the Muṭarrifites, a Zaydī group from 5th/11th century Yemen, who were accused of heresy and unbelief by the other Zaydīs because of their doctrinal approach. Ansari and Schmidtke supported their points about the Muṭarrifites and the social and political factors be-

hind the *takfir* by selecting passages from the writings of anti-Muṭarrifite scholars.

Daniel De Smet pointed out the porous border between *īmān*/faith, *kufir*/unbelief, and *ghuluwwu*/extremism in the doctrine of the Ismāʿīlīs, who were themselves accused of unbelief by other Muslims, both Sunnīs and Twelver Shīʿīs. Ella Landau-Tasserou focused on Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the main authority cited by contemporary radical Muslims to support their legitimization of violence, whose views on *takfir* are expressed in various contexts and scattered throughout his writings. Livnat Holtzman discussed the views of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), the Ashʿarī-Shāfiʿī scholar and judge of the 14th century. Holtzman drew attention to al-Subkī's reluctance, as a chief judge of Damascus, to use *takfir* against the later Ḥanbalīs (such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya [d. 751/1350]), despite the fact that he had accused them of being anthropomorphists, because of the practical and juridical results of transferring the highly theoretical doctrinal debate into this realm.

Michael Ebstein's contribution was concerned with pluralistic and anti-takfiri attitudes in Islamic mysticism. Referring to the writings of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and the epistles of Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, two significant but controversial mystical corpora in Islam, Ebstein highlighted the religious and philosophical foundations of this approach and tried to demonstrate the impact of Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ on Ibn ʿArabī. Farid Bouchiba explored the thoughts of Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490), last of the great Ashʿarīs, presenting an account of that scholar's theory of *takfir* (which Bouchiba considers original and innovative) based on the chapter devoted to the subject in al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddimāt*. Yohanan Friedmann's paper focused on late medieval Ḥanafī legal texts from Central Asia, arguing that these gave special attention to the question of how a Muslim becomes an apostate, unlike earlier texts, which mostly dealt with the punishment for apostasy. Friedmann tried to characterize the material in the Central Asian books by giving interesting examples from the texts.

Sajjad Rizvi made a five-point presentation on philosophers who were accused of unbelief in a number of Ṣafavid-era works with special reference to Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1045/1635). Intisar Rabb's presentation examined how blasphemy was adopted as a punishable crime by Islamic jurisprudence, especially in the 4th/11th century, and demonstrated how the flowering of theological thought in that era

shaped the definition of this crime. Ignacio Gutierrez De Teran concentrated on the impact of the so-called *kutub al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, heresiographical works designed to introduce and (mostly) defame the beliefs of the all theological sects save for the one adhered to by the author. When the main modern factions of Islamic turn to othering and exterminating each other, they are still influenced by these works.

Following the papers concerning *takfīr* in the classical period of Islam came a number of interesting treatments of the modern situation. Ahmad Mousalli gave some insight into the use of *takfīr* by contemporary radical Muslim movements that are unhappy with the way governing elites are running the state. These movements have encountered repression and violence from the elites, which has led them to seek isolation and separation from society to protect their ideological purity from the erroneous beliefs and values of other Muslim groups, or to find that their goals can best be achieved through violence and terrorist actions under the name of *jihād*. Justyna Nedza explored the religious references and practical consequences of the thought of three contemporary Saudi radical scholars (‘Alī al-Khuḍayr, Nāṣir al-Fahd and Aḥmad al-Khālidi) known as the “*takfīr*-troika,” who have used *takfīr* to legitimize armed struggle against “unbelievers” including the Saudi rulers and the rest of the western-influenced Muslim world. Stephanie Lacroix investigated the theological beliefs of Juhayman al-‘Utaybī, a faithful proponent of *Ahl al-ḥadīth*, which emerged in the 1960s under the guidance of Sheikh Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī. *Ahl al-ḥadīth* developed a very restricted view of *takfīr*, although it is a sub-school of *Wahhābism* which has used *takfīr* very extensively. Al-‘Utaybī’s rejection of *takfīr* pushed his followers to embrace messianism to justify their revolutionary actions, including their seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979.

Roswitha Badry focused on the *takfīr* of political, academic, and literary figures who are women’s rights advocates in Arab countries, such as Tūjān al-Fayṣal from Jordan, Nawal El Saadawi from Egypt, and Laylā al-‘Uthmān from Kuwait. Joas Wagemakers discussed the *takfīr* of democracy and democrats by radical Islamists, and the ways in which these ideological attacks are justified. He also showed the differences among radicals’ positions on this topic and finally analyzed the actual application of these views in three specific times and

places (Algeria in the 1990s, Iraq since 2003, and Jordan since 1992), taking their political context into consideration.

Orkhan Mir-Kasimov contributed a paper on Hurūfism, one of the Shī‘a-inspired messianic movements of the 8th-9th/14th-15th centuries, treating the accusations leveled against the movement by its opponents as well as the Hurūfīs’ responses and attempts to legitimize their own doctrine. Mir-Kasimov underlined the changes in the ways that the Hurūfīs determined the concepts of “true belief” and “heresy” after a similar messianic movement, the Ṣafavids, rose to power in Īrān, although Hurūfism itself eventually failed in politics. His paper also described the reception of Hurūfism in the late medieval and modern Muslim societies. As the last presenter of the conference, Daniel Lav discussed the various interpretations of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology of *īmān* in modern intra-salafī polemics.

The conference ended with a concluding panel, chaired by Camilia Adang, which allowed three well-known figures in Islamic studies, Josef van Ess, Yohanan Friedmann, and Wilferd Madelung, to offer their opinions on the issue of *takfir* and the papers presented at the conference.

As we have seen, the rich content of this conference provided the audience with the opportunity to discuss many different aspects of *takfir*. However, I cannot help but say a few words about the significance of the choice of *takfir* as the theme for this conference. *Takfir* is a hot issue due to its being one of the main practices of contemporary radical Muslim movements that construct their paradigms around violent acts. However, its choice as a conference theme could have raised suspicions about the aims of the conference in the minds of those who are uncomfortable with the fact that Islam has been mostly identified with the ideas and acts of these radical movements in recent times, and the fact that, as a result of this identification, *takfir* has been seen as a distinguishing practice of Islam despite its never having been adopted by the majority of the Muslim community but rather by a limited number of groups over the centuries. Nevertheless, when we take the papers presented at the conference into consideration, we see that they mostly treated their subjects in an academic way and held to the limits of scientific discourse, without repeating or producing hostile accusations. It could even be said that the conference created a nurturing atmosphere for researchers of classical Islamic sciences. This positive atmosphere gives us a good reason and oppor-

tunity to congratulate all those involved: the host, Maribel Fierro and her team; the organizers, who put in so much effort; the presenters, whose papers were products of meticulous and rigorous scholarship; and finally, the participants, who enriched the conference with their interesting questions and comments.

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