

The Taqiyya Controversy and its Implication for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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Abstract

Lying in the service of altruism is considered despicable by all religions, but to think that Muslims are allowed to dissimulate in furtherance of Islam is worrisome. While the Qur'an is against Muslims deceiving Muslims – “for surely, Allah guides not him who is prodigal and a liar.” To lie to non-Muslims generally known in Arabic as Taqiyya, does not only have qur'anic backing, but also fall within the legal category of things that are permissible to Muslim. This paper will analyse the social purpose of the term taqiyya in social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially on the table of dialogue in polemical societies.

Key words: Taqiyya, simulation, interreligious dialogue, polemical societies

INTRODUCTION

Taqiyya “is the practice of concealing one's belief and foregoing ordinary religious duties when under threat of death or injury.” It is derived from the Arabic *waqa* ('to shield oneself'), but generally, it defies easy translation. The English rendering of *taqiyya* such as 'precautionary dissimulation' or 'prudent fear' partly conveys the term's meaning of self-preservation in the face of danger to oneself or, by extension and depending upon circumstances, to one's fellow Muslims. *Taqiyya* may be employed for the protection of an individual or for the protection of a community. The principle is more common with Shia Muslims because of their history of persecution and political defeat not only by non-Muslims but also by Sunni Muslims who are the majority sect of Islam. (Stefon, accessed online).

Scriptural reference to the principle is attributed to the following *sūras*: 'Let not the believer take disbelievers as allies, rather than the believers – whoever does that, has nothing from God – unless you guard yourself against them as precaution' (Cf. Q. 3:28) or better put it says that out of fear of Allah, believers should not show preference in friendship to unbelievers, 'unless to safeguard yourself against them.' According to Islamic tradition Q. 16: 106 was revealed to

ease the conscience of Ammār b. Yāsir, a devout follower of the Prophet Muhammad, who renounced his faith under torture and threat of death. 'Whoever disbelieves in [Allah] after having believed, except for someone who is compelled, yet his heart is (still) secure in belief, and whoever expands his heart in disbelief, on them is anger from God, and for them (there is) a great punishment.' (Cf. Q. 16: 106). Better put, the verse reads 'if a Muslim who is forced to deny his faith is nevertheless a true believer who feels 'the peace of faith' in his heart, he will not suffer great punishment.' The meaning of this verse is not clear even in the context of the *sūra* in which it appeared. It is therefore a subject of debate among Islamic scholars that the verse sanctions the practice of *taqiyya*. The hadith has also been cited as providing theological warrant for *taqiyya*. One hadith mentioned that Muhammad waited 13 years until he could 'gain enough supporters' before combating his powerful polytheistic enemies in Mecca. A similar story relates how 'Alī Muhammad's son-in-law followed the advice of the Prophet to refrain from fighting until he had 'the support of 40 men.' Some scholars have interpreted these legends as examples of *taqiyya*. By avoiding combat against enemies of Islam until they could muster sufficient military force and moral support, Muhammad and 'Alī preserved not only their own lives but their divine appointed mission to spread the faith. Consideration of community rather than private welfare is stressed in most cases. (Stefon, accessed online). Critics and especially non-Muslims basically see *taqiyya* as the Islamic concept of the obligation to lie to any non-Muslim if that lie furthers the interest of Islam, informs the decision to discuss whether this teaching does not encumber or creates a feeling of distrust in the minds of Christians when they dialogue with Muslims.

Taqiyya allows the Shia to dissemble their religious affiliation in front of the Sunni, not merely by being clandestine about their beliefs but also by actively praying and behaving as if they are Sunnis (Gokum, p. 152).

Who is a Muslim?

This scrutiny becomes necessary when we look at what Islam means and who is a Muslim. Islam means submission or surrendering to [Allah] expressed firstly by faith (*īmān*), which implies gratitude (*shukr*). This is opposed to *kufr*, which primarily means ingratitude, but came to mean misbelief/disbelief/unbelief in [Allah]'s sign or his revelation. (Lane, p. 2398).

Islam is expressed by obedience (*ta'ā*), which is solely or directly to [Allah], but also to Muhammad and those in authority. 'Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those of you who are in authority' (Cf. Q. 4: 59, 83). Islam implies belonging to the Muslim *umma*, 'The believers are naught else than brothers [and sisters]. Therefore, make peace between your brethren' (Cf. Q. 49: 10), and 'Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for [humankind]. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency: and ye believe in Allah.' (Q. 3:110). The Muslim

community is seen as replacing communities before them that did not, please [Allah] and caused 'corruption on the earth' (*fasād fi al-ard*), (Q. 3:32).

Who then is a Muslim according to the Qur'an and who is not? The Qur'an divides humanity into two types of people and has several general terms to describe each type. Opposed to a believer (*mu'min*) is the unbeliever (*kāfir*), who denies (*mukaddib*) what [Allah] has revealed (Cf. Q. 56:51). Such a person who denies what Allah has revealed is *fāsiq* (pl. *fussāq*, *fasaqa*), from the verb *fasaqa-yafsuqu* or *yafsiqu* and *fasuqa-yafsuqu*, meaning 'to stray from the right course, deviate, to act unlawfully, sinfully, immorally, to lead a dissolute life.' The primary meaning is 'to go forth from another thing in a bad or corrupt manner' (Lane, p. 2398). Etymologically, the root has the sense of a ripe date bursting out of its skin. *Fisq* or *fusūq* ('sinfulness, moral depravity, dissolute life, a going forth or departure from the right course or way, from the way of truth, from that which is right and true, a relinquishment or neglect of the command of [Allah], an inclination to disobedience, transgression, unrighteous, sinful, wicked living') is defined by al-Rāzī as a 'man's action of going outside that which is ordered and fixed for him' (Lane, p. 2398).

The point of this long discuss on what Islam means and by default how Muslims should treat those who are not members of this group, is that anyone who does not practice Islam is not qualified to be treated as a Muslim. He or she is a target for conversion or persecution by extremists, if he or she refuses to convert, or at best, a *dhimmi* who should pay the *jizya*. It should be clear from the preceding who *taqiyya* can be employed upon, depending on what side of the divide one falls.

Uses of Taqiyya

Taqiyya offers two basic uses. The better known revolves around dissembling one's religious identity when in fear of persecution. This has been the historical use of *taqiyya* among Shia Muslims whenever and wherever their Sunni rivals outnumber and threaten them. Sunni Muslims, far from suffering persecution have whenever capability allowed, waged jihad against the realm of unbelief; it is here that they deployed *taqiyya* – not as dissimulation but active deceit. If Muslims are enjoined to be truthful, how could deceit be prevalent, or have divine sanction? How does it fit into the broader concept of Islamic code of ethics, especially in relation to non-Muslim? But more precisely, what implication does *taqiyya* have for interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, and especially the issue of religious tolerance? (Ibrahim, p. 1).

Interreligious Dialogue and the Taqiyya Question

According to Raymond Ibrahim, *Taqiyya* is not an entirely a Shia Muslims' thing, even though as a minority group interspersed among their Sunni adversaries, they have historically had more reason to dissemble. Now Sunni

Muslims living in the West find themselves in the position of the Shia Muslims; are minorities surrounded by their 'traditional enemies', the Christian 'infidels', a circumstance that made *taqiyya* integral to the Shia Muslims, although bereft of the threats that Shia Muslims had to face. The fear about Muslims dissimulating in their commitment to interreligious dialogue or interreligious coexistence is heightened by Islam's dichotomized worldview that pits the realm of Islam against the realm of war – *dar al-Islam* versus *dar al-Harb*, the first, *dar al-Islam*, is the 'realm of submission', the world where Sharia governs; the second, *dar al-Harb*, 'the realm of war', which is the non-Islamic world. The struggle must continue until the realm of Islam conquers the non-Islamic world. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) clearly articulates this separation:

In the Muslim community, jihad is a religious duty because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and the obligation to convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force. The other religious groups did not have a universal mission, and the jihad was not a religious duty for them, save only for purpose of defence. But Islam is under obligation to gain power over other nations. (Ibn Khaldun, p. 473).

For a religious tradition with over a billion followers to oblige unprovoked warfare in its name should be a source of concern for non-Muslims, and to realize that to expand to the ends of the world is the aim, the world, whether under democracy, socialism, communism or any other system of governance will inevitably be in bondage – a great sin, since the good of all humanity can only be found in a state that is governed according to Allah's law – the Sharia – which is seen as good for both Muslims and non-Muslims. A view supported by an ancient pedigree: in the early stages of Islam after the death of the Muhammad in 632, in 634, as the jihad fighters burst out of the Arabian Peninsula, a soon to be conquered Persian commander asked the jihadists what they wanted. The memorable answer was:

[Allāh has sent us and has brought us here so that we may free those who desire from servitude to earthly rulers and make them servants of Allāh, that we may change their poverty into wealth and free them from the tyranny and chaos of [false] religions and bring them to the justice of Islam. He has sent us to bring his religion to all his creatures and call them to Islam. Whoever accepts it from us will be safe, and we shall leave him alone; but whoever refuses, we shall fight until we fulfil the promise of Allāh. (Kennedy. P. 112).

This view was echoed again fourteen hundred years later in March 2009 publicly by Basem Alem, a Saudi legal expert, who said:

As member of the true religion, I have a greater right to invade [others] to impose a certain way of life [in accordance with Sharia], which history has proven to be the best and most just of all civilizations. This is the true meaning of offensive jihad. When we wage jihad, it is not to convert people to Islam but to liberate them from the dark slavery in which they live. (Ibrahim, p. 7)

And it goes without contestation that *taqiyya* in the service of this objective to bring all people under Sharia law is permissible. This was demonstrated recently when a Muslim cleric recounted how he tricked a Jew into converting to Islam – warning him that he will be killed by Muslims if he apostatized. The Muslim cleric Mahmoud al-Masri called it a 'beautiful trick'. According to Raymond Ibrahim, from the point of view of Islam, it was the Jew who was the better for it, because he benefited from the deceit, which brought him to Islam. "Egyptian Cleric Mahmoud Al-Masri recommends Tricking Jews into becoming Muslims", (Cf. *TV Monitor*, clip 2268, Middle East Media Research Institute, transl; August 10, 2009), (Ibrahim, p. 7).

Hostility or Grievance?

Terrorists in their scathing attacks against Europeans, Americans and non-Muslims in Africa and Asia have maintained that the terrorisms are targeted in response to decades of ill treatment of Muslims by Westerners, and Christians in other parts of the world outside of Europe and America, who are linked by creed (guilty by association). Yet, in writing to their fellow Muslims, the story is not one of reaction to military and political provocation but as sacred religious obligation. The altruism accompanying the slaughter of Christians in Middle Belt Nigeria can be situated within this ambience. For example, the late Osama bin Laden when addressing Western audiences about the grievances motivating his war on the West, listed the oppression of the Palestinians, the Western exploitation of women, and the refusal or the failure of the U.S to sign the Kyoto protocol – things that make sense to the Western mind, but never once did he justify the attacks on Western targets, simply because non-Muslim countries are infidels that must be subjugated. According to Raymond Ibrahim, he always initiated his message with the statement "reciprocal treatment is part of justice' or 'peace to whoever follows guidance', but he means something different from what his Western audience understand as 'peace', 'justice' or guidance" (Ibrahim, p. 8). In response to a group of Muslims who wrote to the American people after the 9/11 attack that Islam seeks to peacefully coexist with other religious traditions, his message assumed a castigating clarity that reads as follows:

As to the relationship between Muslims and infidels, this is summarized [by the word of the Most High]: 'We [Muslims] renounce you [non-Muslims]. Enmity and hate shall forever reign between

us—till you believe in [Allāh] alone. (Q.60:4). So, there is an enmity, evidenced by fierce hostility from the heart. And this fierce hostility—that is, battle—ceases only if the infidels submit to the authority of Islam, or if his [or her] blood is forbidden from being shed [i.e; a *dhimmi*, or protected minority], or if Muslims are at that point weak and incapable. But if the hate at any time extinguishes from the heart, this is great apostasy!... Such then is the basis and the foundation of the relationship between the infidels and the Muslims. Battle, animosity, and hatred—directed from the Muslims to the infidel—is the foundation of our religion. And we consider this a justice and kindness to them (Ibrahim, p. 9).

For Raymond Ibrahim this hostile *Weltanschauung* is supported by all Islam's mainstream schools of jurisprudence; they see the infidel (non-Muslims) in similar terms. Bin Laden's address to the Western world about justice and peace are clear examples of *taqiyya* (Gokum, p. 153).

This style of employing *taqiyya* as a strategy of war assumes an importance in the Nigerian context, for example, where Governor El-Rufai of Kaduna state and the presidency of Buhari have referred to the killings of Christians by Fulani militias in southern part of Kaduna state as 'revenge killing' or 'reprisal attack'. Bin Laden and the Fulani militias are not just waging a jihad but also a propaganda war, that is, a war of deceit. The intention is to create an impression that the attack on the Christians is borne out of the need to correct a wrong done against the Muslims, which justifies the attacks on Christians. This has garnered sympathy among Muslims for the heinous attacks, and it has also created an impression of a temporality to the attacks, because if the Christians realize that nothing short of their submission or total annihilation will bring peace, the propaganda will be quickly compromised, hence the need to cite grievances as the reason for the attacks.

Taqiyya: its Implications for Christian- Muslim Dialogue

Taqiyya presents a range of trust dilemmas to Christians who want to dialogue with Muslims and to coexist peacefully with them; because to know that Muslims believe that deceit is encouraged, if it advances the cause of Islam, creates the impression that Muslims will not experience any ethical qualms over lying about their commitment to interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence with people of other religious traditions. Indeed, this sentence sums it all up: “a zealous believer in the tenets of Islam which legitimize deception (*taqiyya*), in order to make Allah's word supreme, will have no qualms when lying” (Gokum, p. 153).

The *Taqiyya* issue strikes at the core of Judeo-Christian belief and disposition which demands that Christian should stick to the truth and even die for it, if need be (Cf. 2 Maccabees 7: 1ff, and Matt. 5: 37).

It is within these confines proven from both qur'anic source and the lived experience of Muslims with people of other faith traditions that we must accept that contrary to the long-held academic presumptions, that the doctrine of *taqiyya* goes far beyond Muslims engaging in religious dissimulation in the interest of self-preservation and encompasses deception of the infidel enemy in general. The fact that Islamic law splits the world into perpetually warring halves—the Islamic world against the non-Islamic world of the infidels, and teaches that Allah's will is for the Islamic world to subsume the world of the infidels; and if war between the *dar al-Islam* (Islamic world) versus *dar al-Harb* (world or house of war) is a perpetual affair, if war is deceit, and if deeds are justified by intensions, Muslims will naturally conclude that they have divinely sanctioned right to deceive, so long as this deception is in the service of, or aid the cause of Islam, 'until chaos ceases, and all religion belong to [Allah].'(Cf. Q. 8:39). As James Lorimer practically noted over a century ago, “so long as Islam endures, the reconciliation of its followers with Jews and Christians, and the rest of humankind will continue to be an insoluble problem.” (Lorimer, p. 124). According to Raymond Ibrahim, “whereas it may be more appropriate to talk of 'war and peace' as natural corollaries in Western context, when discussing Islam, it is more accurate to talk of 'war and deceit. From an Islamic point of view, times of peace is whenever Islam is significantly weaker than its infidel rivals, feigned peace, and pretence, in a nutshell, is *taqiyya*” (Ibrahim, p.10).

Muslims' Refutation to the Claim

Muslims however claim that few Islamic teachings are widely misunderstood but non as *taqiyya*, and likewise few other teachings are frequently invoked to impugn the motives of Muslims. Imran Saddiqi, executive director of the Arizona chapter of the council on American-Islamic Relations, said he constantly encounters false claims about *taqiyya*. He said 99.99% of Muslims do not even understand what *taqiyya* is about, but “every alt-right Twitter troll is an expert on Islamic theology”, which is completely absurd. His co-traveller Muhammad Fadel, an expert on Islamic law at the University of Toronto, describes *taqiyya* as a 'doctrine of prudential dissimulation' that arose from time to time when Muslims were minorities in hostile societies. He said Muslims are instructed that hiding their faith could be permissible to escape persecution. A doctrine that more closely associated with Shia Muslims whose adherents are themselves often minorities within Muslim societies. According to Fadel, “unfortunately, the idea of *taqiyya* has become a dogma among the right wing in North America, and the entire anti-Muslim coalition in the West”, but the truth is that it is a false claim to say that Muslims are permitted, or even commanded to lie to non-Muslims as part of a larger project to take over Western countries and impose Sharia or Islamic law. He buttresses that Sharia does not allow for broad deceptions and *taqiyya* has no connection to Sharia. According to Omar

Suleiman, the founder and president of the Yaqeen Muslim, League, given that *taqiyya* has only been used in Islam to refer to Muslims saving themselves from mortal danger by concealing their faith, it should readily quell the Islamophobic claim that Muslims are generally taught to lie to non-Muslims. For both Suleiman and Khan, “when Islamophobics are confronted with the fact that their use of the term *taqiyya* is a grotesque misinterpretation, they run to another concept in an attempt to buttress their caricature of Muslims as dishonest criminals, by citing a saying of the Prophet: 'warfare is deceit' (*Ar. Khida'ah*).” This claim lacks support because in military strategy from time immemorial, has involved subterfuge. This fact is backed by the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu as stated in *The Art of War* that 'all warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we can attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.'¹ He finalises that “behind the seemingly scary use of Arabic jargon, there is nothing more than run-of-the mill common sense notion that every civilisation has expressed and employed”; (Suleiman & Khan, accessed online), an argument that neither denies nor concedes that Muslims employ *taqiyya* in their relations with non-Muslim. If anything, it confirms it.

CONCLUSION

One of the few books devoted to the subject, *At-Taqiyya fi'l-Islam* (Dissimulation in Islam) makes it clear that *taqiyya* is not limited to Shia Muslims who fear persecution. Written by Sami Mukaram, a former Islamic studies professor at the American University of Beirut, the book clearly shows the ubiquity and broad application of *taqiyya*: '*Taqiyya* is of fundamental importance in Islam. Practically every Islamic sect agrees to its practice. “We can go so far as to say that the practice of *taqiyya* is mainstream in Islam, and those few sects not practicing it diverge from the mainstream; and it is very prevalent in Islamic politics, especially in the modern era” (Mukaram, p. 7).

It is on this note that the commitment of Muslims to the interreligious dialogue question requires scrutiny.

The challenges confronting the modern religious person can be daunting and overwhelming. There are basically two assumptions: that the fundamental truths of religion are of value to humanity and that the relevance of religion must at all costs be demonstrated. The obstacle for many seems to be the structure of influence that traditional religious authorities have on text of scripture be it in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. The challenge across all three monotheistic religions is how are the deeply felt moral principles of the 21st century to be reconciled with the text of scripture that has always been grasped in fashion that challenge emerging modern positions? (Saeed, p, ix). A challenge that all religions must respond to.

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