

Sharia Creep in Harvard Yard

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Diana West



Photo: Harvard Islamic chaplain Taha Abdul-Basser, '96, who believes there is "great wisdom" in the death penalty for converting from Islam.

From the Internet to the media, slowly: Yesterday's Harvard Crimson carried a story on the Harvard Islamic chaplain's support for capital punishment for Muslims who leave Islam as revealed in an email the chaplain "allegedly" wrote. (We're still at "allegedly"--although no one, including the chaplain, has disputed the authorship of the email.) I posted the story here on April 4. What caught my eye in this week's Crimson story was the "clarification" flagged at the bottom of the following Crimson paragraph:

"I believe he doesn't belong as the official chaplain," said one Islamic student, who asked that he not be named to avoid conflicts with Muslim religious authorities. "If the Christian ministers said that people who converted from Christianity should be killed, don't you think the University should do something?" [SEE CLARIFICATION BELOW]

Scrolling down, I found it:

CLARIFICATION: The April 14 article "Chaplain's E-mail Sparks Controversy" included a quotation from a named Harvard student, who was later granted anonymity when he revealed that his words could bring him into serious conflict with Muslim religious authorities.

Got that? For opposing death for apostasy, for opposing the Islamic chaplain's continued tenure based on said chaplain's support for death for apostasy, a Harvard Muslim student felt compelled to call up the Crimson to seek post-publication anonymity to avoid coming into "serious conflict with Muslim religious authorities."

This isn't the Swat Valley. This isn't Taliban-controlled Afghanistan--or, for that matter, Karzai-controlled Afghanistan. This isn't Iran. This isn't Iraq. This is what sharia creep looks like in America...in Harvard Yard.

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Chaplain's E-mail Sparks Controversy

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CLARIFICATION APPENDED

Harvard Islamic chaplain Taha Abdul-Basser '96 has recently come under fire for controversial statements in which he allegedly endorsed death as a punishment for Islamic apostates.

In a private e-mail to a student last week, Abdul-Basser wrote that there was "great wisdom (hikma) associated with the established and preserved position (capital punishment [for apostates]) and so, even if it makes some uncomfortable in the face of the hegemonic modern human rights discourse, one should not dismiss it out of hand."

The e-mail was forwarded over Muslim student e-mail lists and later picked up by the blogosphere, sparking debate and, in many cases, criticism of Abdul-Basser from those who have interpreted his statement as supporting the execution of those who leave the Islamic religion.

"I believe he doesn't belong as the official chaplain," said one Islamic student, who asked that he not be named to avoid conflicts with Muslim religious authorities. "If the Christian ministers said that people who converted from Christianity should be killed, don't you think the University should do something?" [SEE CLARIFICATION BELOW]

According to the student, many of Abdul-Basser's other views are "not in line with liberal values, such as notions of human rights. He privileges the medieval discourse of the Islamic jurists, and is not willing to exercise independent thought and judgment beyond a certain limit," the student said.

Samad Khurram '09-'10 said Abdul-Basser's remarks conflicted with the Harvard United Ministry's support of freedom of religion.

"I support free speech, freedom of belief and association, so this came as a big shock to me," Khurram said.

"[His remarks] are the first step towards inciting intolerance and inciting people towards violence," said a Muslim Harvard student, who requested that he not be

named for fear of harming his relationship with the Islamic community.

Aqil Sajjad, a Harvard graduate student, also said that Abdul-Basser's statements were "totally wrong, definitely out of line for somebody in that position. I wouldn't go and seek religious advice from one who is saying this."

A Muslim student at MIT, who also asked to remain anonymous to preserve his relationship with the Islamic community, said the chaplain's remarks wrongly suggested that only Westerners and Westernized Muslims who did not fully understand Islam would find the killing of apostates objectionable.

"If what he said was what I thought, then it is very shocking and not something that I would expect or want coming out of a chaplain at any major American university," he said.

Abdul-Basser wrote in a later e-mailed statement that he "never expressed the position that individuals who leave Islam or convert from Islam to another religion must be killed. I do not hold this opinion personally." He explained that he was not advocating for the positions mentioned in his e-mail, but rather "addressing them in the context of the evolution of an Islamic legal doctrine."

"[Abdul-Basser] was speaking as a chaplain to a student in a private e-mail exchange. One of these e-mails was misinterpreted, misconstrued, and posted on the blogosphere," said Harvard Islamic Society spokesperson Nafees A. Syed '10, who praised Abdul-Basser for promoting diversity within HIS and the campus at large.

"His immeasurable contributions should not be overlooked in this matter," she said.

—Staff writer Melody Y. Hu can be reached at melodyhu@fas.harvard.edu.

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