

The Amman Message

Brief comments by Zahid Aziz

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The *Amman Message* is a declaration of principles agreed to by a large number of Muslim scholars gathered by King Abdullah of Jordan in Amman in 2005. Its main purpose is to combat the despicable and divisive practice by various Muslim religious leaders of issuing *fatwas* declaring some other group of Muslims as non-Muslim. Those who endorse it are expected to regard all other Muslims as Muslims and to refrain from declaring them as apostates. This is undoubtedly a most noble and laudable aim, and one must wish it every success.

It must, however, be pointed out that, even while adhering to the terms of this charter, those *ulama* who call other Muslims as *kafir* (the practice known as *takfir*) will still be able to do so, just as before. This is because the definition of 'Muslim' as adopted in this Message goes beyond the bounds of the simple definition taught in the Holy Quran and Hadith, and contains an 'escape clause' for those who indulge in *takfir*. At the end of the First Point of the Amman Message, it is declared:

“... it is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him) and the pillars of faith, and acknowledges the five pillars of Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion.” (See the website: www.ammanmessage.com)

Those who drafted these words have not realised that the last clause of this extract, “and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion”, represents the justification that has always been used by various *ulama* to declare other Muslims as *kafir*. When such leaders declare another Muslim group as apostate from Islam, they admit that their target believes in the *kalima* and the five pillars of the faith, but they accuse it of denying some other necessary tenets of Islam which makes them apostates. And, of course, the other “necessary” tenets are defined by the accusing party itself. It is impossible to make a list of these “other necessary doctrines” that everyone will agree to, and the Amman Message does not attempt to define what these are, nor would it have been able to do so.

In the Ahmadiyya court case in Cape Town of 1984-85, the anti-Ahmadiyya *ulama* took exactly this standpoint. They stated in their submissions that in addition to accepting the *Kalima* and the five pillars of Islam “there are many other principles and beliefs, ... failure to accept which constitutes apostasy”. Two of those *ulama* have endorsed the Amman Message: Mufti Taqi Uthmani and Professor Mahmud Ahmad Ghazi (see the list on the Amman Message website under 'Pakistan'). They were among the anti-Ahmadiyya expert witnesses due to testify in the above court case, although no witness appeared in court since the anti-Ahmadiyya defendants withdrew from the case. Prof. Ghazi did appear at length in the next case, during the 1987 hearings, to testify that Ahmadiis are non-Muslim. Unfortunately, both of them can claim to adhere to the Amman Message and still find a way within its framework to declare any other Muslims, whom they wish, as apostates. They are given this scope by the words “and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion”.

The First Point in the Amman message begins by declaring as Muslim the adherents of the main schools of Sunni and Shia jurisprudence, whose names it lists (Hanafi, Maliki, etc.). Then it adds that those who practise “real tasawwuf” or subscribe to “true salafi thought” cannot be declared

apostate. Again, how is it to be determined whether a person claiming to be Hanafi, or a “real” sufi, or a “true” salafi”, is right in his claim? Unless that person’s own word is to be accepted, it would be some religious leader or body who would be making this decision, and they would be the same kind of clerics who indulge in *takfir* of other Muslims.

But here there is a further interesting point. Ahmadis are criticised by many other Muslims for calling themselves as Ahmadi, and are told that they must call themselves Muslims only. Yet in the First Point of this Message, certain groups are mentioned by name, starting with Hanafis, and declared as being Muslim despite identifying themselves by appellations such as *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, etc.

To avoid the problems mentioned above, the proper course is to adopt the definition of ‘Muslim’ as found in the Quran, Sunna, Hadith and even classical jurisprudence. The case for this has, in the past 90 years, been put forward most vigorously and consistently by the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. It is that a person declaring himself or herself as a Muslim by professing the *Kalima Shahada* or by following the *Qibla* of Islam in prayer is a Muslim in the application of Islamic law and the law of the land. He or she ought to be treated as a Muslim by other Muslims. No Muslim can be declared as *kafir* or apostate, except by himself stating that he or she is no longer a Muslim. (Note also that Islam does not prescribe any punishment to be applied in this world to such a person.)

The Second Point of the Amman Message explains that:

“There exists more in common between the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence than there is difference between them. The adherents to the eight schools of Islamic jurisprudence are in agreement as regards the basic principles of Islam.”

The points of agreement are listed there as: the concept of God, the status of the Quran and the Holy Prophet Muhammad, the five pillars of Islam, and the fundamental beliefs of Islam. Disagreements only relate to secondary matters and, to quote:

“Disagreement with respect to the ancillary branches of religion (*furu’*) is a mercy. Long ago it was said that variance in opinion among the *ulama* (scholars) ‘is a good affair’.”

Every well-wisher of Islam will be heartened by the truths expressed in this Second Point. Again, the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement has always been in the forefront in drawing attention to the fact that all Muslims, not only the groups mentioned here, agree on the fundamentals of Islam. The Amman Message could have further built upon this and declared that all those who accept this common ground are Muslims. That would have been a great advance, and would have removed the power of the *ulama* to declare bone fide Muslims as *kafir* and apostate.