

Al-Walā' wal-Barā'

الولاء والبراء

The doctrine of 'loyalty and renunciation'

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A MAJOR THEORETICAL obstacle to full integration and co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims is the doctrine of doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* ('loyalty and renunciation').

Al-walā' wal-barā' is a polarizing doctrine by which radicals maintain their control over what constitutes the authenticity of a Muslim's Islamic faith, gauged according to his expression of love for anything or anybody defined as Islam or Muslim, and his hatred for the infidel.

The 'true Muslim' under this scheme does not assimilate into the infidel's society or imitate its ways on even the most trivial level – such as imitating unbelievers in their physical appearance, greeting unbelievers,¹ greeting them at their feast times, or employing a non-Muslim or agreeing to be employed by a non-Muslim ("because it cedes authority and demeans the believer to the unbeliever").²

A cornerstone of the ideology is the *maintenance of enmity* against the fear of contamination and the challenges posed by accommodation with infidels, by the threat of mutual affection and the consequent threat of harmony and assimilation. The doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* is designed to protect against this. It is a doctrine which:

“divides humanity into 'believers' and 'infidels,' and seeks to establish that the only relationship between them can be one of hatred and enmity.”³

The doctrine *al-walā' wal-barā'* ('loyalty and disavowal') is not some obscure point of detail but a fundamental and entirely orthodox doctrine of Islam, one which stipulates the lengths that a pious Muslim has to go to prevent contamination by social intercourse with non-Muslims.

¹ This particularly refers to initiating a greeting to non-believers, as opposed to returning a greeting made first by non-believers. The argumentation is that “it is not allowed to imitate a *'salām'* greeting to a *kāfir* since the meaning of *'salām'* is safety from harm, so if you say *'al-salāmu 'alayk'* ('peace be upon you') you are thereby asking God almighty to grant him security from physical and moral harm”. Amīn al-Shaqāwī, المسلمون في بلاد الغربية (*Muslims Abroad*) 1st ed. 2017, p.245.

² *The General Presidency for Teaching Girls*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, collected by Freedom House from Masjid al-Farouq, Houston, 12/15/03. See, *Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques*, Center for Religious Freedom Freedom House, Washington 2005, p.85.

³ Cf. Anon.: رسالة في الحكم الاصيلي في دماء واموال واعراض الكفار (*Essay Regarding the Basic Rule of the Blood, Wealth and Honour of the Disbelievers*), Tibyan Productions.

The molecularity of the doctrine

At its purest level, the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* achieves an almost molecular attention to detail in preventing any participation in the civil culture of the modern state. In order to maintain a distinction and avoid contact with the infidel and his ways, the Muslim is required to:

1. Avoid attending non-Muslim festivities (since this equates to legitimising their beliefs);⁴
2. Avoid doing the same things that they do;
3. Avoid congratulating them on the occasion of their festivals⁵;
4. Avoid giving non-Muslims gifts or help them to celebrate their festivals by either selling or gifting items associated with it (food, clothing, perfumes etc.);⁶
5. Accept gifts from them at the time of their festivals (religious or non-religious) only if this is to encourage them to become Muslim;⁷
6. Avoid using the means of transportation that they use to go to their festivals;
7. Not help the Muslim who wants to imitate them in their festivals to do so;
8. Avoid using their words or religious terminology.

And there are many more official doctrinal stipulations that extend to even to the level of anti-humane behaviour, such as avoiding expressing 'best wishes' to non-Muslims on hearing of their ill-health, or avoiding visiting them in hospital, or sending them condolences at a time of bereavement.

Naturally, the majority of Muslims in their daily lives do not adhere to these inhumane directives, but the problem remains that there is a filter erected by the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* that imposes a degree of reticence among Muslims towards engaging in normal social intercourse across the denominational boundaries.

The centrality of the doctrine in the Islamic heritage

The doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* is openly accorded a primary status by orthodox thinkers,⁸ and is considered to a central pillar of the Islamic faith with strong emphasis placed on it in the Qur'ān.⁹ It is thus held to be a definition and a demonstration of 'true' Islamic belief. For

⁴ Cf. the opinion of Ibn 'Uqlā al-Shu'aybī حكم المشاركة في احتفالات النصارى (*The Verdict on Participating in Christian Celebrations*); Hāmid 'Alī: حكم الإحتفال بعيد ميلاد الولد (*The Verdict on Celebrating Birthdays*), on the grounds that this is a foreign import; and his هل لا تفعلوا! لا تجوز الإحتفال بعيد رأس السنة النصرانية! (*Is it Permissible to Celebrate the Christian New Year?*). For Muhammad al-Muqri': 'Don't Do It!', to celebrate the New Year is to wage war on God and to celebrate the trampled upon dignity of the Muslim nation, and the memory of the Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Gujarat and Iraq. It is "possibly the most grievous moment of God's anger upon the infidel."

⁵ There is a particularly rich body of warnings on this: cf. Ibn 'Uqlā al-Shu'aybī: حكم تهنئة الكفار بأعيادهم (*The Verdict Concerning Greeting the Infidel at the Time of their Feasts*). According to the 'ask a scholar' site *Islam Q&A*, the position is the following: "Greeting the kuffaar [the infidel] on Christmas and other religious holidays of theirs is haraam [forbidden], by consensus ... as is congratulating them on their festivals and fasts by saying 'A happy festival to you' or 'May you enjoy your festival,' and so on ... It is like congratulating someone for prostrating to the cross, or even worse than that. It is as great a sin as congratulating someone for drinking wine, or murdering someone, or having illicit sexual relations, and so on. Many of those who have no respect for their religion fall into this error; they do not realize the offensiveness of their actions. Whoever congratulates a person for his disobedience or bid'ah ['innovation'] or kufr ['infidelity'] exposes himself to the wrath and anger of Allaah." For the full *fatwā*, see: <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/947/ruling-on-celebrating-non-muslim-holidays-and-congratulating-them>

⁶ Amīn al-Shaqāwī, المسلمون في بلاد الغربية (*Muslims Abroad*) First Ed. 2015, p.245.

⁷ Amīn al-Shaqāwī, *Op. cit.*, p.246.

⁸ For instance, Ayman al-Zawahiri considered "Loyalty to the Believers and enmity to the Disbelievers is a key pillar in a Muslim's creed, without it it is incomplete" and authored an entire work on the subject: Ayman al-Zawahiri: الولاء والبراء، عقيدة منقولة وواقع مفقود (*Al-Walā' wal-Barā', an Inherited Doctrine but a Forgotten Reality*) December 2002, الخاتمة.

⁹ "Walā' and barā' are both related to the declaration of faith and constitute essential elements in it. The evidence of this from the Qur'an and the Sunnah is considerable ... No one may taste true faith except by this, even if his prayers and fasts are many." See Wasīm Fathullāh, الولاء والبراء في سورة الممتحنة، Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, n.d. Trans. *Alliance and Disavowal, A Thematic Analysis of The Sixtieth Chapter of the Qur'an*, n.d.

instance, the scholar Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Qahtānī, the author of a comprehensive work on the theme entitled *Al-walā' wal-barā' fī al-Islām* ('Loyalty and Disavowal in Islam'), focuses on the relationship of the doctrine to the central declaration of faith in Islam:

Walā' and *barā'* are both related to the declaration of faith and constitute essential elements in it. The evidence of this from the Qur'an and the Sunnah is considerable.¹⁰

Given its centrality there is consequently a very rich seam of literature on *al-walā' wal-barā'*, and most of the major authors referenced by the Islamists have contributed to it.¹¹

One of the more influential scholars referenced by the Islamists, no doubt because of his hard-line approach to *al-walā' wal-barā'*, is the mediaeval scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). In his work *The Requirement of the Straight Path for Opposing the Denizens of Hell*, Ibn Taymiyya preached that the starting point for a Muslim's life was the point at which "a perfect dissimilarity with the non-Muslims has been achieved" and justifies his case from the authority of early Muslims:

"Our forefathers used to say: if one of our '*ulamā'* ['scholars'] deviates, it means he is imitating Jews, and if one of our ordinary people deviates, he is imitating Christians ... Stress your differences from them in some or most things ... Because being different from them [Jews and Christians] brings us benefits and good in everything we do. Even the good things they do in their lives could be harmful to us in our lives or in the hereafter, so remaining different from them will bring us goodness."¹²

The logic of his position is that "imitation on the outside implies that a person loves (the one whom he imitates), and so it is forbidden."¹³ Ibn Taymiyya argued that evidence was clear from the Qur'ān and the Sunna that exclusive allegiance was demanded by the declaration of faith since this was an essential part of its meaning:

"The declaration of faith, that 'there is no god but Allah', requires you to love only for the sake of Allah, to hate only for the sake of Allah, to ally yourself only for the sake of Allah, to declare enmity only for the sake of Allah; it requires you to love what Allah loves and to hate what Allah hates."¹⁴

This author is one of the most influential authorities for the doctrine and its practice. His work derives its authority from its thoroughgoing mining of sources justifying and promoting the practice from the Qur'ān, the Hadith, the opinions of the Companions and the four legal schools of Islam.

The centrality of the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* means that it features in educational materials across the Muslim world. As has been highlighted by the controversy over the Saudi textbooks in the United States, this renders difficult the promotion of social integration ("because

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Sa'īd al-Qahtānī, *الولاء والبراء في الإسلام ('Al-walā' wal-barā' in Islam')* tr. *Al-Walā' wa'l-Barā' According to the Aqeedah of the Salaf*, Kashf ul Shubuhāt Publications 1993.

¹¹ Militant Islamists/jihadists, are particularly interested in this doctrine. The works more frequently cited by them are Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: *الدلائل في حكم موالاة أهل الإشراف*, trans. Anon.: *The Evidence for the Ruling Regarding Alliance with the Infidels and matters Related to It*, At-Tibyān Publications, n.d.; Muhammad ibn Sa'īd al-Qahtānī, *الولاء والبراء في الإسلام ('Al-walā' wal-barā' in Islam')* tr. *Al-Walā' wa'l-Barā' According to the Aqeedah of the Salaf*, Kashf ul Shubuhāt Publications 1993; 'Abd Allāh al-Ahdal: *السيف البتار على من يوالي الكفار* tr. *The Slicing Sword, Against the one who forms allegiances with the disbelievers and takes them as supporters*) At-Tibyān Publications, 2009; and the works by Juḥaymān al-'Utaybī: *أوثق عرى الإيمان الحب في الله والبغض في الله ('The Trustiest Bond of Faith is Love for God's Sake and Hatred for God's Sake')*; Hammūd al-Tuwayjirī: *تحفة الإخوان بما جاء في الموالاة والبراء، عقيدة منقولة وواقع* (Ayman al-Zawahiri: *Al-Walā' wal-Barā', an Inherited Doctrine but a Forgotten Reality*) December 2002.

¹² Ibn Taymiyya, *اقتضاء الصراط المستقيم لمخالفة أصحاب الجحيم ('Cleaving to the Straight Path means Opposing the Inhabitants of Hell')*, Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, 1994, pp.39 and 43.

¹³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Cleaving to the Straight Path*, 1/490.

¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *الإحتجاج بالقدر*, p.62.

imitating them in appearance points to liking them on the inside”¹⁵), or economic co-operation (since agreeing to be employed by a non-Muslim “cedes authority and demeans the believer to the unbeliever”).¹⁶ The aim of these works, of course, is to prevent contamination with a non-Muslim cultural environment.¹⁷

The problem that *al-walā' wal-barā'* poses for Muslim reformers

Due to the importance of this doctrine as a ‘force multiplier’ for the radical Islamist propagandists, understandably the RRG has concentrated heavily on this doctrinal feature, as a core element of the radicals’ programme and source of resilience to de-programming.

For instance, an anti-radicalisation group in Singapore, the *Religious Reform Group* (RRG) argues that the concept of *al-walā' wal-barā'* has been falsely used:

First, it is based on an incorrect understanding of the terms *Wālī'* and *Walā'* as referred to in the Qurʾān. Second, it is built upon a misunderstanding with regard to precisely which group of unbelievers this prohibition applies to.

The RRG scholar Mohamed Bin Ali goes on to make that case that scholars have traditionally stressed that the terms *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* should be taken in a ‘nuanced’ or ‘sophisticated’ understanding. While *al-walā' wal-barā'*

is a Quranic principle that has to be followed by all Muslims (i)t is essential to note that in classical Islamic literature, the idea of *walā'* denotes the beauty of close servanthood to God, without giving emphasis to the idea of hatred to others.¹⁸

Similarly, he argues that:

barā' ... is to disavow shirk and anything that constitutes shirk, as it is the only act that will not be forgiven by God. One who reads the Quran carefully would find that this is the most accepted meaning of *bara'* in the Quran.¹⁹

Thus the heart of the problem, which this apologetic tone illustrates, is that the doctrine is orthodox and unimpeachable. Even the progressive anti-Salafist American Shaykh Hamza Yusuf admits that ‘*al-walā'* (allegiance to anything other than Islam) nullifies a Muslim’s faith, making a person a *kāfir* or a disbeliever’.²⁰

Non-Salafist scholars therefore might attempt to mitigate its implications by saying that:

Al-barā' [renunciation] does not automatically include hatred for a person. It could be any grade of dislike of a behaviour, and sometimes of the person who does it, but not always. In fact, sometimes *al-barā'* can be accompanied with sympathy and pity for the person who has an abhorred conduct.²¹

¹⁵ *The General Presidency for Teaching Girls, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*, collected by Freedom House from Masjid al-Farouq, Houston, 12/15/03. See, *Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques*, Center for Religious Freedom Freedom House, Washington 2005, p.86.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p.85.

¹⁷ The pre-occupation is ancient: the insecurity of the early faith, particularly in having to defend itself against Jewish and Christian polemics, generated a culture of ‘not them’. It can be observed in such ethically inconsequential *hadīth* as *إِنَّ الْيَهُودَ وَالنَّصَارَى لَا يَصْبُغُونَ فَخَالِفُوهُمْ* The Prophet said, “*Jews and Christians do not dye their hair so you should do the opposite of what they do*”.

¹⁸ Mohamed bin Ali, *The Roots of Religious Extremism, Understanding the Salafi Doctrine of Al-walā' wal-barā'*, Imperial College Press, London 2016, p.266.

¹⁹ Mohamed bin Ali, *The Roots of Religious Extremism, ibid.*

²⁰ Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, *Just Enough Religion to Hate* (citation from Mohamed bin Ali, *op. cit.* p.264).

²¹ Saeed Ismaeel, *The relationship between Muslims and Non-Muslims*, Al-Attique Publications, Canada, 2003, pp.48-9.

Nevertheless, the implications for social cohesion are nonetheless evident in the unavoidable assertion that 'the essence of its meaning is to cut off the relationship with something or someone.'²²

Failing an unambiguous condemnation of the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* progressive scholars have resorted to an argument based on pragmatism and public relations:

The misuse of *al-walā' wal-barā'* has negative implications on the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims and the image of Islam. It undermines Islam's image as a religion of peace, mercy and harmony [and] will hinder integration between different ethnic and religious groups.²³

Other arguments from the progressive scholars focus on the historical 'context' of the evaluation of the doctrine, in that it was elaborated in an age different from our own, an age of deep religious conflict. The problem with this 'context' argument is that it is open-ended and irresolvable. The Qur'ānic starting point that the non-Salafist scholars adduce as an argument for *historical* context is employed equally by the Salafists as an argument for the *permanence* of its rulings, in that the Qur'ān is a sanctified scriptural text that supersedes context and is 'valid for all times and all places'.

The weight of orthodox commentary thus promotes a opposite dynamic that contradicts the progressive scholars. Authoritative medieval commentators such as Ibn Kathīr have already established in the scholarly mindset that the meaning of 'the enemy' has been broadened: from the historical enemies of the Prophet during his lifetime to all non-Muslims in general. This orthodox interpretation retains the greater authority in terms of classical scholarship, and thus greater cogency to the Muslim community.

The guilt factor

One further element that Mohammed Bin Ali highlighted in attempting to opposed the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* needs to be examined:

Anyone who does [subscribe to such interpretations of this doctrine] will feel terribly uneasy in this modern world, and live with a continuous sense of immense guilt.²⁴

Mohamed Bin Ali notes that the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'* cannot be easily disregarded, not only due to its authentic pedigree but also because it answers to some deeply felt anxieties of contemporary Muslims who:

[i]n this globalised world ... feel that their key beliefs are being challenged and their identity threatened. As a result, Muslims are searching for signposts and guidelines to practice Islam in a world seemingly at odds with Islamic principles.²⁵

Given this anxiety, and a sense of guilt at not truly living an authentic Islamic life, no amount of scholarly nuance can hold water against the emotional appeal of the need for the Muslim to save himself from the influence of the *Denizens of Hell*. The scriptural evidence is likely to overwhelm him, and override his natural instincts towards symbiosis and towards fully integrating with the infidels:

"Was not the earth of Allah spacious enough for you to move yourselves away [from evil]? Such men will find their abode in Hell."²⁶

²² Saeed Ismaeel, *ibid*.

²³ Mohamed bin Ali, *The Roots of Religious Extremism, Understanding the Salafī Doctrine of Al-walā' wal-barā'*, Imperial College Press, London 2016, p.129.

²⁴ RRG website publication: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, Friday Sermon, 21 August 2015 / 6 Zulkaedah 1436, *Misunderstood Concepts of Al-Wala' wal Bara'*.

²⁵ Mohamed bin Ali, *Op. cit*, p.268.

²⁶ Qur'ān, IV, 97.

“I am not responsible for any Muslim who stays among polytheists”²⁷

“Anyone who associates with a polytheist and lives with him is like him.”²⁸

The unease that Muslims feel in contemporary, pluralistic environments owes much to the core position that *al-walā' wal-barā'* holds in Islamic law and the doctrinal heritage, and accounts for the puzzling reticence to fully engage with non-Muslims, or reciprocate in equal measure the overtures of interfaith co-operation and dialogue.

Scriptural texts supporting *al-walā' wal-barā'*

The issue of the Muslim's relationship with the infidel is one of the most important in Islam. The amount of attention devoted to the infidel is considerable. Over 60 percent of the total Qur'ānic text addresses that relationship, while 81 percent of the Sīra (chronological biographies of Muḥammad) and 37 percent of the Ḥadīth (the sayings attributed to Muḥammad) maintain a similar focus. In sum, nearly two thirds of the Shari'a (Islamic law) is devoted to the infidel.²⁹ However, the following texts are those most frequently used to support the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'*:

The Qur'ān:

Qur'ān LX (al-Mumtaḥina), 4:

Indeed there has been an excellent example for you in Ibrāhīm [Abraham] and those with him, when they said to their people: “Verily, we are **clear of you** and whatever you worship besides Allah, **we have rejected you**, and there has started between us and you hostility and hatred for ever, until you believe in Allah alone.”³⁰

(The term *barā'* derives from this verse, from the phrase “we are clear of (i.e. disassociate ourselves from) you” - *innā burā'u minkum*)

Qur'ān IX (al-Tawba), 3:

And an announcement from Allah and His Messenger to the people on the day of the greater pilgrimage that Allah and His Messenger are **clear** of liability to the idolaters.

Qur'ān LVIII (al-Mujādila), 22:

You shall not find a people who believe in Allah and the latter day befriending those who act in opposition to Allah and His Apostle, even though they were their (own) fathers, or their sons, or their brothers, or their kinsfolk.

Qur'ān III (Āl 'Imrān), 118:

²⁷ Sunan Abu Da'ūd: Book 14, Hadīth 2639. The context is the Prophet hearing of the deaths of Muslims resident among polytheists as a result of a raid: “Some people sought protection by having recourse to prostration, and were hastily killed. When the Prophet heard that, he ordered half the blood-wit to be paid for them, saying: I am not responsible for any Muslim who stays among polytheists.” The term ‘polytheist’ (*mushrikīn*) is regularly extended in discourse to non-Muslims in general, but Christians in particular for their doctrine of the Trinity.

²⁸ Sunan Abu Da'ūd: Book 14, Hadīth 2781.

²⁹ Data from B. Warner: *Statistical Islam*, Center for the Study of Political Islam, Nashville, Tenn.

³⁰ Qur'ān LX (*Al-Mumtaḥina*) 4: *إِنَّا بَرَاءٌ مِنْكُمْ وَإِذَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ كَفَرْنَا بِكُمْ وَبَدَا بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ الْعَدَاوَةُ وَالْبَغْضَاءُ أَبَدًا*. The words ‘innocent’ and ‘guiltless’ (*barā'*, *burā'a*) in Qur'ānic verses such as these provide the vocabulary for the doctrine.

O ye who believe! Take not for intimates others than your own folk, who would spare no pains to ruin you; they love to hamper you. Hatred is revealed by (the utterance of) their mouths, but that which their breasts hide is greater.

Qur'ān III (Āl 'Imrān), 28:

Let not the believers take disbelievers for their friends in preference to believers. Whoever does this has no connection with Allah unless you are guarding yourselves against them as a precaution.

The most overt divine command to keep a distance from the infidel is Qur'ān V (*al-Mā'ida*), 51:

O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people. [Qur'ān V (Al-Mā'ida), 51]

This text is unapologetically held as a badge of a sincere Muslim's belief, nor is it universally 'contextualised' as referring to opponents contemporary to the Prophet. It is considered to be applicable to the present day. Here, for instance, is a Turkish bus-stop in the city of Konya:



The Qur'ānic citation on the bus stop advertisement is a Turkish translation of the above Sūra V (*al-Mā'ida*), 51. The advertisement is funded by the *Anatolian Youth Association* (AGD - Anadolu Gençlik Derneği) and the *National Youth Foundation* (MGV - Milli Gençlik Vakfı).

The Ḥadīth

The vast body of *ḥadīth* literature is crammed with demonstrations of why the Muslim should keep clear of the infidel and all his ways and adopt instead *al-walā' wal-barā'* as his guiding principle. Two examples from many:

Abū Dharr narrated: The Prophet said: “The best of the actions is to love for the sake of Allah and to hate for the sake of Allah”.³¹

Ibn Abbas is also reported to have said, “Whoever loves for the sake of Allah, and hates for the sake of Allah, and whoever seals a friendship for His sake, or declares an enmity for His sake, will receive, because of this, the protection of Allah. No one may taste true faith except by this, even if his prayers and fasts are many.”³²

³¹ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* 4599.

³² Muhammad ibn Saʿīd al-Qahtānī, *الولاء والبراء في الإسلام* (*'Al-walā' wal-barā' in Islam'*), Vol 2, p.44.