192564 - Guidelines regarding the kind of misinterpretation that does not constitute kufr on the part of the one who follows that misinterpretation, and some other comments on this issue

the question

On your website you have discussed very well in detail, in several fatwas, the issue of excusing the one who follows mistaken notions on the basis of ignorance and how to establish proof with regard to this matter (so that he has no excuse to keep following that mistaken notion). But I did not find any clear guidelines on this site with regard to how we should approach the issue of one who bases his view on a misinterpretation. I have read about this matter but I found some contradictions when applying what I have read by some scholars who discuss the right approach. For example, some scholars say that if their misinterpretation of a text is a valid interpretation from a linguistic point of view, then we may excuse them on that basis, but if it is not valid from a linguistic point of view, then we cannot excuse them and we should regard them as kaafirs. But when it comes to the application of this guideline to the Ash'aris, who interpret the idea of istiwa' (Allah's rising above the Throne) as meaning that He "gained control", you find that when refuting them, they say: this is something for which there is no linguistic basis, yet despite that they do not regard as kuffaar those who deny the idea of Allah being Most High, even though Shaykh al-Islam (Ibn Taymiyah) narrated from Abu Haneefah the view that the one who denies the idea of Allah being Most High is a kaafir. We would like some clarification with regard to the scholars judging many sects, such as the Jahamis and Qadaris, as kaafirs. Is it proven from any of the scholars that he regarded the Ash'aris as kaafirs?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

This issue is very important, and we will discuss it in the following points:

-1-

There is no difference between excusing a person for forming a mistaken idea on the basis of a misinterpretation and excusing him for his ignorance of the religion; in fact the one who bases his mistaken idea on misinterpretation is more deserving of being excused than one who is ignorant, because he is not ignorant of what he has to believe; rather he believes that it (whatever he believes) is true, and he quotes evidence for it and defends it. It makes no difference whether the matter in question, for which the one who bases his idea on a misinterpretation, is a practical matter or a theoretical matter.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The one who bases his idea on a misinterpretation, if his intention is to follow the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), he is not to be regarded as a kaafir or as an evildoer, if he tried to work it out but got it wrong. This is something that is well established among people with regard to practical matters. With regard to matters of belief, many people regard as a kaafir the one who has mistaken notions concerning them, but this view is not known from any of the Sahaabah or those who followed them in truth, or from any of the leading scholars of the Muslims. Rather this was originally one of the views of the innovators.

End quote from Minhaaj as-Sunnah (5/239)

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This does not mean that they do not deserve the hadd punishment, as Qudaamah ibn Maz'oon was given the hadd punishment with regard to his view which was based on his misinterpretation concerning the drinking of alcohol – and it does not mean that they do not deserve punishment and blame, or even that their ideas do not deserve to be described as misguidance or disbelief, as we shall see in detail below. In fact the matter may reach the level of fighting them, because the aim behind that is to put people off this innovation and to protect the religion of Islam.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: What I have mentioned – about a Muslim who forsakes some obligatory duty or does some prohibited action on the basis of misinterpretation and wrong conclusions, or as a result of following the view of others – is clear in

my mind. Such a person is in a better position, with regard to his view, than the disbeliever who bases his disbelief on misinterpretation and wrong notions. But that does not rule out fighting the one who transgresses (against the Muslims) and holds views based on misinterpretation, or flogging the one who drinks alcohol and believes it to be permissible on the basis of misinterpretation, and the like, for misinterpretation does not waive punishment in this world in all cases, for the aim of the punishment is to ward off the harm that may be caused by the action of the transgressor.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (22/14)

And he (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to the one who openly displays that which may be harmful (of actions or beliefs), his harm must be warded off even if that is by means of punishing him, and whether he is a Muslim who is an evildoer or sinner, or a man of good character who tried to work it out but got it wrong, and indeed even if he is a righteous man or a scholar, whether he is one over whom we have power or otherwise (we should still try to ward off his harm)… Similarly, whoever promotes bid‘ah that may harm people with regard to their religious wellbeing should be punished even though he may be excused for having tried to work it out (but got it wrong) or for having followed the view of someone else.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (10/375)

-3-

Not every alternative interpretation is justifiable or excusable according to sharee‘ah. No alternative interpretation is acceptable with regard to the twin testimony of faith, the Oneness of Allah, may He be exalted, the affirmation of the message of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), the resurrection, or Paradise and Hell. Calling this an alternative interpretation in the first place is not acceptable; rather this is a baatini and heretical approach that leads to invalidation of religion.

Abu Haamid al-Ghazaali (may Allah have mercy on him) said: It is essential to point out another principle, which is that if a person holds a view that is contrary to a mutawaatir text and claims that it is just an alternative interpretation, but his view that is based on misinterpretation is far removed from the linguistic meaning, and is not close at all, rather it is very far-fetched, this is tantamount to kufr and the one who holds that view is a liar, even if he claims to base his view on his own interpretation. An example of that is what I have read in the words of some of the Baatinis, that Allah, may He be exalted, is One in the sense that He grants and creates oneness, and He is All-Knowing in the sense that He grants knowledge to others and creates it, and He exists in the sense that He brings others into existence. But as for Him being One in Himself, or existing or being All-Knowing in the sense that this is His own attribute, that is not correct according to their view. This is blatant kufr, because interpreting oneness as creating oneness cannot be an alternative interpretation at all, and it has no basis in the Arabic language, and it is not possible to interpret it in this way at all. These are all examples of words of disbelief described as alternative interpretations.

End quote from Faysal at-Tafriqah (p. 66, 67).

Ibn al-Wazeer (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Similarly, there is no difference of opinion regarding the kufr of one who rejects that which is well-known and well-established to all, and tries to conceal it with the excuse of giving his own interpretation with regard to something that cannot be interpreted in any way other than its apparent meaning, such as the heretics in their misinterpretation of all the divine names, and even of the entire Qur'an and all the rulings of Islam, and matters of the hereafter such as the resurrection and Paradise and Hell.

End quote from Eethaar al-Haqq 'ala al-Khalq (p. 377)

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The kind of interpretation that may be valid is that which does not lead to undermining the religion of Islam, is acceptable on a linguistic basis according to the rules of the Arabic language, and the one who holds this view sincerely intends to seek the truth in accordance with the principles of

knowledge. Such people have a valid excuse if their interpretation turns out to be wrong. This is the very excuse which the scholars mentioned with regard to the reasons why scholars may have different views on practical matters.

Shaykh al-Islam (may Allah have mercy on him) said: This is how we should examine people's statements in cases where the one who holds such a view becomes a kaafir. The texts that could help a person to reach the right conclusion may not have reached a scholar; or he may have been aware of them but they were not proven to him to be sound or he was not able to understand them; or he may have developed some misunderstanding because of which Allah may excuse him. Whoever among the believers strives his utmost to seek the truth, but then reaches a wrong conclusion, Allah will forgive his mistake, no matter what it is, whether it has to do with theoretical or practical issues. This is the view of the Companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and the majority of the leading scholars of Islam.

End quote from Majmoo' al-Fataawa (23/346).

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The scholars said: Anyone who reaches a wrong conclusion but may be excused for his misinterpretation is not a sinner, provided that his interpretation may be valid from a linguistic point of view and that he has some measure of knowledge.

End quote from Fath al-Baari (12/304)

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There is a saheeh hadith which indicates that if a person has a wrong view on 'aqeedah (beliefs) that is based on misinterpretation, if this misinterpretation will not lead to making religion appear meaningless, then he is not a kaafir. That is the hadith in which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "The Jews split into seventy-one sects, one of which will be in Paradise and seventy in Hell. The Christians split into seventy-two sects, seventy-one of which will be in Hell and one in Paradise. My ummah will split into seventy-three sects, one of which will be in Paradise and seventy-two in Hell." It was said: O Messenger of Allah, who are they? He said: "The jamaa'ah

(the main body of the Muslims).” Narrated by Ibn Maajah (3992); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani.

Abu Sulaymaan al-Khattaabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The words “My ummah will split into seventy-three sects” indicates that all these sects are not outside the boundaries of Islam, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) described them all as being part of his ummah. This indicates that the one who holds a view that is based on some interpretation does not go beyond the bounds of Islam, even if he is mistaken in his interpretation.

End quote from Ma‘aalim as-Sunan by al-Khattaabi (4/295). See also: as-Sunan al-Kubra by al-Bayhaqi (10/208)

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The same applies to all seventy-two sects: whoever among them is a hypocrite is inwardly a disbeliever, and whoever is not a hypocrite – rather he believes in Allah and His Messenger inwardly – is not inwardly a disbeliever, even if he is wrong in some views that are based on misinterpretation, no matter how serious his mistake.

Whoever says that each of the seventy-two sects are kuffaar whose kufr puts them beyond the pale of Islam has gone against the Qur’an and Sunnah, and the consensus of the Sahaabah (may Allah be pleased with them), and indeed the consensus of the four imams and others. There is no one among them who ever regarded each of the seventy-two sects as kuffaar; rather those sects may regard one another as kuffaar because of their views and beliefs.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (7/218, 219)

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Those among the scholars who ruled that some of those who follow innovation – that does not constitute disbelief – are kuffaar were referring to kufr of a lesser degree than that which puts one beyond the pale of Islam.

Imam al-Bayhaqi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: What we have narrated from ash-Shaafa‘i and other imams about regarding these innovators as kuffaar only refers to lesser forms of kufr.

End quote from Sunan al-Bayhaqi al-Kubra (10/207).

Imam al-Baghawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: ash-Shaafa'i regarded it as permissible to accept the testimony of innovators and to pray behind them, with no restrictions, even though he regarded that as makrooh. This view of his indicates that if he describes some of them as kaafirs on any occasion, what he meant was lesser kufr, as in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "And whosoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed, such are the Kafiroon (i.e. disbelievers - of a lesser degree as they do not act on Allah's Laws)" [al-Maa'idah 5:44].

End quote from Sharh as-Sunnah (1/228)

Imam ash-Shaafa'i may have used the word kufr as a means of warning against that belief.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

It may be narrated from one of them that he regarded as a kaafir one who held some view, but what he meant was that this view constituted kufr, so as to warn against it; it does not necessarily mean that if a view constitutes kufr, everyone who holds that view as the result of ignorance or misinterpretation of a text is to be regarded as a kaafir. Affirming kufr in the case of a specific individual is like a confirmation that he is deserving of punishment in the Hereafter – and there are specific conditions and impediments with regard to doing that.

End quote from Minhaaj as-Sunnah an-Nabawiyyah (5/240)

-7-

With regard to the difference of opinion among the leading scholars concerning the people of bid'ah who believe in an idea that that constitutes kufr, and whether they are kaafirs or not, that is based on the difference between regarding the view as constituting kufr and regarding a specific individual as a kaafir. They may rule that a particular belief constitutes kufr in itself, but they do not apply the ruling of kufr to any specific individual who believes in that view, unless the conditions are met and the impediments are absent.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

But what we are trying to say here is that the leading scholars' views on takfeer (judging someone to be a kaafir) are based on their differentiation between the idea and the individual who holds this view. Hence some of them narrated that there was some dispute concerning this matter, but these people did not properly understand what they said. Some narrated two reports from Ahmad concerning the issue of regarding the people of bid'ah as kuffaar in all cases, to the point that it seems that there was a conflict between these reports as to whether the Murji'ah and the Shi'ah who give precedence to 'Ali are to be regarded as kuffaar. Perhaps this group (who narrated the two reports) thought that that they should be regarded as kuffaar who will abide forever in Hell, but this is not the view of Ahmad or any of the other leading scholars of Islam. Rather his view is definitely that he did not regard as kuffaar the Murji'ah who say that faith is words to be uttered and is not connected to deeds, and he did not regard as kuffaar those who gave precedence to 'Ali over 'Uthmaan. Rather his statements clearly indicate that we should refrain from regarding the Khaarijis, Qadaris and others as kuffaar; and he only regarded as kuffaar the Jahamis who denied the names and attributes of Allah, because their views are clearly and obviously contrary to that which was brought by the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and because the reality of their view is that it leads to denying the Creator. He had dealt with them and he knew about their reality and that their views boiled down to denial of the Creator. Moreover, regarding the Jahamis as kuffaar was something that was well established and was narrated from the early generations and the leading scholars, but he did not regard specific individuals among them as kaafirs, because the one who promotes a view is worse than one who merely holds that view, and the innovator who persecutes the one who disagrees with him is worse than one who merely calls to it, and the one who describes anyone who disagrees with him as a kaafir is worse than the one who merely persecutes him. Furthermore, those who were in authority (at the time of Ahmad) held Jahami views, that the Qur'an was created, and that Allah would not be seen in the Hereafter, and so on, and they called people to that, and tried them and punished them if they did not agree with them, and they regarded as kaafirs all those who did not agree with them, to the extent that if they arrested someone they would not let him go until he accepted the Jahami view that the Qur'an was created, and so on. They would not appoint anyone to a position of authority or give

any stipend from the bayt al-maal to anyone, unless he held those views. Yet despite that, Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on him) would pray for mercy for them, and pray for forgiveness for them, because he knew that it was not clear to them that they were disbelieving in the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and rejecting what he had brought; rather they based their views on the interpretation of some text, but they got it wrong and followed those who taught them that.

Similarly, when Hafs al-Fard said that the Qur'an was created, ash-Shaafa'i said to him: You have disbelieved in Allah the Almighty, and he explained to him that this view constituted kufr. But he did not rule that Hafs had apostatised just because he held that view, because proof had not yet been established to him such that he might be regarded as a kaafir if he rejected it. If ash-Shaafa'i had believed that he was an apostate, he would have tried to get him executed. And he clearly stated in his books that testimony may be accepted from those who follow bid'ah, and prayers may be offered behind them.

End quote from Majmoo' al-Fataawa (23/348, 349)

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With regard to the views of Ash'aris in particular, there can be no doubt that they have some wrong notions in their beliefs that are contrary to the beliefs of the early generations, and they have prominent figures among the scholars to whom they refer and whom they follow, but they are not all of the same level with regard to beliefs; rather there are different schools of thought among them. The nearest of them to the three best generations are the closest of them to the truth. By applying the argument mentioned above (about differentiating between ideas and individuals) to the Ash'aris, we may realise that any of the scholars who regarded some of what they say as kufr was only referring to elements of kufr in their ideas, and it does not mean that he ruled that they themselves as individuals became kaafirs because of that, or that he meant anyone who holds this view is a kaafir. What he was referring to was a kind of lesser kufr. This group is not one of the sects that are beyond the bounds of Islam, and its individuals are not kaafirs. Rather they are to be excused, because they base their ideas on some misinterpretation

with regard to what they discussed of issues and beliefs.

Shaykh al-‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said: I do not know of anyone who regards the Ash‘aris as kaafirs.

End quote from Thamaraat at-Tadween (no. 9) by Dr Ahmad ibn ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Qaadi

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We may sum up the shar‘i ruling on the innovating groups by quoting what Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan as-Sa‘di (may Allah have mercy on him) said in a clear and scholarly comment:

Whoever denies that which the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) brought, or denies some of it, without basing that on some misinterpretation of a text by the people of bid‘ah, is a kaafir, because he has disbelieved Allah and His Messenger, and is too arrogant and stubborn to accept the truth.

(a) With regard to the innovator among the Jahamis, Qadaris, Khaarijis, Raafidis and their ilk, if he knows that his innovation is contrary to the Qur’an and Sunnah, yet he persists in it and supports it, then he is a disbeliever in Allah the Almighty, and is opposing Allah and His Messenger after true guidance has become clear to him.

(b) If a person among the innovators believes in Allah and His Messenger both outwardly and inwardly, and he venerates Allah and His Messenger, and adheres to that which was brought by the Messenger, (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), but he develops a notion or practice that is contrary to the truth, and gets it wrong in some of his conclusions, and is wrong in some of his interpretations, without disbelieving or rejecting the guidance that is clear to him, then he is not a kaafir, but he is an evildoer and an innovator, or he is a misguided innovator, or he may be pardoned because the issue was too subtle for him and he put effort into finding out what was correct, but he did not succeed.

Hence the Khaarijis, Mu‘tazilah, Qadaris and other followers of bid‘ah are regarded as being of different categories:

(a) Some of them are undoubtedly kaafirs, such as the extreme Jahamis who denied the divine names and attributes, although they realised that their innovation was contrary to that which had been brought by the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Such people knowingly disbelieved the Messenger.

(b) Some of them are misguided innovators and evildoers, such as the Khaarijis who based their wrong views on misinterpretation, and the Mu'tazilah who do not disbelieve in the Messenger, but they were misguided because of their innovation, and thought that what they were following was the truth. Hence the Sahaabah (may Allah be pleased with them) were unanimously agreed that the Khaarijis were innovators and rebels, as was narrated in the saheeh hadiths that speak of them. But they were also unanimously agreed that they were not beyond the bounds of Islam, even though they regarded it as permissible to shed the blood of the Muslims, and they denied that intercession may be granted for those who commit major sins, and they denied many other fundamentals of the religion. But because they based their views on their misinterpretation of some text, they cannot be regarded as kaafirs.

(c) Some of the innovators held ideas that were less serious than this, such as many of the Qadaris, and the Kilaabis and Ash'aris. These people are innovators who are misguided with regard to some fundamental issues, in which they developed views that were contrary to the Qur'an and Sunnah. This is something that is well known and well established. Their innovation is of different levels, according to how far away from or close to the truth they are, and according to their transgressions against the followers of truth by labelling them as kuffaar, evildoers or innovators, and according to their ability to reach the right conclusion and their efforts to do so or otherwise. A detailed discussion of this matter would take too long.

End quote from Tawdeeh al-Kaafiyah ash-Shaafiyah (156-158)

We hope that what we have mentioned above has clarified the matter for you. We ask Allah to help us and you to attain beneficial knowledge and do righteous deeds.

And Allah knows best.