

Apostasy – Apostates. The word derives from Late Latin *apostasia*, borrowed from the Greek with the sense of ‘defection’. It means the total abandonment of the faith by someone who has been baptised. From a theological point of view it is the gravest sin a Christian can commit: ‘Apostasy seems to be the beginning of every sin’ (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Secunda Secundae Q. 12 Art. 1). It is distinguished from heresy, which is a partial abandonment of the faith and consists in a conscious denial of, or a positive doubt about, one or more of the truths of the faith. Also different is ‘apostasy from the religious life’, which occurs when someone who had made their profession of final vows for life, whether solemn vows or simple vows, illegitimately leaves the religious house to which he or she belongs, with the intention never to return, thus withdrawing from the rule of obedience. A final meaning is apostasy from orders, which is when a cleric who has received major orders, from subdiaconate upwards, abandons the ecclesiastical state and persists in the same attitude, despite admonitions to return. Anyone guilty of this is punished by deposition.

In antiquity the people of Israel were urged again and again by prophets sent by God to give up their apostasy, on pain of complete spiritual abandonment and the consequences that would follow from that. (e.g. Exodus 12: 43, Isaiah 59: 20, Maccabees 2: 15).

In Christian tradition apostasy is one of the signs of the end of the world: the day of the second coming of Christ – so the Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians, 2: 3 – will not come before the great apostasy.

In Islam, apostasy (*ridda*) is not allowed and the apostate is faces capital punishment, provide that the intention was to abandon the true faith and not to escape death or grave danger for oneself or people close to one. Nonetheless a period of reflection, in a place of confinement, is imposed on the guilty person, after which either he or she returns to the previous state as a Moslem or faces the death penalty.

Apostasy from the faith has always been considered a grave religious crime. It is a form of desertion from the ranks of the Christian army. It has been a constant in Christian history and continues to this day (the so-called ‘unbaptising’). It began under the pressure of the ferocious persecutions of the Roman empire. The apostates – that is those who committed apostasy, initially called ‘the lapsed’, *lapsi* - were punished by deposition if they were clerics, and by excommunication if they were lay. Those who then wished to return to the faith had to undergo a severe penance; and in some Churches a positive outcome [i.e. forgiveness] could not be taken for granted, even at the point of death. Then [after the conversion of the empire] secular sanctions were added to the ecclesiastical penalties, in that the secular authority considered apostasy to be a political offence which should be punished and repressed by political measures, from the confiscation of goods to the loss of the power to make a will (Justinian, *Codex, de apostatis*, 1: 7). In the later Middle Ages it was not so much the relapse of the faithful into paganism that was feared, but the return to Judaism of converted Jews and above all, in some countries – like Spain – the defection of the faithful, attracted by the considerable temporal advantages they would receive in consequence, to Islam. This explains the creation of the Inquisition in Spain, as a tool of the secular authorities though not without the Church’s consent.

In modern times civil penalties ceased to be applied, but the ecclesiastical ones remained unchanged by numerous apostolic constitutions, among them the bull *In Coena Domini* of Clement VII (1524) and the *Apostolicae Sedis* of Pius IX. Canon 2314 of the *Corpus Juris Canonici* included apostasy among the sins against the faith; apostates fell under automatic,

'*latae sententiae*' excommunication, and apostasy was a sin reserved in a special way for [i.e. only absolvable by] the apostolic see. The new *Codex Iuris Canonici* promulgated in 1983 explains in canon 751 that by 'apostasy' a 'total repudiation of the Christian faith' is meant: schism, refusal to submit to the Supreme Pontiff, or rejection of communion with the members of the Church under him'. So far as sanctions are concerned, clerics should be deposed after a second warning. Those who persist in the crime after a canonical warning are deprived of every benefice, dignity, source of income, and ecclesiastical office, and declared to be 'infames' [abominable]. The crime of public apostasy also means being deprived of ecclesiastical burial (can. 1184, #1); it is an 'irregularity' which prevents reception of clerical orders (can. 1041, 1044); other consequences are prohibition from joining or automatic expulsion from an institute of consecrated life (can. 597 and 694 #1), from a 'society of apostolic life' [an officially recognized form of Catholic community] (can. 732, 747), and from public associations (can. 316, ##1 and 2); inability to make a vow (can. 171, #1); automatic removal from office (can. 194, #1).

Bibliography: In addition to works of moral theology and canon law, the following may be consulted: A. BEUGNET, «Apostasie», in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, I, 2, (Paris, 1931), coll. 1602-1612; P. GISMONDI, «Apostasia», in *Enciclopedia del Diritto*, II, Milano, [1958], pp. 625-629; R. CARCANO - A. ORIOLI, *Uscire dal gregge. Storie di conversioni, battesimi, apostasie e sbattezzi*, Roma, 2008.

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