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출처
(Source) [Muslim-Christian Encounter 10\(1\)](#), 2017.03, 9-26(18 pages)

발행처
(Publisher) [햇불트리니티신학대학원대학교 한국이슬람연구소](#)
TORCHTRINITY Center for Islamic Studies

URL <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07179476>

APA Style Martin Accad (2017). ARE MUSLIMS LIARS? A MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON TAQIYYA. *Muslim-Christian Encounter*, 10(1), 9-26

햇불트리니티신학대학원대학교
220.67.255.***
2021/02/09 (Accessed)

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ARE MUSLIMS LIARS? A MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON *TAQIYYA*

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- INTRODUCTION
- *TAQIYYA* IN *THE QUR'AN* AND *TAFSIR*
- HISTORICAL AND CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS
AND PRACTICES OF *TAQIYYA*
- MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In post 9/11 anti-Muslim discourse, *taqiyya* has been redefined as a religious obligation for Muslims to lie to non-Muslims not simply for survival, but in order to serve the expansionist agenda of their religious community. According to the *taqiyya*-focused strand of the anti-Muslim moral panic, Muslims stand condemned for their participation in this hidden agenda even when no criminal or anti-social behaviour is apparent.¹

As Shakira Hussein vividly describes, *Taqiyya*, best translated as “dissimulation,” may be one of the most misunderstood Islamic concepts today. Essentially, it refers to the permission in Islam, according to most Muslim scholars, for a Muslim to dissimulate his or her religious beliefs in certain circumstances in order to avoid bodily harm. The concept of *taqiyya* belongs to the field of Islamic Law and abides by a variety of guidelines. Today, however, some right-wing politicians in the west have used the idea of *taqiyya* in Islam as a basis to accuse Muslims generally of holding a stealthy agenda in their societies.²

1 Shakira Hussein, “The Myth of the Lying Muslim: ‘*Taqiyya*’ and the Racialization of Muslim Identity,” ABC Religion and Ethics, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/05/28/4244447.htm>, 28 May 2015(accessed 21 March 2017).

2 From the claim that President Barack Obama was a secret Muslim masquerading as a Christian but with an agenda to Islamize the US, to the widely-mediatised statements about *taqiyya* advanced by Ben Carson during his presidential campaign, a vague and undefined concept of *taqiyya* has gained a place of prominence in the non-Muslim

Some Evangelical Christians have also written about *taqiyya* in recent years, as though it were a central doctrine in Islam.³ One among many websites that claims to be a “non-partisan, fact-based site which examines the ideological threat that Islam poses to human dignity and freedom,” claims that *taqiyya* is a form of lying that is permitted in certain circumstances “that advance the cause of Islam – in some cases by gaining the trust of non-believers in order to draw out their vulnerability and defeat them.”⁴

Such highly negative representations, apart from being plain inaccurate and ignorant of detail, have dramatic implications for our societies generally as well as for the church’s mission specifically among Muslims globally, particularly in the current tragic reality of massive people migration as refugees from conflict regions into western societies. The argument goes that we cannot trust in the good faith of any Muslim among us, since Islam permits them to dissimulate their real intentions at their leisure.

western psyche. See a coverage of Carson’s popularization of *taqiyya* in the supportive article of Raymond Ibrahim, “Ben Carson Exposes Islamic Taqiyya and Gets Attacked for it by the Leftist Media,” Frontpage Mag, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/260234/ben-carson-exposes-islamic-taqiyya-raymond-ibrahim>, September 25, 2015(accessed 21 March 2017).

3 As examples, see Patrick Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of Militant Islam*, Isaac Publishing, 2007, especially chapter 9, entitled: “*Taqiyya*” (196–209); chapter 4 by Sam Soloman(60–78), “Challenges from Islam,” in Ravi Zacharias, *Beyond Opinion: Living the Faith that We Defend*, Thomas Nelson, 2007; and Sam Soloman and E, Al Maqdisi, *Modern Day Trojan Horse: Al Hijra, the Islamic Doctrine of Immigration, Accepting Freedom or Imposing Islam?* Advancing Native Missions, 2009.

4 See the website “What Makes Islam so different,” <http://www.thereligionofpeace.com/pages/quran/taqiyya.aspx>(accessed 21 March 2017).

This belief is held particularly by those non-Muslims convinced that Islam has the intention eventually to conquer the world. But is the fear factor triggered by such understandings justified? The current article will explore the concept of *taqiyya* from a Qur'anic and Islamic legal perspective, and by examining current understandings among a few prominent Muslim scholars. The treatment will be brief due to the word limit, but it should be sufficiently representative of the general Muslim understanding of the concept in order to debunk some of the pervasive current misunderstandings and half-truths. The article will close with a reflection on the implications of a more comprehensive understanding of *taqiyya* for the Church's mission in today's global realities.

TAQIYYA IN THE QUR'AN AND TAFSIR

Before delving specifically into the concept of *taqiyya*, we may do well to establish some preliminary understandings about the meaning of the word *shari'a*, often referred to as Islamic Law or Sharia Law. Given the way that we generally think of our contemporary legal systems as compendia of legal directives and limitations, we may do well to refer to Islamic Law simply with its Arabic referent of "*shari'a*," seeking then to understand what the word means in its original Qur'anic context. Strikingly, the word

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shari‘a occurs only once in *the Qur’an*, as follows: “Then we put you on a pathway of the matter, so follow it, and do not follow the whims and desires of those who do not know” (*al-Jathiya* [45] 18). In the translation of Safi Kaskas, which I am using here, he translates the Arabic word *shari‘a* with “pathway.” Other commonly used translations use synonyms of the same word, with Yusuf Ali rendering it as “the (right) Way,” Pickthall as “a clear road,” and Shakir as “a course.”⁵ Evidently, though *the Qur’an* contains many an instruction on right living, it suggests no notion of a comprehensive compendium of legal prescriptions beyond *the Qur’an* itself. The primary linguistic meaning of *shari‘a* is therefore simply a way of living prescribed by God, and this “way” has been understood to be contained in *the Qur’an*.

The Qur’an, as *shari‘a*, has traditionally been interpreted by Muslim scholars through the lens of the prophetic way of life (the *sunna*), contained largely in the Hadith – the traditions considered by most Muslims to contain the words and behavior of the historical Muhammad. This process of deriving instructions for religious ritual and daily life through the interpretation of Qur’an and Hadith, accompanied with the principles of analogy (*qiyas*) and community consensus (*ijma‘*), is referred to by Muslim scholars as *fiqh* – the exercise of jurisprudence. When exploring

5 Irfan Ali (ed.), *Three Translations of the Koran (Al-Qur’an) side by side*, A Public Domain Book (accessed through Kindle). This comparative publication of three English translations of *the Qur’an* contains the extensively and repeatedly published versions of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*; Mohammed Marmaduke William Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*; and Muhammad Habib Shakir, *The Quran*.

a concept such as *taqiyya*, therefore, which belongs to the field of Islamic jurisprudence, our starting point is *the Qur'an*, as we seek to understand the origins of the doctrine, and then the *tafsir* (commentaries) compendia, as we seek to explore the reception and development of the Qur'anic concept in the tradition.

What of *taqiyya* in Islam? First, it should be noted that this concept is the subject of great controversy between Sunnis and Shiites within Islam itself. Therefore, defining the word simply in a negative way, and then assuming that it applies to all Muslims and all groups within Islam, is most definitely the wrong approach. The exact word form, *taqiyya*, does not occur in *the Qur'an*, and its derivatives mostly refer to an admonishment to “fear God” (*ittaqu Allah*), rather than to an invitation to dissimulation. Linguistically, the word means “prudence,” or “fear,” and thus derivatively the Arabic word *taqwa* is often used to translate English “piety,” in the sense of the “fear of God.” However, the doctrine of *taqiyya* is related to a number of other Qur'anic understandings as well. Given the controversial nature of the subject these days, and the connotations of hypocrisy that the doctrine of *taqiyya* may imply, it would be unfair to approach *taqiyya* without a brief reference to the Qur'an's teaching on a certain group of people which it calls the *munafiqun*. The word, both in common parlance today and in most English translations of *the Qur'an*, is rendered as “the hypocrites.” The root meaning, however, judging from the various Qur'anic contexts where the term occurs, seems to suggest “a

group decried in *the Qur'an* as outward Muslims who are secretly unsympathetic to the cause of Muslims and actively seek to undermine the Muslim community.”⁶ “Hypocrisy” has therefore become an apt translation for the word *nifaq*.

Nifaq is repeatedly decried in *the Qur'an*, with the Arabic word *munafiqun* occurring over thirty times. In fact, the entire sixty-third *surah* (Arabic word for Qur'anic “chapter”) is entitled *surat al-munafiqun*. *Nifaq* in *the Qur'an* is a grave sin, and almost in every occurrence, it is followed with a promise of eternal hell-fire. This is important to keep in mind as we approach the topic of *taqiyya*. In the opening verse of *sura* 33 (*al-Ahzab*), God's command to Muhammad to fear him (*ittaqi Allah*) is immediately followed by a warning not to obey the unbelievers (*al-kafirin*) and the *munafiqin*. If *the Qur'an* is so condemning about *nifaq*, we must not, therefore, be too quick to accept that it would condone a perpetual practice of hypocrisy under the guise of Muslim *taqiyya*.

One verse which is often cited by those who accuse Muslims of only pretending to be friends with non-Muslims while holding a hidden agenda is found in *surat Al-Imran* (3) 28:

The believers should not take unbelievers as allies in preference to believers. Anyone who does that will completely isolate himself from God, unless you are seeking protection.

6 Devin Stewart, “Dissimulation in Sunni Islam and Morisco *Taqiyya*,” in *Al-Qantara* XXXIV 2, julio-diciembre 2013, 449.

God warns you to beware of Him, God is our ultimate destination.

This verse, in reality, is not a prohibition for Muslims to have non-Muslim friends, and even less Christian or Jewish friends. Indeed, *the Qur'an* in many places encourages friendship with the “People of the Book” – an expression always understood to be a reference to Jews and Christians. Islam even permits intermarriage with the “People of the Book” – albeit Muslim men with Jewish or Christian women but not the other way around – without forcing the wife to become a Muslim. The prohibition in the preceding verse is of forming alliances with non-Muslims in times of war, in such a way that could harm the Muslim community. It does not speak of everyday alliances, but of alliances only in times of war. *Tafsir at-Tabari*, one of the tenth century AD’s most respected commentaries on *the Qur'an*, explains it as such, and specifically with reference to the wars of Muhammad’s early community against the pagans of the city of Mecca.⁷ At-Tabari affirms that, in times of war, Muslims are not to take unbelievers as allies. At such times, however, they are permitted to pretend alliance, so long as it could not be harmful to Islam. But he also affirms that friendships are permitted in everyday life with non-Muslims for the purpose of mutuality (Ar. *musana’ā*) and

7 See *Tafsir at-Tabari*, <http://altafsisr.com/Tafasir.asp?tmadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=28&tDisplay=yes&Page=1&Size=1&LanguageId=1>, (accessed 21 March 2017).

The commentary is available entirely at this website in the Arabic language. The English rendering and paraphrase is mine.

good neighborliness (Ar. *mukhalaqa*).

In *surat an-Nahl* (16) 106–110, we find one of the most cited passages with reference to the practice of *taqiyya*:

Whoever denies God after having once believed, (except for anyone who is forced to deny God while his heart remains true to his faith) – he who willingly opens up his heart to disbelief will have the wrath of God upon them and a grievous punishment awaiting them. (106) That is because they favored this worldly life over the Hereafter, and because God will not guide unbelieving people. (107) The ones whose hearts, ears and eyes are sealed by God – it is they who are the heedless. (108) No doubt they will be doomed in the life to come. (109) As for those who migrated after they were persecuted and who then struggled and persevered, to them your Lord is so very forgiving, a purveyor of mercy! (110)

In this verse, we find instruction for those who believed in Islam, but then as a result of force denied their faith. *The Qur'an* reserves for such people two possible fates. Those who deny with their tongue while still believing in their hearts have committed no wrong. Whereas those who deny God with their tongue and dwell in their unbelief in their hearts will be punished in eternity. At-Tabari's commentary explains that this verse was revealed with reference to a certain Ammar b. Yasir, who had remained in

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Mecca after Muhammad had migrated to Medina with his early followers. After he and his family were imprisoned and tortured by the Meccans, he denied his Muslim faith, though his father and mother refused to do so and were executed as a result. According to the Muslim traditions noted by at-Tabari, *the Qur'an*, through the revelation of this passage, acquits him of any permanent wrong, because after Muhammad enquired of his faith, he affirmed that he had never abandoned it in his heart.

This is a typical case of *taqiyya* in the Muslim tradition and the most common. Islam, then, permits its adherents to dissimulate their faith if doing otherwise would cost them their life, so long as they continue to be steadfast in their heart. The practice is by no means sanctioned in any or all situations at the discretion of Muslims.

HISTORICAL AND CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS AND PRACTICES OF *TAQIYYA*

Devin Stewart agrees with the definition of *taqiyya* that I have presented, pointing out that it

permits a legally responsible believer to perform certain acts under duress that would ordinarily be forbidden or to omit certain acts that would ordinarily be obligatory.⁸

8 Stewart, "Dissimulation," 448.

Therefore, in practice *taqiyya* has been commonly used in Muslim history mostly among oppressed minority groups. Though, as we have seen from the exegesis of at-Tabari (which is vastly followed by the majority Sunni exegetical tradition), *taqiyya* is a doctrine endorsed by mainstream Islam, in practice it has been used most frequently by minority Shiite communities persecuted under Sunni governments.

Helpful insight into the validity and practice of *taqiyya* by Muslims historically and today is found in an article at the website <https://www.al-islam.org>. It is a Shiite website, and therefore particularly insightful when it comes to the issue of *taqiyya*, since the doctrine is often attributed – wrongly – to the Shiites exclusively, particularly by Sunnis who hold a polemical discourse against them. However, as we have seen above, *taqiyya* is by no means an exclusively Shiite doctrine. It finds its roots rather vaguely in *the Qur'an*, but Sunni commentators have elaborated positively on the doctrine, based on such verses. In this article, the author asserts that the practice of *taqiyya*, as I have elaborated above, is permitted only in cases where the life or limb of a Muslim is at stake, and that only when it is judged that the practice of dissimulation will not ultimately be more harmful to the Muslim community than the proclamation of the truth. In the latter case, Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite, would have to affirm their position in truth, even if it leads to their own demise. I retain here a few citations from major Shiite authorities which

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the author of the article mentions, as a means of elucidating the correct understanding of the doctrine in practice.

In his book *'Aqa'id al-Imamiyya* (The Doctrines of Imamiyya [a common appellation of Shiism]), Muhammad Ridha al-Mudhaffar (1904–1964) affirms,

It is not mandatory to practice it (*al-Taqiyya*) at all times; on the contrary, it is permissible, and sometimes necessary, to abandon it (*al-Taqiyya*) altogether; as in the case where revealing the truth will further the cause of the religion, and provide a direct service to Islam; and (when the revealing of the truth is such that it constitutes) a *jihad* (striving) for (Islam's) sake; (verily,) in such a situation, wealth and life should be forsaken. Furthermore, *al-Taqiyya* is prohibited in instances wherein the killing of innocent people and the spread of corruption will result; and in cases wherein the marring of the religion will result, and/or a significant harm will befall the Muslims, either by leading them astray or corrupting and oppressing them.

According to this statement, *taqiyya* is not something which is encouraged at all times, but rather is permitted in certain circumstances when practicing it will not lead to a greater ill. The question that should be asked, therefore, is not when *taqiyya* is not permitted, as though it were an encouraged practice in all

instances, but rather when is *taqiyya* permitted. Accordingly, it is only permitted when it will not bring harm on the Muslim community, and when practicing it will not lead to some harm coming upon innocent people.

Imam Khomeini (1902–1989) argued in a similar way that “It is not right to resort to dissimulation on every issue, small and big. Dissimulation was legislated to preserve one’s life or others from damage on subsidiary issues of the laws. But if Islam in its entirety is in danger, then there is no place for dissimulation and for silence.”⁹ Famous Shiite Qur’anic commentator Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaei (1903–1981) further defines the legitimate circumstances of practicing *taqiyya* with the following injunctions:

The exact extent of danger which would make permissible the practice of *Taqiyya* has been debated among different Shi’a scholars. In our view point, the practice of *Taqiyya* is permitted if there is definite danger facing one’s own life or the life of one’s family, or the possibility of the loss of the honor and virtue of one’s wife or of other female members of the family, or the danger of the loss of one’s material belongings to such an extent as to cause complete destitution and prevent a man from being able to continue to support himself and his family.

9 The citation is found in the same article on *Taqiyya* at the www.al-islam.org website.

I hope to have shown clearly, even if briefly, that based on the text of *the Qur'an* and its official interpreters, as well as on the writings of contemporary Muslim scholars, we cannot confirm the impression widely-held these days that, any time a Muslim speaks and behaves positively towards non-Muslims, they are being hypocritical and hiding a stealthy agenda. But this exploration leads us to further reaching implications from the church's missiological viewpoint.

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

One might rightly ask, what benefit is there in a Christian defending such a doctrine as *taqiyya*? For indeed communicating false information and deceit, whether with good or bad intentions, is not a familiar practice – nor is it sanctioned – from the perspective of a New Testament worldview. My explanation of the concept of *taqiyya* in defense of Muslims is not done with the motivation of promoting this Muslim doctrine as an acceptable practice. But from my perspective, this article is first of all written with the intent of guarding us from bearing false witness. Would it not represent *taqiyya* on our part to use a Muslim belief against Islam and Muslims by promoting a partial understanding of it? Are those of us dissimulating parts of the true meaning of *taqiyya* not themselves practicing the very doctrine which they claim to

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be exposing? Therefore, judging Islam and all Muslims through a partial understanding of a Muslim doctrine in order to serve the purpose of antagonizing our world against Islam is never justifiable for followers of Christ, the Prince of Peace and reconciler of our world.

My second motivation for writing the present piece was in order to dispel the persistent fear that non-Muslim societies have developed towards Muslims. For the church in Muslim lands, as well as for the church in countries where Muslims are in the minority, fear only gives rise to more suspicion and eventually to more conflict that leads to violence in our communities. The church globally is called to bear witness to the mission of God, a mission of love, peacemaking, and reconciliation. This article is a call to Christians everywhere to get rid of their fears. Do not fear your Muslim neighbors. Do not accuse them of hypocrisy, in false witness to the truth. Invite them into your households and communities of faith by practicing biblical hospitality. Show them what good neighbors your Lord has made you into. Testify to them about the Living Word. Show them the redemptive power of a self-giving God who has redeemed us so that we would be willing to lay down our own lives for their sake. Befriend your Muslim neighbors and love them to the point where they will recognize that the way of Christ is the way of Truth, which alone leads to life – a life of abundant goodwill in the present world, and of eternity in the coming Kingdom of God.

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■ Abstract

This article provides a brief treatment of the doctrine of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, in Islam. Concerned primarily with current accusations raised rather brashly against Muslims, according to which the *taqiyya* is supposed to be a common daily practice that they implement in their lives, making them largely unworthy of trust, the present article seeks to bring some clarification into the matter. Given the brevity required for this article, we will content ourselves with a brief survey of the concept in *the Qur'an* and in Islamic *Tafsir*, followed with a short exploration of the way that *taqiyya* has been understood by a few major authorities in Shiite Islam, the group most often associated with the doctrine. The article will close with a brief missiological reflection on some implications of a proper understanding of the doctrine for the church today.