In 1994, Husayn Ali Qambar, a Kuwaiti Shi'i, aban-
donated Islam and joined the Evangelical Church. The news of this conversion caused quite a sensation in Kuwait, as such a move is practically unheard of in the Arabian Peninsula. Instead of keeping a low pro-
file, as is the custom amongst converts in the Middle
East, Qambar officially declared his apostasy. He agreed to meet with the press and appeared in photos wearing a small silver cross around his neck and holding a Bible in his hand. To
the question of why he had decided to become Chris-
tian, Qambar candidly answered ‘I have found God
elsewhere’.

When it became clear that he would not
withdraw his decision, Qambar was sued for
apostasy. The case was tried in the Shri
Court of First Instance, and in May 1996
Qambar was officially declared an apostate.
By then, he had already lost his family, his
home, and his job. Qambar who is employed by
the Kuwaiti government against the ruling, but shortly before the ap-
peal was to be reviewed, he was granted a
visas to the United States, which he
left.

I r t i d a d

Liberalism East and West

Amongst the Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle
Vegetable rights and liberties; the third one has led

the association of liberalism with secular-
ism, politically expressed through the sepa-
ration of religion and state. In the

Kuwaiti context liberalism is primarily

understood in the latter sense. While
rights and liberties are also important, it is
not their employment per se that makes a
Kuwaiti liberal. Rather, it is the embrace-
ment of the third tenet, the separation be-
tween din and dole. As the term is used
here, a liberal is a person who accepts the
freedom of religion as a personal matter and the
public sphere as a religiously neutral space. ‘Liber-
ism’ is therefore commonly used in oppo-
sition to ‘Islamicism’, the latter term refer-
ing to people for whom religion pervades and
shapes every aspect of social life. Every-
where in the Middle East there are states, Is-
lamists and liberals differ in their views on
the relationship between religion, public
life and politics. Kuwait is no exception. When it
comes to apostasy, however, a
strong consensus can be found across the
liberal-Islamic axis. Most people reacted
with anger and dismay at Qambar’s conver-
sion; even local human rights activists per-
ceived it as an offence that called for some
punishment. While there were only a
few demands for the death penalty, most
people accepted unquestioningly the im-
plementation of the civil sanctions.

Protecting the significant community

May be tempting for Westerners to see
in the apostasy law yet another instance of
the incompatibility between the illiberal
Muslim East and the liberal West, or instead
the ultimate vindication of the oriental
‘absences’ thesis. To assess the situation in
this context is to miss the point. What we are
dealing with here is not so much the
tension between liberal and illiberal cultures as a political
and ethical challenge common to all modern societies: How can the political
community be protected against real or per-
ceived threats while inflicting as little
as possible on basic individual rights? From
this perspective, the difference between
Muslim and Western societies lies in the de-
finition of the community under threat
rather than in the measures they evolve to
thwart this threat.

All communities – whether ethnically, reli-
geously or nationally defined – dispose of
resources to ensure their existence on the allegiance of their
members; they are therefore keen to watch
over their boundaries and the movements across
such boundaries. Not all large-scale com-
munities achieve the same degree of signif-
ificance, nor are they all mutually exclusive. To many in the Middle East, the mos-
sic community, the umma throws its doors wide
open to incoming members but severely re-
stricts the right to exit. By contrast, nation-
states generally tend to be lenient on the
right to exit while keeping a particularly vig-

Note

1. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, e.g. Southeast
Asia, apostasy is treated with greater leniency.
3. I have given a detailed account of some of the
liberals’ reactions in my article entitled ‘Apostasy, death and the liberal predicament’
forthcoming.
6. Ahn Nga Longva is associate professor of social
anthropology at the University of Bergen, Norway.
E-mail: ahnlongva@us.no