

# “There is no Compulsion in Religion”

(Al Qur’ān, 2:256)

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## Visit to Egypt and the Lawsuit Before the Supreme Court of Egypt

It is very interesting<sup>1</sup> to go back home after a long time and compare the changes in the attitudes of people and the situation in general. This time I stayed in my village<sup>2</sup> and I found a big change in the views of the people. As soon as I arrived in the village, the people sought my opinion on some topics, and I had the chance to climb the *mimbar*<sup>3</sup> on Friday, something which I had last done when I was a primary school student in Al Azhar. I found that all the controversial issues, especially in the context of Islam that we hear about here, are stirring passions there also.

The questions vexing the minds of the people there include, “Does Islam prohibit shaking hands with women?” People are asking about the position of women in Islam: “Is she considered a second-class citizen, especially in light of the Qur’anic verse ‘Men are the guardians of women?’” These are the same questions with which we are faced here. But there is some other trend I noticed also. When you take the subway in

Cairo, you’ll find lots of young men utilizing their commuting time of half an hour or one hour reading their little Qur’an. I observed this repeatedly. It means that Islam is still in the hearts of the people in spite of whatever we see or hear of other things which we don’t like, considering that American culture is pervasive in Egypt now because CNN is in the bedrooms.

In my village, we had no grade four when I was in the school and I had to study grade four in a neighboring town. I found, on the one hand, that in my village there are now two primary schools, two preparatory schools, a high school, and an Institute of Islamic Studies which is a branch of Al Azhar. On the other hand, there are numerous dish antennas on the rooftops for satellite television, something which we cannot afford here. So, a visit to Muslim countries nowadays will show that there is a clash of opposites – Islamic values clashing with, or coexisting with, trends that are on a collision course with Islam.

What attracted my attention was a case being argued before the Supreme Court of Egypt. The suit involved a man<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Imam starts talking in a soft and sad tone reflecting on his visit to Egypt – February 1998

<sup>2</sup> Al Balashone

<sup>3</sup> The platform from where the imam delivers the Friday sermon in a mosque

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<sup>4</sup> Nasr Abu Zaid

who has written a book. The book,<sup>5</sup> while not in the style of Salman Rushdie’s book, nevertheless cuts the faith of Islam at its roots. He admits that though the Qur’an is the sacred word from God delivered to Muhammad through the Angel Jibreel, it is not sacred anymore once Muhammad expounds the message, for then it has become human words. As a result, the public is divided into two groups. One group says: “This man is *murtadd*<sup>6</sup> and the punishment for *riddah*<sup>7</sup> is to chop his head off.” The other group says: “God created us free and He honored us by giving us a brain to think and this is the thinking of this man so he is free to think the way he does.”

That case was tried in the court at different levels until it reached the Supreme Court of Egypt, and it has ramifications. One ramification is that if this man is *murtadd* and, therefore, no longer Muslim, is his wife legitimate for him, or should she divorce him since he is *kafir*?<sup>8</sup> So another case was filed<sup>9</sup> in the Supreme Court to divorce his wife from him by force. However, the woman stated, “I love him, I don’t want a divorce.” I did not read the details of the case, but I have a cousin lawyer who gave me a copy of the court documents and I am going to study them since it makes for very interesting reading. But what I would like to come to is that there is a very important direction in Islam in Chapter Al-Baqarah,<sup>10</sup> verse number 256. There are some Muslim people who quote Qur’an out of context, or quote hadith<sup>11</sup> which the Prophet never uttered, and, as a result, they argue. We need to understand what *Lā ikrāha fī-Deen*<sup>12</sup> means. [Imam quotes 2:256 in Arabic. The English translation is:]

“There shall be no coercion in matters of faith (*Lā ikrāha fī-Deen*). Distinct has now become the right way from the wrong way of error: hence, he who rejects the powers of evil and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailling, which shall never give way: for God is all-hearing, all-knowing.”

It is a great principle in Islam: No enforcement to follow a certain religion. Religion is a choice. But some

Muslims not only quote Qur’anic verses out of context but then, also, impose their own thinking and interpretation on others. For example, that verse, [Imam translates] “O you who believe! Fight the unbelievers who are neighboring to you and show them your toughness...”<sup>13</sup> when this verse is quoted out of context, it results in the meaning that “every kafir must be fought until he converts to Islam.” And I remember this verse being quoted in this way when we were in the old mosque.<sup>14</sup> Three Iranian students from the University of Toledo came to me and asked: “What type of religion are you preaching here?” It was in the days following the new revolution of Khomeini<sup>15</sup> and the young Iranian men at that time thought that they were in control of the whole world. I didn’t blame them because when Gamal Abdel Nasser became the President following the revolution in Egypt in 1952, I myself thought, being a young man at the time, that we were going to conquer all the world. In the same manner, these young men were taken in by the revolution of Khomeini. I asked them what type of Islam they wanted us to preach here. They said: “Bring any kafir and order him to say *Ashhadu Allah ilaha illallah wa ashhadu-unna Muhammad-an ‘abdu-hu wa rasool-lu hu*<sup>16</sup> and if he refuses, chop his head off.” This was the thinking of some people in Toledo. There are quite a few verses in the Qur’an, which, when read out of context, will lead to that meaning. But when you take Islam in its totality, when you take the verses in their proper contexts, then, Islam is very clear, very easy and it is characterized by reason.

Take, for example this verse [Imam quotes 9:5 in Arabic. The English translation is:] “And so, when the sacred months are over, slay those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God wherever you may come upon them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place.” That is another verse frequently quoted out of context. But this verse must be read together with the *three preceding verses* of the same sura<sup>17</sup> and with verses from Chapter Baqarah which talk about the same topic. Then you will know that this verse [9:5] relates to warfare *already in progress* with people who have become guilty of a breach of treaty

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<sup>5</sup> *Al Khitabi Ad-Dini*

<sup>6</sup> One who has abandoned the Islamic faith

<sup>7</sup> Apostasy

<sup>8</sup> Unbeliever

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Abd As-Sabūr Shaheen, a scholar from Al-Azhar, was instrumental in filing the court cases.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 2 in the Qur’an

<sup>11</sup> A report or account of what the Prophet said.

<sup>12</sup> “There is no compulsion in religion”

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<sup>13</sup> 9:123

<sup>14</sup> On Bancroft Street, Toledo, Ohio

<sup>15</sup> Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini

<sup>16</sup> “I bear witness that there is no god but One God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His bondman and messenger”

<sup>17</sup> Chapter

## “There is no Compulsion in Religion”

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obligations and of aggression. And don't forget that the verse ends with “Yet if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues, let them go their way: for, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.” And in Chapter Baqarah the verses related to this topic<sup>18</sup> end with “If they desist, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace”, “If they desist, then all hostility shall cease...”

“Yet if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues, let them go their way...” This clearly implies that they converted to Islam, but *Lā ikrāha fī-Deen* – this great principle in Islam lays down categorically that any attempt at a forcible conversion of unbelievers is prohibited. You cannot demand that a non-Muslim people who were defeated in war convert to Islam. They may “desist” but not convert to Islam because the next verse says, “And if a *mushrikeen*<sup>19</sup> wants to become your neighbor then grant him protection and afterwards escort him to his home to make sure he reaches safely.” So, he is free to accept Islam or not. [Imam quotes verse 18:29 in Arabic] That is a verse in the Qur'an. It's as easy as that! [The English translation is:] “And say: ‘The truth has now come from your Sustainer: let, then, him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.’” That is what the Qur'an says: Muhammad, tell the truth from your God and allow the choice to the people; whoever wants to believe let him believe, who ever wants to disbelieve, let him disbelieve. Another verse says, *Lā ikrāha fī-Deen* – no enforcement to follow a certain religion. And another Qur'anic verse says [Imam quotes 41:46 in Arabic. The English translation is:] “Whoever does what is just and right, does so for his own good; and whoever does evil, it is against his own soul: and never does God do the least wrong to His creatures.”

That idea of free choice – stressed in the above verses – means that you weigh the alternatives and then select what you see fit for yourself. That is called reasoning in logic, and rationality in sociology and psychology, meaning that you consider the alternatives and choose what is best for you. This free choice is given to man because he accepted it while all other creatures refused it. [Imam quotes 33:72 in Arabic. The English translation is:] “Verily, We did offer the trust of reason and volition to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains: but they refused to bear it because they were afraid of it. Yet man took it up – for, verily, he has always been prone to be

most wicked, most foolish.” This power of choice or reasoning is called *amaanah* – a trust – and on this basis there will be punishment and reward. [Imam quotes verse 33:35 in Arabic and then explains:] In this verse, specifically, the Qur'an talks about every item in pairs. We find that these verses put males and females on an equal footing in regard to thinking and free choice. It means that the *halal*<sup>20</sup> is clear and the *haram*<sup>21</sup> is clear. So, there is no need to enforce religion. [The English translation of verse 33:35 is:]

“Verily, for all men and women who have surrendered themselves to God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves before God, and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for all of them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.

[Imam quotes<sup>22</sup> Arabic, then explains:] God is very near to those who have faith (اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا); God is the protector or *wali*<sup>23</sup> of those who have faith, taking them out of darkness into the light – whereas the protector or wali of those who are bent on denying the truth are the powers of evil (*shaytān*) that take them out of the light into the darkness.

*Muwālāh*<sup>24</sup> means a pact, or an agreement, or a treaty between two people, two groups, two tribes, or two nations to support each other: I support you when you need me and you support me when I need you. Making pacts and entering into agreements takes place all the time even until now. We hear about countries that are entering into agreements, political, economical or military agreements to support and defend one another. That idea of *muwālāh* existed before the Qur'an was revealed so the Qur'an used that terminology and concept to explain that there is a *muwālāh* between the pious people and their Creator. *Wali* means protector or supporter so اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ means God has entered into *muwālāh* – a pact or

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<sup>18</sup> 2:192-194

<sup>19</sup> Pagan/one who makes partners to God/unbeliever

<sup>20</sup> That which is permitted or allowed

<sup>21</sup> That which is forbidden or sinful

<sup>22</sup> 2:257

<sup>23</sup> This is the transliteration of the Arabic word underlined in the preceding quote which is only a part of verse 2:257

<sup>24</sup> Is derived from the word *wali*

agreement with those who have faith and are pious – to be their Supporter and Protector in their time of need. These are the people who seek the support of Allah by following the rules of Allah; as a result God is their *wali* and He takes them from the darkness to the light through His rules. On the other side are those who reject faith, and their *wali* is anyone other than God and their job is to take them from the light into the darkness.

Just recently a magazine arrived here last week. In it there is an article criticizing about four, five, or six Muslim scholars in Egypt, who are graduates of Al Azhar, and the article is cutting them into pieces. The reason is that they are using their brain and their reasoning when they interpret the Qur’an and the hadith. And the writer of the article says: “The brain could make a mistake but the text which is written will not make a mistake” implying that we should follow what is written in the books and stop thinking and not use our brain.

This reminds us of what I have said before and am repeating it today. There are two schools of thought nowadays: *Madrassa-til Naql*,<sup>25</sup> and *Madrassa-til Aql*.<sup>26</sup> Geographically speaking, the School of Reasoning extends from Egypt to Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The School of Text that preaches against the use of thinking exists in the Gulf States. They have some followers in Pakistan and India also, although both schools are to be found in India and in Pakistan. The problems we are having in America nowadays are due to the differences in thinking between people who belong to these two schools of thought. Take, for example, the controversy that revolves around the issue of bank interest. The Qur’an has

a clear-cut verse – *Ayāt Muhkamāt* – to say *riba*<sup>27</sup> is haram. It does not need any thinking. But what is *riba*? This is where the argument lies among the ulama.<sup>28</sup> Is the interest rate charged by the bank, today, *riba*? Some people say, yes, it is *riba*. Others say, no, it is not *riba*. This shaykh<sup>29</sup> says it is halal, while that shaykh says it is haram. Whom to follow? *Follow whomever you like!* Because there is no clear-cut ruling on what constitutes *riba*. It is up to your brain. If you feel that the interest of the bank is haram, don’t deal with it. If you feel that it is not, deal with it. And I am not going to criticize either side because there is ambiguity here and that is why the brain should be working.

The Qur’an is full of verses like:

يَا أُوتُوا الْأَبَابَ<sup>30</sup>

لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ<sup>31</sup>

لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ<sup>32</sup>

لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ<sup>33</sup>. Many, many Qur’anic verses end in that fashion to impress upon us that we should utilize our brain. The brain, with its power to reason and to think, has been created only for human beings and not for any other creature, and I am giving these examples to show that I, too, am, interpreting by using my powers of reasoning.

The main point is that there is no enforcement in matters of religion.

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<sup>27</sup> Usury

<sup>28</sup> Scholars

<sup>29</sup> Religious leader

<sup>30</sup> O you who have brains

<sup>31</sup> That you may learn to use your reason

<sup>32</sup> That you may reflect and remain conscious (of Him)

<sup>33</sup> That they may remember or bethink themselves

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<sup>25</sup> The School of the Text

<sup>26</sup> The School of Reasoning