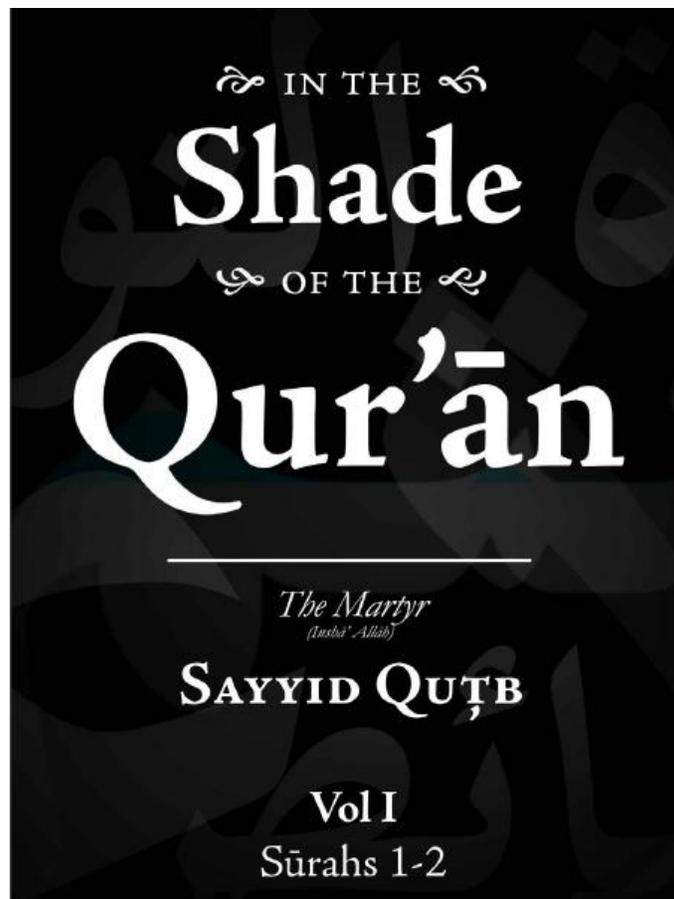


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**Sayyid Qutb – Tafsir (Commentary on the Qur'an) about verse 2:256**

transgression. He will truly fear God and appreciate His majesty and power, and will seek to be more humble towards God and less haughty in dealing with his fellow human beings.

Here again, we see how a tenet of faith is immediately translated into a code of conduct in real life.

### **Freedom of Belief Guaranteed**

Having outlined some of the most essential and detailed aspects of faith, and having precisely defined the status of God and the nature of His relationship with the rest of creation, the *sūrah* goes on to describe the proper behaviour of the believers as they adopt this faith and pass it on to others, and assume the leadership of mankind.

*There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error. He who rejects false deities and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a most firm support that never breaks. God hears all and knows all. God is the Patron of the believers. He leads them out of darkness into the light. As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false deities who lead them out of light into darkness. Those are the ones destined for the fire, therein to abide. (Verses 256-257)*

Islam looks at religious faith as a matter of conviction, once the basic facts are provided and explained. Faith is never a matter of coercion or compulsion. To achieve this conviction, Islam addresses the human being in totality. It addresses the human mind and intellect, human common sense, emotions and feelings, the innermost human nature, and the whole human conscious being. It resorts to no coercive means or physical miracles that confound the mind or that are beyond human ability to rationalize and comprehend.

By the same token, Islam never seeks converts through compulsion or threats or pressure of any kind. It deploys facts, reasoning, explanation and persuasion.

In contrast, we find that Christianity, the last revealed religion before Islam, was imposed by force after Constantine, the Roman Emperor, made Christianity the official religion throughout his empire. He adopted the same brutal means his predecessors had used against Christian minorities. These were not restricted to subjects who did not convert to Christianity, but were also used against Christians who would not accept the official doctrine sanctioned by the emperor.

Islam came to declare and establish the great universal principle that: *“There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error.”* (Verse 256) This reflects the honour God has reserved for man and the high regard in which

man's will, thought and emotions are held, and the freedom he is granted to choose his beliefs, and the responsible position he is afforded to be judge of his own actions. Here lies the essence of human emancipation which 20th-century authoritarian and oppressive ideologies and regimes have denied mankind. Modern man has been deprived of the right to choose and live other than according to what is dictated by the state, using the full force of its colossal machinery, laws and powers. People are today given the choice only to adhere to the secular state system, which does not allow for a belief in God as the Creator and Master of the world, or to face annihilation.

Freedom of belief is the most basic right that identifies man as a human being. To deny anyone this right is to deny him or her humanity. Freedom of belief also implies the freedom to express and propagate one's belief without fear of threat or persecution; otherwise, that freedom is hollow and meaningless.

Islam, undoubtedly the most enlightened view of life and the world, establishing a most sensible human and social system, takes the lead in declaring this most fundamental principle. It teaches its adherents, before anyone else, that they are forbidden to compel others to embrace Islam. This Islamic approach stands in total contrast to that of man-made systems and regimes which, despite all their inherent shortcomings, impose their beliefs and policies by the force of the state and deny their opponents the right to dissent or even live.

The Arabic text, using a generic negative, imparts a negation of the very idea of compulsion. When it comes to matters of belief, not only should these never be imposed by coercion or compulsion, but there cannot even be an option to use such a means of conversion or persuasion.

The *sūrah* reinforces the principle with a gentle, but firm, touch to arouse the human conscience and guide it along the path of enlightenment, saying simply: "*The right way is henceforth distinct from error.*" (Verse 256)

Belief in God is the right path man should seek and follow, and denial of His existence and sovereignty is the path of error that man should avoid and guard against. Belief in God is indeed a blessing. It gives the human mind a clear view of the world around, and gives the heart peace and assurance. It sets for man higher goals and noble concerns and aspirations, and for society as a whole a sound system of values and ideals that improve the quality of life. A moment's reflection is sufficient to verify the truth of this Qur'ānic statement) which could only be rejected by the ignorant and the foolish who would choose cynicism, confusion and insecurity over peace, certainty and high aspirations.

The *sūrah* elaborates the theme further, saying: "*He who rejects false deities and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a most firm support that never breaks.*" (Verse 256)

It is false deities that must be rejected, while faith must be reserved for God, who alone deserves faith and trust.

The Arabic term for 'false deities' is *ṭāghūt*, meaning tyranny, a word denoting anything or anyone that takes hold of the mind or suppresses the truth, or transgresses the laws and limits set by God. It refers to forces and systems that disregard the divine religious, moral, social and legal order and operate in this life on values and principles not sanctioned by God or derived from His guidance and teachings. To resist such forces, in all their manifestations, and to believe in God's oneness is the only certain path to success and salvation.

The *sūrah* presents us, yet again, with another vivid image to express an abstract truth. Faith in God provides the believer with a strong and unshakeable support that guarantees him certain liberation. In its essence, faith is a recognition of the most fundamental truth, the existence of God, upon which all reality stands, and acknowledgement of the laws God has laid down for the world and by which the world exists and operates. Believers who hold to God's Guidance are assured of never drifting away from God's path or losing their way.

*"God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 256) He hears what is uttered and knows what is in people's innermost souls. Those who believe in God will never be denied justice or be disappointed.

The *sūrah* then goes on to present a vivid and graphic scene depicting the two paths of guidance and error. It indicates how God kindly and gently takes the believers by the hand and leads them out of the darkness, into the light, and how the false deities sponsor the unbelievers and lead them, too, by the hand, but out of the light into the darkness.

It is a fascinating and inspiring scene, full of life and imagination, and far more eloquent and effective than any polemic or rational exposition. One would be hard pressed to find an alternative way of expressing the same ideas without losing spirit, rhythm, and dynamism. The Qur'ānic style is not only very articulate and beautiful, it is also precise as it describes, in the original Arabic syntax, faith and belief in the singular as light, and describes disbelief as darkness, in the plural. This is a succinct, profound and enduring statement.

Faith is light that permeates man's soul and conscience to radiate from within his being and illuminate all things, ideas and values around him. It gives the believer a clear vision and a steady and confident understanding that enable him to identify, discern and choose. It lights his route to God, His laws and teachings, putting man in perfect concord with the world around him. He proceeds through life in total harmony, free of all conflict and at peace with his human nature.

The light of faith and truth is one and unique, leading to the one straight path;

while darkness, in the sense of evil, can take various shapes and forms. There is darkness in caprice and uncontrolled desire; in deviation, conceit and tyranny; and there is darkness in abject acquiescence and servility; as well as in ostentation and hypocrisy, in lechery and greed, and in cynicism and scepticism. All these forms of darkness stem from the evil of abandoning God's guidance and submitting to powers and laws other than His. Leaving the light that radiates from God plunges man into darkness and despondency, and the ultimate end is even worse: "*As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false deities who lead them out of light into darkness. Those are the people destined for the fire, therein to abide.*" (Verse 257)

The statement "*There shall be no compulsion in religion,*" raises the question of whether this principle can be reconciled with the obligatory duty of *jihād*, or taking up arms for the defence and protection of the faith, which Islam has openly advocated and the Qur'ān has established in verses such as: "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone.*" (Verse 193)

Some biased writers have accused Islam of double standards, claiming that it was spread and imposed by the sword while, at the same time, advocating non-coercion and freedom of religion. Others have been rather more insidious and used this argument apparently to defend Islam; but in fact they have undermined the very meaning and significance of *jihād* in Islamic culture and history. Their tempting, but specious, arguments lead to the conclusion that *jihād* is a matter of history and is no longer valid or necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Many Orientalists approach this subject with hostility and a tendency to distort and belittle the dynamic aspects of Islam. They perceive Islam as a threat, and seek to resist and destroy it. In effect, they argue that the Muslim peoples' conflict with Western colonialism was dictated by trade, raw materials and power, rather than by religion, a view which would make *jihād* totally unnecessary.

There is no denying that, throughout its long history, Islam has advocated the use of force, not to impose its doctrines, but to guarantee certain objectives that are necessary for human prosperity.

Islam advocates *jihād* to protect its followers against attacks and threats and to ensure their security and freedom. As indicated in Verse 193 of this *sūrah*, Islam considers religious persecution and any threat to religion more dangerous for the future stability and existence of Islam than actual war. According to this great Islamic principle, the survival and prosperity of the faith take precedence over the preservation of human life itself. Islam justifies the defence and protection of life and possessions by force, and allows even greater justification for the use of force in

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<sup>1</sup> A leading exponent of this argument is Sir T.W. Arnold, in his book *The Preaching of Islam*, Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, Lahore, Reprinted in 1968.

defence of the faith. Muslims have been the target of religious persecution on many occasions and in various parts of the world. In Spain, they, together with non-Catholic Christians, suffered waves of genocide and brutality, wiping them out of that part of Europe altogether. In Jerusalem and its surroundings, Muslims were the target of relentless Crusader campaigns designed to uproot Islam and destroy the Muslims. The Muslims resisted and fought, and prevailed, in the name of Islam sparing their land and people a fate similar to that of the Muslims in Spain. Today, Muslims continue to be the target of religious persecution under a host of Christian, Zionist and secular regimes in many parts of the world. This situation makes *jihād* an incumbent duty on Muslims.

Islam also advocates *jihād* to guarantee the right and freedom of expression and propagation of the faith. Islam has a comprehensive understanding of life. Its highly refined social order dwarfs all systems that have existed before or since. Its global message is addressed to all mankind. In order for individual human beings to make the choice of whether they believe in Islam or not, nothing should stand between them and God's message. They should in any way be prevented from having full and free access to it. Once they are informed, they are free to make their choice under no duress, pressure or coercion of any kind.

Of the many obstacles that stand between Islam and people, foremost are the tyrannical political regimes that oppress and persecute religious believers. Islam takes a clear stand against such regimes, striving to topple them. It urges its followers to try to replace them by tolerant and liberal ones that respect and guarantee religious freedom as well as freedom of expression. This remains an on-going objective of Islam, and the duty of *jihād* continues to be a valid and urgent obligation on Muslims.

Another objective of *jihād* is to establish the Islamic social order and defend it. It is an order that frees man from tyranny, in all its forms, by urging the submission of all to God, the supreme master of all. No single person, class or group has the right to dictate laws or moral standards to other people or control their lives through ideology or legislation. The authority of individuals or institutions can only be valid or legitimate if they are representing or implementing God's law, and have had that duty entrusted to them by the community. Individuals have no authority invested in them to introduce ethical or legal concepts, principles or rules on the basis of their own preferences, because that is the prerogative of God alone.

This is the basic Islamic principle upon which a truly civilized social and ethical order is built, guaranteeing individual freedom for every member of society, including non-Muslims. It protects their privacy and personal dignity and respects their civil and religious rights, regardless of creed or conviction. Under Islamic law, no one is compelled or coerced to convert to the religion of Islam.

Islam has justifiably urged its followers to strive for the establishment of this society and to stand firm against man's domination of his fellow human beings. Hence, the hostility and aggression with which tyrannical and totalitarian regimes have responded to Islam were inevitable. Also inevitable was the determination of Islam to stamp out such regimes and assert its legal, social, ethical, and economic world order. That notwithstanding, Islam undertakes to respect and guarantee the religious and personal freedom of everyone under its jurisdiction, in accordance with its ethical principles and social norms and regulations.

It is to continue the fight against religious tyranny and persecution, and establish the tolerant and magnanimous principles of Islam that *jihād* remains valid and necessary today.

It is clear, therefore, that Islam has not used force to impose its beliefs. Nor was it force, as some would have us believe, that has been responsible for the phenomenal success and spread of Islam. Its main objective has been the establishment of a stable society in which all citizens, including those who follow other religious creeds, may live in peace and security.

Power was essential for the survival and continuity of the Islamic order, and for the peace and security of its followers. *Jihād* has been, and continues to be, a significant and necessary means for the establishment and protection of Muslim society. Islam, by definition, is a comprehensive order for the organization of human life that must take root in the world, and power is needed to sustain and promote its existence. *Jihād* is the sinew of that power, without which it would not survive.

The principle of "*no compulsion in religion*," should be read in conjunction with another one that states: "*Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster, so that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, but of whom God is well aware.*" (8: 60)

These principles present the correct perspective of Islam from which its followers should view and understand it. Muslims need not be on the defensive nor have to justify Islam's stance, but should be confident and proud of its teachings and its history compared with those of all other cultures and philosophies. Muslims ought not to be taken in by those who claim to defend Islam but, in reality, only seek to undermine it and subvert the right of Muslims to strive to be powerful and to undertake *jihād* to protect their faith and spread its teachings to all mankind.

Those who stand in the way of Islam's progress are the real enemies of humanity who ought to be pursued, and whose efforts should be frustrated. This task falls upon the believers who have the benefit of God's grace and blessings which they are obliged to value and pass on to others.