

# Islam and the Freedom of Thought and Belief

---

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?">

This is a rather free translation of two lectures delivered by Martyr Mutahhari at the Husayniyyeh Irshad, Tehran, in the fall of 1969. They form part of a posthumously published collection consisting of an interview, speeches and notes, Pīramun-e Jamhuri-ye Islami, Tehran: Intisharat-e Sadra, 1st ed., Khurdad, 1364

## Lecture One

' No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. So whosoever disbelieves in taghut and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreaking; God is All-hearing.' Qur`an (2:256)

The freedom of belief and thought is one of social freedoms. It implies that man should be free in these vital aspects of his life and that there should be no obstacle in the way of his advancement and sojourns and no hurdle to the development of his capacities. One of the most venerable capacities in man, which he needs most intensely in order to develop freely, is his capacity for thought and belief, to put it provisionally (for later we will draw a distinction between them).

In fact, thought is the most important part of man's being that must be developed, and since its growth requires freedom—that is absence of an obstacle and hindrance—man stands in need of freedom. Nowadays also we observe that the so-called free-freedom of belief has become one of the most important global issues, especially ever since the publication of declarations of human rights. We read in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human rights: ...the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Here 'belief' includes social, political and religious beliefs. Hence the greatest aspiration of man is a world wherein everyone is free to express his belief and wherein everyone has a right to choose any belief and to express it freely, a world wherein there is no fear or poverty and where there is perfect security and economic welfare. Such a world has been declared as a human ideal, Article 19 of the declaration states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to

hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Here we want to examine this issue from an Islamic point of view, to see whether or not Islam defends the freedom of thought and belief. It is here that we must differentiate between thought and that which is often called 'belief' nowadays.

There is a difference between thought and belief. Thought is human faculty that arises in the intellect. Since man is a rational and thinking being, he has the ability to think and reflect about problems. By the means of his thought he can discover facts within the limits of his capacity, whether the mode of ratiocination is deductive and rationalistic or empirical. God, Almighty and Exalted, has given man the faculty of intellect with which he can reason, that is, discover the unknown. Man is born in ignorance as the noble Qur`anic verse declares:

He brought you forth, knowing nothing, from your mothers' wombs (16:78)

Man is born ignorant and has to become knowledgeable, through thought and study. To think is to use one's capacity for reasoning regarding a problem and to solve it in a scientific way. Can Islam, or any other authority for that matter, deny man the right to think? No, because it is a human necessity and an essential need of his humanity. Islam has not only acknowledged the right to think, it has declared thought to be one of man's duties. Reflection is an act of worship in Islam.

Since we are used to read only the Qur`an and we do not read other scriptures, we often fail to appreciate the great emphasis laid by the Qur`an on thought and reflection. You will not find any book, religious or secular, that has driven man towards thought and reflection to the extent of the Qur`an. Repeatedly, it asks one to think about all kinds of issues -concerning history, concerning creation, God, the prophets and prophets and so on. There are a large number of such instances in the Qur`an. Thought has even been considered a worship. You have often heard the various traditions of the Prophet of this kind:

An hour's reflection is better than a year's worship.

An hour's reflection is better than sixty years of worship.

An hour's reflection is better than seventy years of worship.

The variance in these statements, as pointed out by the 'Ulama' (scholars), refers to the different levels of reflection as well as its subjects. One kind of reflection makes man advance to the extent of a year's worship. Another type of reflection makes him advance to the extend of sixty or seventy year of worship. In our traditions it is stated that:

Most of the worship of Abu Dharr consisted of contemplation.

That is Abu Dharr-whom we consider to be next or equal to Salman, and about the two of them

we may say that no man after the Infallible Ones (the prophet, Fatima and the Twelve Imams) has had a faith like these two—worshipped God a lot, but most of his worship consisted of contemplation.

Apart from this, there is a principle in Islam concerning the doctrines of the faith that sets our religion apart from other creeds, in particular Christianity; Islam does not accept belief in its doctrine except through reflection and intellectual effort. That is, when it calls upon one to know God and be a monotheist, it requires one to furnish the reasons of his belief himself. From the viewpoint of Islam, it is a scientific and intellectual problem that of a teacher who says to his pupil, 'Go and solve this arithmetical problem yourself. You should know how to solve it. My solving it for you will not help you.' Islam states categorically the *La ilaha illallah* (There is no God except Allah) is a problem that one must solve with the help of his own reasoning. That I believe in *La ilaha illallah* and am able to apprehend its meaning is not sufficient for you. You should yourself confront this issue and solve the problem.

Muhammadun rasulullah (Muhammad is the Messenger of God) is the second 'pillar' (*rukn*) of Islam. This is also another problem that you must solve with the help of your own intellect. The same is true of resurrection and other doctrinal issues, though the solution of these two helps in the solution of the rest of problems. In any case, belief in the doctrines is, from the Islamic viewpoint, a matter that depends on independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), not on imitation (*taqlid*), and everyone must verify them for himself.

Hence this is the most compelling proof of the fact that Islam not only permits intellectual inquiry into its doctrines but regards it as an intellectual duty of everyone to reflect regarding the doctrines of his faith in order to understand to some extent that he has a creator, and that God is one, that He has sent messengers, that the Qur`an has been sent down by God, and that the Prophet has been sent by Him. Islam does not accept belief in these matters if it is a verbal declaration and pronounced without intellection.

It is here that the difference between Islam and Christianity—and even other faiths—becomes clear. The case of Christianity is quite the converse, in that the doctrines of the Christian creed are considered being beyond thought and reason. The Christians put it as a formula when they say that "this is the domain of faith, not that of reason. That is, they recognize separate domains for faith and reason.

They state that reasoning and intellection has its own function and faith and submission have a different function; you may reason if you want to, but you have no right to employ reasoning in the matters of faith. The domain of faith is the domain of submission; one has no right to reason in this matter. One can see how much these two positions differ. One of them

considers its doctrines as a prohibited zone for thought and intellect; the other not only does not declare it a prohibited zone but also requires the intellect to enter it, making it an essential condition for the acceptability of faith. This is what is meant by freedom of thought. Hence, from the viewpoint of Islam, one has a right to make a rational inquiry into such issues. Should some doubt occur to one's mind in his rational inquiry concerning God, prophet-hood or resurrection, he has a right to bring it to the attention of others and to ask them to resolve it. To question concerning doctrinal issues is an obligation.

The people used to put a lot of questions to the Prophet (S), 'Ali (A) and the other Imams (A) regarding these issues and they would answer them. Our books on polemical issues as well as other works indicate the extent to which Islam acknowledges the freedom of expression and the right to inquire and question. Islam encourages the spirit of inquiry, questioning and research. The more the numbers of doubts that occur to an inquiring mind, the closer does it ultimately get to the truth?

That was concerning the freedom of thought and inquiry. How about freedom of belief ('aqidah)? A`qidah' is derived from i`tiqad, which is derived from 'aqd, in`iqad, and so on, meaning 'to tie'. 'To knot' 'to congeal' and 'to be concluded'. One's heart may be 'tied' to something in two ways: either as a result of reasoning and thought, or as a result of emotional and irrational attachment. Most of the beliefs of people in the world are a result of irrational attachment, not reasoning.

Now the question that arises is, should people be free in respect of their irrational beliefs? It is these attachments, which create fanaticism, stagnation, apathy and passiveness in human beings and arrest the process of rational thinking. Wherever such beliefs are formed, their first consequence is to stop the free activity of thought. It is said that, 'the love of a thing makes man blind and deaf '. When one is made blind and deaf by prejudice, he cannot see facts and cannot hear the word of truth.

For instance, the idolaters worship idols, a practice that existed in the past and still exists at the present. Can we consider their belief a result of rational thought and a consequence of unfettered intellection? Or is it a result of superstition that has been handed down from generation to generation on the basis of imitation?

Can one believe that a human being will conclude as a result of free and logical thinking that the cow must be considered as sacred, a belief which is subscribed to by millions of people in India even today? Is it possible that a group of human beings will reach the conclusion as a result of free, unfettered and logical thinking that one must worship the sexual organs, a belief which, is held even now by millions of people?

No, the human intellect and thought, even in its most elementary stage, will not reach such a conclusion. These beliefs have irrational roots. For instance, at the beginning there emerge some exploitive individuals who want to hold others in bondage (the world has seen for which they need some kind of creedal basis, without which its establishment would not be possible. The originator of the belief himself knows what he is doing. That is, he perpetrates the treachery with knowledge.

He gives prevalence to something - an idol, the cow or the dragon in a certain form amongst the people, who are thus misled. At first they are not very attached to it. But as years pass and their children grow up observing their parents' practice, they imitate them. One generation succeeds another and the matter assumes a historical background and becomes part of national custom and traditions.

It is looked upon as a matter of national pride and distinction, and then it is first a thin paste when mixed with water; you can form it in any shape you want. But once given a certain form and allowed drying, gradually it becomes harder the drier that it gets. Then it reaches a state when it cannot be broken even with a cudgel.

Should we combat such beliefs or not? That is, when we speak of freedom of thought does that include this kind of beliefs? The current fallacy lies just here. On the one hand they declare that man's reason and thought must be free; on the other they add that belief too must be free. The idolater must be free in his belief, and so also the worshipper of the cow or the dragon. Everyone must be free to worship anything he chooses and to practice any belief of his choice, despite the fact that these kinds of beliefs are contrary to the freedom of thought. It is beliefs such as these that put thought in bondage.

They praise England for being a free country, a land where all religions are free. There, they declare, the idol worshipper is free to worship idols; the cow-worshipper is free to worship the cow. Both of them have freedom to practice their beliefs and are even provided with facilities, and their temples and deities are looked upon with respect.

All that is done, they say, because man has freedom of belief. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has also committed the same kind of mistake. The principle on which it rests is the dignity of man (a principle which we also accept). Now since man is respectable, it argues, every belief that he may hold is also respectable. This inference is strange, for it is possible that man may choose something that puts him in chains. Is he to be left free to do so?

What is more compatible with the acknowledgement of man's dignity? To guide him and to show him the path of progress and development or to tell him that since you are a human being and every human being is respectable, you are free to choose anything and your choice is

respectable even though I consider it to be a wrong one and know it to be a false superstition that has thousands of evil consequences, but I accept it because you have made this choice yourself? What he has chosen is a chain, bondage for reason and thought; how can you respect chains? Your respect for these chains is an insult to his human capacity and his dignity as a human being, which lies in his ability to reason. It is your duty to liberate him from this bondage so that his thought is set free. The Queen of England once went to India where she visited temples. While entering a temple she would take off her shoes as a mark of respect even before the point where shoes are usually taken off - with the remark: "This is a temple and a place to be venerated." She was a Christian and not worshipper of idols; she showed respect to idols because they are held in veneration by some human beings.

There is a certain group of people (among the Iranians) who declare with a feeling of national pride that " We signed the declaration of human rights two thousand and five hundred years ago! When Cyrus entered Babylon he declared respect for all the temples of idol worship that were there, though he himself was a Zoroastrian and not an idolater. So we are a nation that has upheld the freedom of belief. " This is a most misguided position, though it may serve the purpose of political propaganda. Because one who seeks to subjugate a people must show respect for its beliefs. But it is something totally wrong from a human point of view.

The right approach is that of Abraham, may peace be upon him. He was alone in possessing a free mind, and he saw all the people around him captives in the chains of hollow traditional beliefs without any intellectual foundation. One day when the people left the city to celebrate some festival, he remained behind with the pretext of illness.

When there was no one about in the city he entered the main temple, took an axe and broke all the idols. Then hanging the axe in the neck of the biggest idol, he came out of temple. He did that on purpose, as the Noble Qur'an says, in order to emancipate the minds of the people. When the people returned at nightfall, on entering the temple they saw it in shambles. The whole scene appeared as if the idols had fought out a battle amongst themselves with the biggest idols being the sole survivor.

'Who has done all this?' they ask one another, for their inherent rational sense tells them that the lifeless idols could not have fought amongst themselves. Definitely it is the work of a conscious being. Some of them say, "We heard a young man, called Abraham, making mention of them.

Perhaps he is the one who has done it." They bring Abraham in order to cross-examine him. They tell him, " So, art thou the man who did this unto our gods, Abraham?"

Abraham replies, " No; it was this great one of them that did it. Question them, if they are able to speak." He meant, " You see that the weapon with which the crime was committed is carried by the big idol. Why do you accuse me? Ask the victims themselves so that they may inform you.

" So they returned to themselves, and consulted their own reason. With his act Abraham made them 'return to themselves ' and emancipated their minds from the bondage of belief. Such an act as this is an act of human worthy. Similarly the act of Moses, son of Imran, is an act of human worth. When Moses observes that his people are worshipping the Samaritan's golden calf as an idol, he declares:

"We will surely burn it and scatter its ashes into the sea." The Israelites who worshipped the calf did not do so as a result of free and unfettered thinking. After crossing the sea they came across a people who prostrated before idols-something they had not seen before. They were fascinated by it, considering it a good pastime, and they said to Moses,

"Moses, make for us a god, as they have gods."

The right approach is that of the Seal of the Prophets, who struggled for long years against idolatry in order to emancipate the minds of the people. Had the Arab paganism survived for another thousand years, the Arabs would have continued to worship idols (in the same way as idolatry still exists even in some civilized nations such as Japan) and would have not moved a single step towards intellectual progress and development. The Prophet came and released them from the chains of that belief and emancipated their minds. The Qur'an says of the Prophet (S):

' He relieves them of their load, and the fetters that were upon them.' (7:157)

That which the European considers as one's right to keep is referred to as fetters by the Qur'an which asks the faithful to be thankful to God for relieving them of the burden of superstition and for freeing them from the fetters in which they had chained themselves.

When the captives of war were brought before the Prophet (S) after the battle of Badr, they were bound in order to keep them from escaping. When the Prophet glanced at them, an involuntary smile appeared on his face. They said to him, "We did not expect you to rejoice at our misfortune." He said to them, "I am not rejoicing at your misfortune. It seems amusing to me that I have to put these chains on you in order to drag you to paradise and that I have to resort to force in order to emancipate you from your false beliefs."

Accordingly, there is a great difference between freedom of thought and freedom of belief. A belief is founded on thought and reasoning, Islam accepts it; otherwise it does not accept it. It permits a belief that is derived from freedom of thought. Islam never accepts such beliefs as

are based on tradition and imitation and which emerge due to ignorance, absence of reflection and submission to irrational ideas in the name of freedom of belief.

This extremist view concerning freedom of belief that one finds in the European world today is partly a reaction to the terrible history of the Inquisition, which held Europe in its clutches for centuries. The Church used to investigate the beliefs of people to see if anybody held an opinion contrary to the official doctrine, even if it were a matter related to astronomy. For instance, if the Church held the elements to be four and the sun to revolve around the earth, it considered it its business to discover and punish those who held different view, even if that were more scientific and logical. The 'culprits' were brought to trial and sentenced to the most terrible kinds of punishment such as burning at the stakes. If you read the history of the European Middle Ages, you will see that it has no parallel in the East. I have pointed out once earlier that whatever one may say in characterizing the East's history in respect of cruelty and however our speakers may exert themselves in describing the black character of the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids—even Hajjaj ibn Yusuf —those accounts pale before the history of the Europe of middle Ages, even before that of contemporary Europe. Punishment by burning people alive was a simple matter. Albert Malet in the part of his history concerning the Middle Ages writes, for instance, how a woman was burnt alive for some very petty offence.

Many scholars received the death sentence for expressing an opinion, not about some issue of theology, but some scientific issue related to physics or astronomy. The inevitable reaction to this intolerance and tyranny was to declare that in matters related to religion and faith, the people were free to hold and practice any kind of belief, even if it were cow-worship.

Another reason for this approach to freedom of belief is that, in the view of European philosophers, religion and faith—regardless of whatever form it takes, whether it is the worship of God, or that of idols or that of the cow is a matter related to individual's conscience. That is, every individual in his personal life stands in need of a certain kind of diversion called 'religion'. They acknowledge at least this much that man cannot do without some kind of preoccupation with religion.

They make similar statements about art and poetry—matters, which are entirely subjective, to which such criteria as good and evil, true and false, right and wrong, do not apply. Hence goodness and badness depend on personal taste, as in the case of food one likes to eat and the colour of clothes one likes to wear. There is nothing, which is absolutely good and bad in matters of personal taste.

They do not want to admit any objectivity in the matters of religion and prophet-hood or accept



that the Prophets have really been sent by God to show mankind and objective path in treading  
which lies man's felicity.

They say that the real nature of the religious feeling and its roots are unknown to us. All that we know is That man cannot live without religion and that he needs a certain kind of preoccupation in life that may termed as 'religious', regardless of whether that object of worship is the One God, or a man named Jesus Christ, or the cow, or some image of metal or wood. Hence we should not create trouble for individuals. Everything that one chooses in  
accordance with his or her taste and liking for him/her.

Our objection lies just here. We do not consider this approach to religion as a correct one. In fact the kind of religion in which belief – as they declare – is a matter of free choice is, in our view, no religion at all. We believe in religion as a path of human felicity that has objective existence. We cannot say that any belief concerning the objective path of human felicity is free,  
even if it is not based on thought and intellection.

I will give an example. Will you permit freedom of belief in matters of health and education? Suppose the people of a region want to have trachoma and ninety per cent of them have it. Will you ask their permission to cure them of it? Don't you try by all means, through tact and force, to treat them of this disease, and declare that you have rendered them a service though they  
themselves don't appreciate it?

Suppose there are some people who don't want education. You open schools for them, but they oppose you and try to close them down. Don't you think that their compulsory education is necessary? Why doesn't the Universal Declaration of Human Rights condemn compulsory  
education as a violation of human freedom?

On the contrary, the same declaration in its Article 26 considers elementary education as compulsory. Does it negate men's right to freedom in this matter? No. Why? Because, it answers, it is a matter related to Human welfare; those who want to remain ignorant and illiterate do not understand. Force must be used to make them literate; coercive methods are  
essential to render them this service.

However, they don't take a similar approach in regard to religion, because they assume that while health and education have an objective reality on which human welfare depends, religion is a personal matter relating to a subjective need that must be satisfied somehow. Man, they say, feels an inner need to worship and adore, whatever that object of worship may be. That is why they say that beliefs are to be respected and do not differentiate between belief and  
thought.

Hence there are two objections involved here. Firstly, we should not consider religion as a

subjective matter of personal taste and preference, such as preference for a certain color for one's dress. Secondly, the choice of religion is different from preference for the color of dressing. That is, if man adopts an irrational belief, that belief becomes a hindrance to the free activity of his intellect and thought.

To summarize what we have said above, freedom of thought exists in Islam, as well as Freedom of holding a belief that is based on proper reasoning. But there is no freedom in Islam for a belief that not based on rational thought, for such a freedom amounts to a license for slavery and bondage. Hence the approach of the prophets, who used to break these kind of chains and compel men to think, was the right approach.

Islam, on the one hand, seriously combats idolatry and, on the other, tells the idolater that his belief in God in the state in which he worships idols is not acceptable. Belief in God must be accepted with a free and unfettered mind:

In the earth are signs for those having sure faith; and in your selves; what, do you not see? The Holy Qur'an ( 15:20-21 )

Islam does not accept an unthinking belief in God. It calls upon human beings to study the Creation - the plants, the animals, one's own creation, one's body and soul, the skies. It lays such a great emphasis on studied belief in Divine Unity that man is forced into the study of the sciences of nature as a means to acquiring the knowledge of God's Oneness, Prophet-hood, and resurrection.

Surely in the creation of the heavens and earth and in the alteration of night and day there are signs for men possessed of minds, who remember God, standing and sitting and on their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth; 'Our Lord, Thou hast not created this in vain. Glory be to Thee! Guard us against the chastisement of the fire.' Holy Qur'an ( 3:190-191 ) This noble verse points out that there are signs of the Divine in the earth and the Heavens. It calls men, provided they have intellect, spirit, and thought, to study those signs and to contemplate about them. Another verse of the Qur'an declare:

There is no compulsion in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. Holy Qur'an ( 2:256 )

It means that religion and faith is not a matter of coercion. The path is clear. All that is required is thought and care. Basically, the kind of faith that Islam requires cannot be forced. There is no possibility of coercion, for it is impossible to force anyone to acquire the kind of Faith that is required by Islam. It is not possible to spank a child into solving a certain Arithmetical problem? His mind and thought must be left free in order that he may solve it. The Islamic faith is something of this kind.

It has been written concerning the circumstances of the revelation of the above mentioned Verse that the Ansar, that is the people of Madinah belonging to the clans of Aws and Khazarij, used to send their children to the Jews before the Prophet's migration. The Jews were more civilized than the polytheists of Madinah and some of them, ten or twenty knew how to read and write. These children were to learn something and to be trained by Jews. They would come to realize the difference of level of culture the Jews and their own families and clan and, occasionally, they embraced Judaism. When Islam came to Madinah, the Polytheists became Muslims, but most of the Jews continued to follow their faith. From among those who had been trained under the Jews, some continued to follow the Jewish Religion. When the Jewish tribe of Banu al-Nadir was exiled from Madinah due to its violation of the terms of treaty and on account of treason, the children of the Ansar who were attached to the Jews and had embraced their faith wanted to go with them. Their parents wanted to stop them and insisted that they remain and embrace Islam. When the matter was brought to the Noble Prophet (S); he forbade them to exercise coercion. He told the parents to explain the Islamic creed to their children and leave them free to accept or reject it.

He recited to them the verse,  
'There is no compulsion in the faith.'

The truth has been made clear, he told them. The path of guidance has become distinguishable from the path of error. Should anyone fail to take the path of guidance, it indicates the sickness of his soul.

Islam has combated false beliefs that often form the basis of tyrannical regimes. In our own country, Iran, it fought to overthrow a corrupt regime and then invited the people to its teachings, leaving them free to decide. This is history, and Western historians admit that the majority of Iranians remained Zoroastrian during early Islamic era. The Iranians gradually embraced Islam during a period when Arab rule had been replaced by Persian rule. They did not embrace Islam under Arab rule and the Arabs, too, did not force them to convert.

## **Lecture Two**

In the last session, we discussed freedom of belief and spoke concerning the kind of belief that is free and the kind that shouldn't be free, for its freedom is contrary to man's dignity. We said that beliefs rest on two kinds of bases. Sometimes it is based on free thought, and sometimes it is imposed through imitation of ancestors without having even the least relation with the faculty of reasoning. The primary characteristic of the latter kind of beliefs is to hinder the course of free thought and to fetter the human intellect. These kinds of beliefs are chains of

habit, custom and imitation that fetter man's spirit and thought.

In the same way as a man bound in chains is unable to release himself and someone else should emancipate him with the means at his disposal, the nations that are captive in the chains of such beliefs need another power that may emancipate them. This is the greatest service that can be done to man. One of the accomplishments of the prophets was to shatter the foundations of such beliefs so that liberated man may be able to think freely about himself, his destiny, and convictions.

Many examples can be offered in this relation. In order that you may realize how someone in the bondage of custom cannot think properly, I will mention a small example. One of the well-known Companions of the Prophet (S) once came and standing in front of him declared: "O Messenger of Allah! The more that I reflect, I find that the favour done by God to us through you is greater than we can imagine.

" Apparently he said this when the Prophet (S) was showing his affection to his daughter or some other girl. Then he related a terrible story, which is truly shocking. He himself wondered how he could have committed such an atrocious act.

He said, "I was one of those who lived under the influence of the custom that daughters were a source of disgrace and were not to be kept alive when born." Then he related that his wife gave birth to a daughter when she hid away from him, telling him that the baby had been put to death. When the child grew up to an age of six or seven, his wife brought her in front of him with the belief that he would be delighted to see what a charming daughter he had and would not think of harming her. Then he described how he cruelly buried the child alive. He said, "Now I know what kind of beasts we were and how you have delivered us. At that time we used to think that we were doing something good."

There are certain matters in which compulsion is impossible, like love and friendship. No one can be forced to love or befriend someone that he does not love nor be compelled to relinquish his love for someone dear to him. Among such things, which are not susceptible by nature to force, is faith. That which Islam demands from people is faith, not forced confession, for it is useless and unenduring; it remains as long as force is there and disappears as soon as its cause disappears. The Holy Qur'an speaks of faith throughout its pages. When a group of Arab Bedouins came to the Prophet (S) and claimed to have faith, God Almighty instructs the Prophet to tell them, "Don't say, 'We believe':"

The Bedouins say, 'We believe?' Say. 'You do not believe; rather say, "We surrender" (aslamna-); for faith has not yet entered your hearts.' (49. 14)

The Bedouins are told that all that you may claim is that you have embraced Islam, but you

cannot claim to have attained faith. 'Islam' means an outward act of confession of faith and pronouncement of the shahadatayn, whereupon one is counted as one of Muslims in respect of social rights and other laws that apply to Muslims. But Islam did not come merely to create a society following Islamic regulations. That is only one of the stages.

Islam came to create faith, love and enthusiasm in the hearts, and faith cannot be forced upon anyone. The verse: has perhaps another meaning apart from the one that I mentioned in the first lecture. It means that "O Prophet, you want people to have faith. But can you make anyone a believer by force?" Elsewhere the Prophet (S) is told:

Call them to the way, of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition (16:125). Then remind them! Thou art only a reminder; thou art not charged to oversee them. (88:21-22) Hence there are certain matters, which by nature are not susceptible to coercion and the people, are of necessity free in regard to them; that is, there is no alternative to freedom there.

There are certain other matters where people can be coerced, but to act under coercion in such cases is not any merit. For instance it is a moral duty to be truthful, honest and just and to abstain from cheating others. It is possible to compel people to abstain from lying, dishonesty and theft. But that is from the viewpoint of law and order in society. However, there is another aspect involved in such matters, which is the moral aspect. That which morality requires of one is not that one should speak the truth but that he be a truthful person.

That is, truthfulness must be a spiritual habit for him. Truthfulness, honesty and justice are considered moral virtues when they become one's second nature. A righteous person is truthful, honest and just not due to the fear of penal laws but because he considers these qualities as a merit and human asset for himself, and abhors lying, dishonesty and deceit. Hence these qualities are considered moral virtues when they become part of one's character, and not when one is merely true and honest in conduct. Hence coercion cannot instill moral sense in people, and the moral sense is not susceptible to force.

Another matter, which is not susceptible to coercion and wherein freedom is a necessity, is personal development and growth (tashreeh). You cannot make a child grow and mature by always ordering him to do things and without giving him the freedom to choose. Within certain limits it is essential to guide him, but it is also necessary to give him a certain amount of freedom. Guidance and freedom should go hand in hand.

There are many social issues in which it is necessary for the guardians of society to guide the people, who will be lost without such guidance. But if they deprive the people of their freedom, even with good intentions (to say nothing of evil intentions), with the pretext that people lack understanding and capacity, the people will always remain incapable. A society that has no

freedom to make its choices and is always compelled to follow the judgments of its leaders – even if the judgments are right and the leaders have good will and fair intentions–it will fall co attain maturity.

Its development and growth lies in freedom, though it may make mistakes a hundred times. It is like a child learning to swim. If you want to teach swimming to a child and instruct him for a hundred years in a classroom concerning the required motions of the arms and legs, he will not learn swimming unless he is allowed to get into water and left free to learn the movements required for swimming. He will also not learn it if you hold him on your hands in water without leaving him on his own.

Freedom is also necessary for intellectual development. If people are denied freedom in matters where they should use their thinking, with the fear that they would make a mistake, or if they are scared of punishment in hell if they think about some religious issue and if a doubt occurs to them, their minds will never develop and mature in respect of religious issues. A religion that requires people to reach its doctrinal truths through thought and intellection, necessarily grants them the freedom, of thought.

It does not frighten them from entertaining doubts and does not tell them that an attempt to reflect concerning a certain problem is a satanic insinuation that would lead one to hell. There exist many traditions in this regard. One of them is the one according to which the Noble Messenger said: "My ummah is absolved of -nine thing; one of them is a doubt that occurs in the course of reflection concerning the creation" i.e. reflection on a doubt concerning the creation). It means that God would not punish one who in the course of his inquiry encounters a doubt.

In a famous hadith mentioned in al-Shaykh al-'An.sari's Faraid al-'usial, it is narrated that an Arab Bedouin came to the Prophet and said: "O Messenger of Allah, I am doomed!" The Prophet immediately knew his problem and said to him, "I know what you want to say. You want to say that Satan came to you and asked you, 'Who created you?' You answered that it was God.

Then Satan asked you, 'Who created Him?' and then you could not give him a reply." the man said, "O Messenger of Allah, that is exactly what happened." The Prophet (S) said to him: 'That is pure faith.' That is, this doubt will lead you to real faith and is a preliminary step towards it. Skepticism by itself is an evil destination but a good and essential transit. If one were to stop at his doubt and give up further inquiry, that is the skepticism of the lazy, and is destructive. But the man in the story just narrated did not sit at home when the doubt occurred to him. He did not worry that others would censure him for his doubt. That help-immediately came to the

Prophet (S) co question him concerning his doubt, showed that he had a spirit of research and inquiry. The Prophet (S) therefore cold him not to worry. This is freedom of thought. Hence Islam has broken the chains of imitation, and it does not accept a belief in its doctrines that is based on blind imitation of others. Is it possible that such a school of thought should have compelled people to embrace its creed? Islam did not do anything of this kind. What it did was to release man from the bondage of superstitious beliefs chat have nothing whatsoever to do with thought and intellection. It cooks off these chains and then left people to think freely for themselves. The battles chat it fought were against tyrannical regimes, not against people. That is, it fought those who held people captive in the chains of superstition and evil social customs. You cannot show an instance where Islam has fought people. That is why the nations embraced Islam with extreme eagerness and zeal and our own people were one of those.

The issue of freedom of belief constitutes one of the most radiant chapters in the history of Islam. Regrettably the history of other creeds has many a black page in this regard. Unfortunately, we do not give sufficient thought and attention to this matter. 1 have no time to elaborate on this matter and all 1 can do is to ask you to study history. Read the third volume of Albert Malet's work concerning the history of the European Middle Ages. You will see what crimes have been committed to impose the Christian creed by those who are today making propaganda amongst us that Islam spread through force. You will see what atrocities they have committed amongst themselves (that is those whom they refer co as 'heretical' sects) and against Muslims and the followers of other creeds. Read the history of Zoroastrianism, especially that of the Sassanid era and of Iran before Islam. You will see what kind of conduct was adopted by the Zoroastrians in power and their priests against the Christians and Jews of that period. Read volume 13 of Will Durant's A Story of Civilization, which tells of the atrocities perpetrated by the Christians. Read also the volume 11 of this work, which concerns Islam, especially those parts where the author shows the extent of respect that the Muslims had for the freedom of peoples under their rule. Such a thing has no parallel in the world's history.

The scholars have mentioned two basic reasons for the emergence and expansion of the Islamic civilization. The first one is the un- bounded encouragement offered by Islam to think, learning and education as indicated by the Qur'anic text itself. The second reason they mention is the respect-or as they put it, tolerance and lenience- chat Islam showed to the beliefs of peoples, which allowed it to create a cosmopolitan unity out of different, heterogeneous and mutually hostile peoples.

When this civilization first came into existence, its first nucleus was constituted by the Muslims of the Hijaz. Gradually other peoples joined the fold of Islam. At first only a few of them became Muslim. The rest were either Sabaeans, Christians, Zoroastrians or Jews. The Muslims mixed with them in a friendly manner that there, was not the slightest trace of duality in their conduct. It was for this reason that they were gradually assimilated by Islam and embraced Islamic beliefs.

There are a large number of examples that may be cited from history. For instance, we read in history that the Commander of the Faithful 'All (A) repeatedly made this declaration during the period of his caliphate: i.e. 'Ask me any question that you may have so long as I am alive and in your midst.' Once a man rose from amongst the audience and in an insolent manner said to

'All (A): "You, who don't know what you are claiming, I will ask you. Answer me." From his appearance he did not look to be a Muslim. The accounts describe him as a lean man with long curly hair, who had a book hung in his neck. His appearance was that of the Arabs who had embraced the Jewish faith. At his insolence, the companions of 'All indignantly rose to chasten him. 'All told them to sit down. Then he remarked:

The proofs of God are neither established nor defended by thoughtless acts. Then turning to the man, he said: "Ask anything that you may want." This sentence of 'All was enough to soften the man. Then he asked several questions and 'All answered them. The sources also mention what these questions and answers were. They also say that at the end the man pronounced the shahddatayn and embraced Islam.

People used to come to the Prophet (S) and put questions to him, to which he would answer. In history you read that 'All (A) often used to be present in the Prophet's Mosque, especially during the rule of the first two caliphs. Explaining the reason for doing so, he said that since the call of Islam had resounded throughout the world, people came from various parts and they had certain questions, which someone should answer.

At times he would send his close companions such as Salman and Abu Dharr to be present in the mosque and to be on the look out for people who came to ask questions and lest there be no one to give an adequate answer or some ignorant person should rudely drive them away. He would tell them so inform him if the visitor was a scholar from some part of the world and had come to inquire concerning Islam.

Even when we compare the Umayyads-with all that is said regarding them and about ninety percent of which is correct-with regimes in other parts of the world, you will see that they were better. Especially during the era of the 'Abbasids there was a lot of freedom of belief- so far as it did not come into conflict with their policies.



Al-Mufaddal ibn 'Umay was one of the companions of al-'Imam al-Sadiq (A). One day he came across Ibn Abi al-'Awja', an atheist, who was saying blasphemous things to a like-minded companion in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. Al-Mufaddal could not restrain himself when he heard Ibn Abi al-'Awja's blasphemies. Infuriated, he said to the latter: "O enemy of God, do you mention such things in the mosque of the Messenger of God?" Ibn Abi al-'Awja' asked him as to which sect of Muslims he belonged. Later, he said to him. "If you are one of the companions of Ja'far ibn Muharimad, you should know that we say similar things in his presence. He listens to us in such a patient manner that we imagine that he has accepted our views. Then in a poised manner he begins his reply and answers to all our objections. He never becomes impatient and there is no trace in him of this kind of fierceness of yours."

Al-Mufaddal got up and left to see the Imam. When he described to him the matter, the Imam smiled and told him not to be vexed. He told al-Mufaddal to come the next morning for lessons on theology, which would help him in his future debates with atheists. The book al-Tawhid al-Mufaddal that we possess today is a product of that episode.

As I said, some of our books of hadith consist of records of polemics and debates (ihtijad). Among these is one of the volumes of the Bihir al-'anwar and al-Tabrisi's al-'Ihtijad. We must study these works, which are records of the debates that our Imams had with the scholars of other creeds, some of whom were materialists and atheists and others were Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Sabaeans. Some of these debates were even with idol-worshippers. They would come to the Imams, question them and receive replies from them. None of them was ever told that they had no right to raise such question under a powerful Islamic government. Of special interest among these debates are those of al-'Imam al-Rida (A) which have been recorded in works of history and hadith. The regimes of Harun and al-Ma'mun were among the most powerful regimes that the world has seen, and had they wanted, they could have easily curbed all freedom of belief and expression and no one would have dared to object.

Yet we see that they permitted free debate amongst Mu'tazilite, 'Ash'arite, and even Shi'ite theologians. Though they were number one enemies of the Shi'ah, they, more or less, permitted Shi'i theologians to participate in such debates.

Since Islam had confidence in its own logic, it did not warn people against reflecting on the matters of theology. It is convinced that every human being can attain essential knowledge about God, His existence and Attributes through rational thought. The same is true of belief in prophet-hood and resurrection.

I have stated it recurringly in my writings that I am not only not vexed by the appearance of

skeptics who speak against Islam but am even delighted, since I know that their emergence will make the countenance of Islam more visible. The existence of skeptics who speak against Islam is dangerous only when the defenders of the faith are so lifeless that they fail to show any reaction. But if there is just enough life in the Islamic ummah so that it can react to the enemy's challenge, be assured that it is ultimately to the benefit of Islam.

In the last four decades, there was Kasrawi, who wrote things against the Shi'ah and occasionally against Islam. Those belonging to the Tudeh Party propounded materialist ideas and raised basic objections against Islam. There emerged other individuals who attacked Islam in the name of Iranian nationalism. But God knows how much service they indirectly and unwittingly rendered to Islam.

When Kasrawi published his writings, the Islamic scholars began to examine critically for the first time those issues which had become blurred during the course of several centuries and which had gradually come to be clustered with superstitious ideas. Before that, the people had no clear ideas about such issues as Imamate, Shi'ism, taqiyyah, bada' and so on. The 'ulama' then began to discover the facts that had become buried beneath the heaps of false notions that had collected during the course of several centuries due to the absence of sceptics. Then the communists came, who unwittingly rendered great service to the development of Islamic philosophical and sociological thought and resulted in the publication of many a fine writing.

A living religion has nothing to fear from sceptics. Danger arises only when its followers are so dead that they do not show any reaction. Regrettably we have faced such a situation in the past. For instance, at the beginning of the Constitutional Movement there were some individuals who declared that the penal laws of Islam were obsolete. We do not find a single writing of the time that defended the Islamic viewpoint in this regard. The result of it was that some people, due to ulterior motives, and others out of ignorance, set aside the Islamic penal laws as outdated, and translated the penal codes of foreign countries into Persian. However, today we observe a movement amongst Muslims in regard to other legal issues of Islam—such as women's rights—and there is no cause for worry and the victory ultimately lies with Muslims.

Basically a religion based on reason and thought, on philosophical reasoning and a series of objective advantages, has nothing to worry about in this aspect. That is why the 'freedom of thought' that Islam has conferred since its advent to the present upon Muslims and the followers of other creeds has no parallel in the history of nations