

No pressure, then: religious freedom in Islam

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The Quranic statement: "There is no compulsion in religion" – erupted into controversy again in 2006 when the Pope selected the most illiberal view of the text available. But when the thirty-eight Muslim scholars responded that he was wrong, they were necessarily misrepresenting history. To understand why they might wish to do this, we have to go back to 720-750 AD.

To understand the place of religious freedom in Islam, I will examine the different interpretations, from the earliest times until today, of the Quranic statement, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256). Actually, I could not possibly cover all that in one article either, but that's not too much of a problem, for all the major pre-modern interpretations were in place by the tenth century. So first I shall deal with the interpretations up to the tenth century, then I shall jump to the twentieth century and deal with the modernists, the Islamists and the context in which you may all have heard about the verse recently, namely the controversy over the Pope's speech at Regensburg in September 2006, almost exactly one year ago.

The Pope was just one out of many people to talk about this verse. You hear a lot about it these days. When the American journalist Jill Carroll was kidnapped in Iraq in Jan. 2006, her kidnappers tried to convert her to Islam, but insisted that there was "no pressure" (= "no compulsion") on her to convert. A friend of mine recently spotted the statement on a bumper sticker: "no compulsion in Islam", it said; and you can read a lot about the verse on many websites too.

So why is there so much fuss about this statement? Well, one reason is that it expresses a tolerant view that Westerners like to hear, so it is a good passage to dispel their prejudices about Islam with. But it is also a statement of great importance in connection with the question whether Islam can coexist with a secular sphere: is Islam a belief system that you can combine with a any political order that you like - as long as they are religiously neutral? Or is it a religion that dictates its own political order? That's a key issue today, and the "no compulsion" verse figures in the discussion. But you can't appreciate what people say about it today without knowing the traditional interpretations, so as I said, we have to look at the pre-modern exegetes. They start round about 720-750 AD.

The six interpretations

La ikraha fi'l-din, "There's no compulsion in religion": to our modern ears it sounds like a declaration of unlimited religious freedom. It sounded that way to the earliest exegetes too, so in principle they could have said, this verse shows that Muslims must reject the use of compulsion in religious matters and that everyone must be free to choose his own religious beliefs. But in practice, they could not, and did not, say anything of the kind. Because if it is up to the individual to choose his own religion, then you can't have a polity based on religion; if religion is a private matter, then the public space is secular, in the sense of based on some non-religious principle, such as territory or nationality, or whatever else a large number of people can feel they have in common. The exegetes lived in a polity based on Islam. Islam had created the public space they shared. For as you know, Islam had not grown up within a state, the way Christianity had; rather; it had created its own state. You obviously can't have religious freedom in a community based on religion. You can't have religious freedom in a church. All you can have is freedom to leave the church, if you don't agree with it. But in a society based on shared religion you can't easily have that freedom either unless you remove yourself physically, to go to live somewhere else.

So the "no compulsion" verse was a problem to the earliest exegetes, and they reacted by interpreting it

restrictively, in one of three ways.

Abrogation

One solution was to say that the verse had been abrogated. It was generally agreed that God sometimes repealed a verse in favour of another without removing the text of the old one from the book. So some exegetes said that the verse had been revealed in Mecca, when Muhammad had no power: God was telling him that he could not and should not try to force the infidels to convert. But when he moved to Medina and set up a state of his own, God ordered him to wage holy war against the infidels. So the proclamation of religious freedom to the infidels was abrogated. In short, religious freedom had come and gone.

Unique specificity

Another solution was to say that the verse had been revealed in Medina in connection with some problems of purely historical relevance, to do with children of the Medinese: there were people in Medina whose children had been brought up by Jews, and so had become Jewish, or there were some who had converted to Christianity back in the days before the coming of Islam. When Muhammad came to Medina, the parents wanted these (by now adult) children to become Muslims and tried to force them, so this verse was revealed telling them to stop. This interpretation tied the verse to a unique historical situation. It hadn't been formally abrogated, it just had no relevance any more, for no situation like that could arise again. For good measure some adherents of this scenario added that the verse had been abrogated. So this second solution was really a less drastic version of the first.

Freedom for dhimmis

The third solution also said that the verse had been revealed in Medina, but it placed its revelation in a later context to do with defeated infidels. According to this third interpretation, the verse was about protected people (dhimmis). Dhimmis were Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims who had passed under Muslim rule and been allowed to retain their own religion in return for the payment of jizya, poll-tax. Legally, they were not members of the Muslim community, just protégés of it. The third interpretation was to the effect that the verse prohibited forced conversion of dhimmis. Actually, all the jurists agreed anyway that dhimmis could not be forced to convert, so this was really just a way of finding something for the verse to do, but it had the advantage of giving the rule a memorable formulation, and we actually know of real cases where the verse was invoked to protect the right of dhimmis to retain their religion. So on the third interpretation the verse was indeed a proclamation of religious freedom, but only for dhimmis, not for Muslims or mankind at large.

So these were the three positions advanced by the earliest exegetes: the verse had been abrogated, or it had lost relevance, or it applied only to dhimmis. These are the canonical interpretations - the interpretations of the equivalent of the church fathers - and you'll find one, or two or all three of them in every commentary on the Quran down to modern times, and quite often in modern ones as well. They all had the merit of making the verse compatible with the use of force for the maintenance and expansion of the Muslim community. It did not clash with the rule that apostates had to be executed, or with the use of force against internal dissenters, for it wasn't about Muslims. Nor did it clash with the duty to wage jihad to bring all mankind under Muslim sovereignty, for it only granted freedom to infidels after they'd been subjected.

So the problem had been solved. But you aren't going to get off that lightly. There are more interpretations that you need to know about.

The descriptive turn

The three canonical interpretations rest on the assumption that the verse should be understood as laying down a legal norm: it says that there is no compulsion in religion in the sense that it is morally wrong and legally forbidden to use force in religious matters. In other words, it is prescriptive. But from the ninth century onwards there were people who wanted to use the verse for purposes of theology rather than law. They included the theologians of the Mu'tazilite school, and according to them, the verse was not prescriptive, but descriptive. It did not condemn or prohibit anything, it was a straightforward factual statement. "There is no compulsion in religion" means just that: there isn't any, full stop.

What they meant by this was that when God says that there is no compulsion in the religion, He means that He does not practise compulsion. God does not force you to be a believer or an infidel – i.e. He does not predestine or determine it for you: you have free will. This may sound farfetched to you, but the word for determination was jabr, compulsion, and the word for free will, or one of them, was qadar, power. God was seen as refraining from using His power so that you could have your own; he was abstaining from compulsion - from determination - so that you could choose whether to be a believer or an unbeliever. That's what God was saying here, according to the Mu'tazilites: the verse was a declaration of unlimited freedom from divine coercion. God allows you to choose your own salvation. It is just humans who don't: the Mu'tazilites accepted that. They agreed that religious freedom was only for dhimmis. But vis-à-vis God everybody was free to choose for himself.

You'll say, how could the Mu'tazilites hold that humans can use coercion where God won't? Well, they had a second interpretation here. They said that the verse could also be read as declaring that there is not and cannot really be any such thing as human coercion in religious matters either, for it simply is not possible to force other people to believe. You can only force them to act as believers, i.e. to conform on the surface; you can't force them to believe in their innermost hearts. So on the first Mu'tazilite interpretation, God is saying that He won't force people to believe; and on the second Mu'tazilite interpretation, He is saying that you can't do it. In short, in your inner self, your private interior, you are free vis-à-vis humans and God alike.

But your external self was a different matter. You were free as a disembodied soul, not as an embodied social being. As a member of a human society you were subject to coercion in all kinds of ways. Social life is impossible without coercion. There was - still is - no way round that. And since the Muslim polity was based on religion, coercion had to be used in religious matters too. But that didn't contradict the verse according to the Mu'tazilites because the coercion was only applied to the external person: the inner person was free; there was no coercion in religion in the sense of inner conviction. So on their interpretation the verse was not contradicted by the duty to wage holy or execute apostates either. It was even compatible with forced conversion. It was allowed to force people to become Muslims when they hadn't become dhimmis yet or couldn't become dhimmis, either because they were pagans rather than Christians, Jews or Zoroastrians or because they were slaves. In fact, one Mu'tazilite said that forcing people to convert was a good thing, because sooner or later they or their children would acquire genuine faith: so you would have saved them from eternal hellfire. And you hadn't forced them to accept the truth. In their inner hearts they had converted of their own accord. You had only forced them into the Muslim community which made it possible for them to see the truth.

You'll probably react by finding this a self-serving argument, and so it was, of course. It allowed the Mu'tazilites to legitimate the use of force in religious matters while at the same time claiming that there was no such thing. But they weren't just being self-serving. When the Mu'tazilites made their sharp distinction between inner conviction and external conformance, they were saying that individual salvation was one thing, civic religion was something else. Civic religion was all about keeping Muslim society together in the here and now, it was the religion you had for the public space, the religion that was good for the social and political order. Your own wishes had to be subordinated to those of the community here. You could not and did not have complete freedom at that level. Here as in other societies, you had to obey the law, and

the law happened to be religious. But you could choose your own innermost convictions, your own avenue to salvation. You could believe what you liked as long as you did not endanger the boat that everybody was sailing in.

This distinction between civic religion based on the law and individual conviction based on a freely chosen theology or philosophy or spirituality was quite a marked feature of Muslim thinking in the tenth and the eleventh centuries. Many people saw the law-based, collective religion of the community as something lower and more prosaic than individual spirituality or philosophy or esotericism. They had a strong sense that individuals had needs that went far beyond those served by communal worship. So they distinguished between the external and the internal, the lower and the higher: they saw these two as forming two distinct levels of religion. But they did not go so far as to secularise the lower level. They didn't say that the civic level should have nothing to do with religion at all. Some came close. The Ismaili Shi'ites initially denied that the civic religion – the law – had any saving power. You were saved by your inner convictions alone. But that put them beyond the pale, so they changed their mind. Being a good social being, a good citizen, did have saving value by common consent, that of the Ismailis included. It just wasn't all there was to religion, or even the most important part.

What the Mu'tazilites were saying was that in the higher sphere of religion there was no compulsion. All human beings, not just dhimmis or Muslims, had an inner sanctum that was controlled by themselves alone. They had what you would call freedom of conscience. But this freedom was wholly internal, you couldn't claim it as a social being. And it was deemed to exist as a matter of fact, so it was not protected by the law. It wasn't a right you could claim. All you could do was to retreat into your inner self, where you were alone with God. Here again the Ismailis were an exception: they did award legal protection to individual religiosity. But for everyone else it remains true to say that individual freedom of religion was never given legal expression; it was never allowed to prevail against the social order.

The two Mu'tazilite interpretations of the verse, as a statement that God will not and that humans cannot coerce in religious matters, were extremely long-lived. They went into both Shi'ism and Sunnism, where their Mu'tazilite origin was soon forgotten. You'll find those two interpretations along with the canonical three in a fair number of Sunni and Shi'ite commentaries all the way down to modern times.

No forced renunciations of Islam

Now I've given you five interpretations. I'm sorry, but I have to add a sixth: it takes us back to the prescriptive interpretations. Some people said that the verse did indeed prohibit forced conversion, but not of dhimmis: what it prohibited was forced conversion of Muslims to something false, i.e. it said that it was unlawful to force Muslims to renounce Islam. This interpretation was also in place by the tenth century, but it is much less common than the other five. In fact, there were more interpretations, but I shall leave them aside because practically all modern interpretations involve doing things with one or more of these six.

Modernism and Islamism

So what happens in modern times? Well, what happens is that Europe becomes the dominant power, and the Europeans go around saying that Islam is a backward religion which established itself by force, which lacks the virtue of tolerance, and so on. So Muslims now have to rebut these charges, and the "no compulsion" verse is an obvious one to do it with. As I said, it voices a view that Westerners like. But as I also said, there's more to it. The dominance of the West doesn't just mean that Muslims have to cope with rude remarks from Westerners. It also means that their own traditional pattern of a society based on a religious law begins to look outmoded. Modernism means separating religion from socio-political matters, it means draining law and war of religious significance and basing them instead on secular ideologies such as nationalism or communism, leaving religion as something optional for your private salvation. That's the

European pattern; that's what allows for religious toleration; and that's what every self-respecting society now had to claim to have as well in order to count in an era of European dominance. So whereas the early exegetes had to interpret the "no compulsion" verse restrictively, the twentieth-century exegetes have to widen its meaning again, to read it as a universal declaration of religious freedom that would both refute the European charges and provide an impeccable Quranic basis for something like a separation between religious and political matters in Islam. The religious scholars start working on the verse in a modernist vein already around 1900, but it isn't really till the 1940s that they get going.

So how could they widen the interpretation of the verse without declaring all the earlier exegetes to be wrong, and so throw out their entire exegetical tradition? Well, for one thing they could stop talking about the verse being abrogated: nobody, absolutely nobody says that it is abrogated anymore, not even the most conservative Saudis.

But then what? Well, the answer is they could go to the Mu'tazilite strand which was embedded in both the Sunni and Shi'ite traditions. The Mu'tazilites had done some separation of the public and the private spheres, the civic and the individual; and if you read them in the light of modern preoccupations, you'll misunderstand them. You'll engage in creative reinterpretation, as people will say these days. When a modern person reads a pre-modern exegete explaining that there is no coercion in religion because we have to choose for ourselves, he will not see that the exegete means that God does not coerce you; he will take the exegete to be saying that we should not do it. In other words, he will understand a factual statement about the absence of divine coercion as a prescriptive statement prohibiting human coercion – and that gives him the position he wants. Or again, if he sees a statement to the effect that religion is confession by the heart and therefore beyond compulsion, he will read that too as a prohibition of compulsion, not as a claim that compulsion is all right because it only affects outer man.

From the 1940s onwards you see one exegete after another adapt the two Mu'tazilite arguments along those modernist lines. Tantawi, the current rector of al-Azhar in Cairo, is among them. He is actually perfectly familiar with the explanation of the verse as a factual statement that God doesn't coerce us, but that doesn't stop him having the modernist adaptation as well. The modernist (mis)interpretation has become an independent position in its own right. Countless exegetes have it. More often than not, they'll tell you that the verse is a declaration of religious freedom and that this shows Christians to be wrong when they claim that Islam was spread by force. Along with this they'll often adduce the second canonical interpretation, about how the verse was revealed when the Medinese wanted to convert their Jewish or Christian children to Islam by force: this interpretation (which had changed already in the centuries not covered here) is now read as a timeless account of how Islam respects religious differences, not as a story trying to get rid of the verse by tying it to a bygone historical situation. Modern exegetes will often add that it isn't possible to convert people by force, meaning that therefore it is prohibited, not that therefore no legal prohibition is necessary.

But of course forced conversion of Jews and Christians isn't the real issue any more. The big issue is Muslim society itself. The laws regulating modern Muslim states are mostly secular: should the civic sphere be wholly secularised? Can Muslims be fully integrated in secular societies in the West? In other words, should religion be something you have along with your citizenship rather than as part of it?

And if yes, should this additional membership be wholly voluntary, so that Muslims would be free to convert to other religions, or to have no religion? The modernists tend to be rather unclear on this: they hide behind the bluster about forced conversion, feeling that if they assert the principle of religious freedom there, then they've paid their respects to modern values and can keep silent about the rest. For to say that people are free to leave Islam is officially to declare the public order to be secular, so that one could in principle be an atheist or a Buddhist or a Hindu along with being a full citizen of Egypt. And you are then half way to the situation where no religious community has privileged access to the state, where all

religious associations are equally private. That is full secularism, and it would be a radical change. It is too radical for most modernists to contemplate it. Islamists.

Nowadays the modernists are under siege by the Islamists –people who want the public sphere to be fully based on Islam again. Some are militant and some are not, but all are convinced that secularism is a mistake. In their view, Islam should not be drained of authority, but on the contrary serve as the basis of it. As they see it, Islam prescribes its own social space and its own political agency, and religious freedom is nonsense unless Muslims are allowed to have this freedom within their own political organisation: religious freedom is the right to live as a Muslim, not just in private affairs, but also in public ones.

You can read that in Sayyid Qutb, the enormously influential Islamist who was hanged by Nasser in 1966. According to him, you must wage jihad to bring about that freedom now, for secularism is an oppressive system that doesn't allow you to practise what you believe. All this is directed against the Egyptian regime, Nasser's state, not against the infidel West. He wrote his exegesis in jail; it was a secularist regime that was persecuting him, and which eventually hanged him: secularism did not mean freedom to him, just as it didn't to the mullahs in the Shah's Iran.

To them, as to other the victims of Middle Eastern regimes, secularism did not stand for religious neutrality, as it does to Westerners, but rather the forced imposition of something false and foreign. They would adduce the "no compulsion" verse against these regimes. The verse forbids forced conversion to falsehood, as the blind shaykh Umar b. Abd al-Rahman said during his trial for complicity in the assassination of Sadat in 1981. He was quoting the sixth interpretation I have given you, from an Andalusian scholar who'd written at the time of the Christian Reconquista. According to Sayyid Qutb and others, true religious freedom can only obtain under Islamic rule, for it is only under Islamic rule that people will be allowed to follow their own creeds.

It sounds great until you start thinking about the implications. How can Christians, Jews, Buddhists or atheists be full members of a state which is conceived as an expression of Islamic aims? They can't, of course. Several Islamists will explicitly tell you that actually, non-Muslims will have to resume the position of dhimmis, protected people. And by non-Muslims they typically mean Jews and Christians, full stop. In the past, some jurists held that only Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians qualified for dhimmi status; others said that all infidels did, whoever they were. The Islamists always go for the restrictive view, and what they want to outlaw with it is atheism. Their position is quite clear: atheism is a form of paganism, or idolatry, and Islam does not recognize that as a religion. Religion means monotheism, and religious freedom does not include the freedom to have no religion, because in their view there can't be any morality without religion.

In actual fact, the Islamists don't really believe in religious freedom, except for themselves, because they believe that religion should form the basis of the social and political order; but the concept of religious freedom is so prestigious that even they can't quite abandon it.

Many of them are so torn between their desire to present Islam as a religion of tolerance and their determination to force their fellow-citizens back into the Islamic fold that they end up in complete incoherence. Take the ayatullah Sabzawari, a Shi'ite cleric who published his exegesis in 1997. He starts by interpreting the no compulsion verse to mean that compulsion is unnecessary, impossible, and forbidden: it couldn't be clearer. He adds that Islam was not established by the sword: fine. But Muslims do have to fight, he says, not to convert people by force, only to restore them to their original nature, which is Islam. In his view this is not really compulsion, for like other Imamis he combines the second Mu'tazilite argument with the old idea of Islam as original human nature (fitra) and argues that to deny Islam is to deny one's own identity and will, so that being forced to live as a Muslim is simply to be restored to one's self. Besides, he says, compulsion only affects the external man, and sometimes it is actually a good thing for both the public order and the victim; indeed, what would be more repugnant in moral term than leaving

people to work for their own damnation? In short, forced conversion is unnecessary, impossible, forbidden, required, a good thing, and highly commendable.

Or for a Sunni example, take Dr 'Amir 'Abd al-'Aziz , editor with Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others of the Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies, who published an exegetical work, in Arabic, in 2000. He too starts by affirming that the "no compulsion" verse rejects forced conversion. "It is not permitted for Muslims to convert infidels to the faith by force", he says, "for that kind of thing is no use, leads to no good, and does not bring about faith in the hearts of their own free will". He adds that it is not necessary to use force either, for Islam is a clear religion based on cogent arguments (many traditional exegetes say that too). On the contrary, he declares, the coercive method is characteristic of vacuous, odious, self-absorbed egoists and oppressive authorities. So there is no coercion. But, he says, the verse was revealed specifically about Christians and Jews. Idolaters and similar godless and permissive people have to be compelled to adopt Islam, since they cannot be accepted as dhimmis and do not deserve any consideration because of their godlessness, stupidity, error and foolishness. In other words, Muslims are not permitted to convert anyone force, but "anyone" really just means dhimmis, as in traditional law. All others have to be forced, above all Muslim secularists.

The Islamists tend to avoid discussing apostates, but some of them explicitly say that the verse does not grant freedom of religion to them. So all their talk about religious freedom is really designed to get rid of it. Unclarity. In short, everybody is agreed that Islam goes in for religious freedom, but not on what it means, except that Christians and Jews shouldn't be forced to convert. Everything else is unclear. Unclarity is also the key impression left by the controversy over the Pope's speech at Regensburg in 2006, with which I shall conclude.

The Pope mentioned that according to some experts, the "no compulsion" verse probably dated from "the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat" and that other rules had later been added concerning holy war; in other words, the Pope adopted the first canonical interpretation, according to which the verse had been revealed in Mecca and abrogated in Medina. Thirty-eight Muslim scholars responded that the Pope was wrong: the verse had been revealed in Medina in connection with some Jews or Christians who had wanted to force their children to convert to Islam, as one could read in al-Tabari and other early commentators; it did not date from the period when the Muslims were weak and powerless, but rather from their period of political ascendancy, and it taught them that "they could not force another's heart to believe".

Well, to a historian, that was an odd reaction. One can read the Pope's interpretation in al-Tabari and other early commentators too. One might have expected the thirty-eight scholars to respond that the Pope was out of date, and that the interpretation he went for no longer carried any weight: that is certainly true. But that is not what they said. They said that he was mistaken; and they corrected him with reference to a hybrid interpretation of their own: the Medinese were forbidden to convert their children by force, they said. Fine, that's the second canonical interpretation, as dusted off by modernists. The verse taught them that they could not force another's heart to believe. That's the second Mu'tazilite interpretation, the verse as a factual statement about the impossibility of coercing inner man. Traditionally, that goes with the view that coercing outer man is all right, though it doesn't usually do so in modern works, so what did they mean? Were they reserving the right to coerce outer man, the social being? I don't know. I suspect that the formulation was a compromise designed to paper over the cracks between different positions.

Here the interpreters of the "no compulsion" verse show us another aspect of the clash between secularism and Islam. To a historian, the thirty-eight scholars were being somewhat less than frank. They told the Pope that he was wrong instead of freely admitting that the view he had selected is indeed part of the Islamic tradition. One Islamicist professor in America happily followed suit and publicly said that the Pope should apologize for getting his facts wrong. But the Pope didn't get his facts wrong, he just selected

the most illiberal view available, which is out of date. The reason why the thirty-eight scholars did not simply say this outright is partly that they were not writing as historians, but rather as theologians, and partly that it would have been to acknowledge that doctrines change. That is something that Muslim clerics are still reluctant to do.

To a historian, the thirty-eight clerics were guilty of traducing the past: they knowingly misrepresented it. But what the thirty-eight clerics would reply, I imagine, is that we historians are guilty of traducing the present: for we knowingly show people's convictions to be historically conditioned rather than perennial truths. By insisting that the past must be understood in its own light, we remove the support of the tradition from the present; we undermine its authority. This is true, and it is all the worse if you think that change is a sign of falsehood.

We historians do not equate change with falsehood, but there is no way around the fact that we are secularisers: we are secularising history, because we separate the past we are studying from our own and other people's modern convictions; we do not allow the past to be rewritten as mere support for these modern convictions. That's a problem to all traditional believers, and perhaps to Muslims more than most. Muslims tend not to have a problem with modern science: the Quran does not have a mythological account of the creation, it is not incompatible with any modern scientific views. But history is a different matter because the truths of Islam are tied to history. So whether they want to or not, historians also find themselves as actors in the debate whether, or to what extent, Islam should coexist with a secular sphere.

Where will it all end? Well, there at least even the most modern of historians can give the most traditional of answers: God knows best.