

needs to be addressed: what is their goal? The answer is not as simple as one might assume. Is the goal the pursuit of power by example? I will assume the truthfulness of the raised slogans about justice, equality, *shura* (consultation), fighting corruption, and ensuring security. But these slogans require a mechanism to achieve them and gradualist programs at the core of that mechanism. Obviously, Islam's original heritage and traditions are deficient when it comes to these mechanisms and programs.

Fundamentalism essentially starts from sacralizing tradition and subscribing to it literally, regardless of its contradictions or inconsistencies. Accordingly, it will find itself obliged to force people to go back to the past with all its details and leave aside the present with all its novelties in order to apply unchangeable traditional texts under the pretext of respecting constants.

If the Islamists' goal is to participate in power and not to monopolize it, then with whom would they cooperate in ruling? With the nationalists or the liberals? Or would they transform themselves into a new official religious institution whose function is to legitimize a new system within which it would be an active partner? The Islamist movements' choice—to monopolize power or to share it and leave the door open to all coming movements, whether religious or not—will determine whether the cycle of destructive violence will resume yet again, with merely a changing of places and roles.

An experiment taking place in Lebanon features an Islamist movement, Hezbollah, that is undoubtedly fundamentalist in terms of its foundations and ideology. Yet it is trying to prove that terrorism is not an option, and that violence was employed only against occupation, colonialism, and subjugation. Hezbollah is unabashedly attempting to entrench its position more and more inside the politics and culture of its society. However, it cannot be foretold to what extent this movement can cooperate with nationalist powers and other political movements. Nor is it clear how it will engage with external powers that cannot tolerate collective action led by a religious fundamentalist movement. (There is also the compelling question of whether Hezbollah will deviate from Iran, its major patron and supporter.)

The central concern for the Arab Muslim world is the need to appreciate the urgent necessity of a second contemporary reading of the Koran and Sunna, guided by the imperatives of the world today. This process should be freed from the perspectives of early thinkers, with due and deep respect for all of them, because we need a current reading. The exercise of self-conscious and critical reason is the only safeguard against terrorism and violence. This process is of course arduous and still remote, and the hopes built around it are imbued with idealism. Nevertheless, for good or bad, I see no other way to salvation.

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Freedom of Thought and Religion

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TO UNDERSTAND THE PLACE of tolerance in Islam, we need to examine what we mean by freedom of thought in Islam. I argue that freedom of thought and faith is not only beneficial to Islam and to Muslims, but that it is also mandated by fundamental religious rules.

Islam is one of the three great religions but it is frequently thought to be a religion that does not accept diversity of viewpoints. In historic Islam the text of the Koran, the traditions of the holy prophet Mohammed, the behavior of the authorities of religion, and consensus among Muslim scholars are considered to be permanent precepts, beyond time and space. Thus they are regarded as divine and not

subject to criticism. While proponents of this approach believe in religious rationality, referred to as "wisdom," this rationality is thought to exist beyond the human mind.

According to Islam, Muslims are free to openly practice their religion, express their religious beliefs, practice their rituals alone or in groups, and teach religion to their children. They have the right to criticize all other religions and to ensure the supremacy of Islam. Nobody has the right to force a Muslim to leave his religion under duress or to prevent him from practicing the religious ceremonies. There is a consensus in this and there are no differences in this area.

Yet a Muslim is not allowed to change his religion to become, for example, a Christian or a Buddhist or become an atheist. A Muslim who for any reason leaves his religion, or in other words becomes an apostate, would be severely punished. The child of a Muslim who has chosen to become a Muslim after maturity and then renounces Islam is subject to execution, even if he repents. His wife would be separated from him without divorce, and his property expropriated and divided among Muslim heirs. Also, a youth with one Muslim parent is not free to choose another religion other than Islam after maturity. If she or he does not become a Muslim the charge of apostasy would apply, although she or he would first be asked to repent. If the apostasy continues the person would be sentenced to death or to life imprisonment with forced labor.

There are several "traditions" that are frequently cited as justification for these punishments. Sunni Muslims refer to the tradition of the prophet that states: "Kill any one who changes his religion." Shiite Muslims refer to a tradition from their sixth imam, Jaafar Sadeq, that also reportedly makes death a penalty for anyone who leaves Islam. In the history of Islamic thought, few Muslim thinkers have dared to question these traditions. Why have Muslim thinkers shied away from analyzing them? How can a religion that wants its followers to research and accept a religious faith with the help of reasoning and analysis argue for killing a Muslim should he or she decide to follow another faith that is as rational and accepting of its followers?

"DURESS IS NOT PERMISSIBLE"

The Koran has a verse that states: "Duress is not permissible in religion, as the path has become clear from falsehood to light, therefore anyone that takes the idols as tyranny and starts to have faith in God, has truly found a support that is never separated from him. . . ."

This verse means that we as Muslims cannot deny that God has prohibited us from imposing faith on anyone, since forced faith and tyranny are not valid. The disapproval of force in this verse equals accepting freedom in religion and its requirements are freedom in both matters: freedom in bringing religion and freedom in leaving it.

How can a religion that denies the freedom of religion and thought expect to be freely chosen and when those who choose may have their freedom

taken from them? If people are free to think seriously about religion, it is irrational to argue that they must choose Islam. If they are free, then the result cannot be determined beforehand. If they have no choice but to accept it then they are not free. What is the difference if an individual has been born in a Muslim family and has matured in an Islamic society and therefore is a Muslim and if someone has been born in a Christian family, has matured in a Christian society, and as a result is a Christian? Good and operative ideas are the choices for conscious individuals.

As stated in the Koran, "We send the book [the Koran] righteously to you for the people, therefore anyone who finds the right path has done so to his own benefit and anyone who deviates has done so to his own loss and you are not their guard." The Koran has revealed the right of people to choose their faith, and people in this world are free to go by it or to ignore it. It is not in this world but in the other world [that is, at Judgment Day] that one is to be evaluated and awarded.

Unfortunately, the subjects of freedom of religion and thought in Islam have not been studied in the context of how individual Muslims perceive their faith. Like any idea, people choose their religion, or choose to abandon it for another idea or faith. We live in an age of rational thinking. People do not see a conflict between reason and faith. Faith is strengthened by reason and principle, not by coercion and pressure. That which is created with force and pressure is only a superficial idea and no more than that.

I believe that all ideas and religions found in human societies do not all enjoy the same validity and justification, and there is no doubt that some proponents of Islam find their religious faith superior to others. If non-Muslims or skeptical Muslims do not accept our reasoning, we do not have an obligation to impose our version of truth on them. Force and terror in the name of religion would undermine religion itself. When a person sees a benefit in a religion, such as well-being and spiritual peace, he or she will not let go of it. Change comes when people are convinced, not when they are forced.

Restricting thought and ideas is not the solution to our problems, and as Muslims we cannot ignore the fact that in today's world our ideas have to exist with other ideas, even if we disagree with them.

Translated from the Persian by Bahman Baktiari