

10. Views of eminent scholars

A question may be asked whether the key points presented in the foregoing pages¹ are accepted only by some small groups of eccentric Muslims or if they have a wider acknowledgement among Muslims. Here a distinction must be drawn between the serious religious scholars of Islam, who study this religion objectively and independently, and what might be called the populist clerics who seek to keep the masses trapped in ignorance and bigotry in order to exercise a hold over them. The independent-minded scholars have always tended to hold similar views to those expressed in this booklet.

We present below the writings of nine eminent scholars of Islam of modern times, including four well-known translators of the Holy Quran into English and two non-Muslims.

1. Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Yusuf Ali's English translation of the Quran with commentary, first published in 1934, is perhaps the best known English translation of the Quran. Below we quote from some of his footnotes:²

“Compulsion is incompatible with religion: because (1) religion depends upon faith and will, and these would be meaningless if induced by force.” — note 300 on verse 2:256

“... men of Faith must not be impatient or angry if they have

¹ These key points are that Islam allows complete freedom to people in adopting whichever religion they wish, that *jihad* does not mean ‘holy war’ and that only wars of self-defence, and not of aggression, are permitted in Islam.

² Edition used here published by the Amana Corp., U.S.A., 1983.

to contend against Unfaith, and most important of all, they must guard against the temptation of forcing Faith, i.e., imposing it on others by physical compulsion, or any other forms of compulsion such as social pressure, or inducements held out by wealth or position, or other adventitious advantages. Forced faith is no faith.” — note 1480 on verse 10:99

“Mere brutal fighting is opposed to the whole spirit of *Jihad*, while the sincere scholar’s pen or preacher’s voice or wealthy man’s contributions may be the most valuable forms of *Jihad*.” — note 1270 on verse 9:20

“War is only permissible in self-defence, and under well-defined limits. When undertaken, it must be pushed with vigour, but not relentlessly, but only to restore peace and freedom for the worship of God. In any case strict limits must not be transgressed: women, children, old and infirm men should not be molested, nor trees and crops cut down, nor peace withheld when the enemy comes to terms.” — note 204 on verse 2:190

“In general, it may be said that Islam is the religion of peace, goodwill, mutual understanding, and good faith. But it will not acquiesce in wrong-doing, and its men will hold their lives cheap in defence of honour, justice, and the religion which they hold sacred. Their ideal is that of heroic virtue combined with unselfish gentleness and tenderness...” — note 205 on verse 2:191

“At the same time Muslims are commanded to exercise self-restraint as much as possible. Force is a dangerous weapon. It may have to be used for self-defence or self-preservation, but we must always remember that self-restraint is pleasing in the eyes of God. Even when we are fighting, it should be for a principle, not out of passion.” — note 210 on verse 2:194

2. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall

Pickthall was an English novelist who embraced Islam in 1917, gave lectures and sermons on Islam, and published a translation of the Quran in December 1930. His translation also is among the best known ones. Earlier in 1919, he delivered a speech or sermon

in London, published under the title *Tolerance*,³ in which he stated:

“Religious tolerance is of the very essence of Islam. The Quran enjoins it, and Muhammad in his life as Prophet and as ruler showed how it should be practised both in war and peace. He it was who first announced in terms which no one can misconstrue that Allah rewards the good of every creed and nation, not according to what they believe, ... but according to what they do, the effort which they make to help humanity. We Muslims — God forgive us! — who have the sacred words of mercy and of toleration always before us, have often in our history fallen into great intolerance. But let nobody suppose that, when we do so, we are following the great example of Muhammad, or the precepts of our Faith. No; when we do so, we lose sight of that example. No; when we do so, we belie our faith.

“Now please to disabuse your mind of the impression, ... that Muhammad was fanatical or harsh in war, or ever in his life played the aggressor. For twelve years he was patient under cruel persecutions, although at any time he could have raised a faction to protect him from among the idolaters themselves. He bade his followers retire from Mecca, and he himself eventually retired to a place, of which the people were more favourable to him; desiring peace. It was only when his enemies were on the road with a great army, meaning to hound him out of that retreat and make an end of the community, that he proclaimed to his disciples the command to fight. ... They had tried to wreck Islam by warfare, murder, persecution, treachery. And yet Muhammad, when he conquered Mecca, pardoned them. Never was such mercy witnessed in the world before. ...

“As for the Jews and Christians and all those who worship the One God and look to the Day of Judgment — though their priests and rabbis have obscured the truth with vain imaginings, they are simply Muslims who have gone astray. Such of them as do good works, and are not persecutors, are counted on a par with Muslims.

³ *The Islamic Review*, March 1919, see pages 90–95.

The Prophet extended the most perfect tolerance to Jews and Christians, and those religions have at all times been allowed in Muslim lands. Those Jews and Christians who attacked the Prophet or betrayed him, he opposed or punished as the case might be; but that did not impair his toleration of their faith ... But the Prophet and the early Muslims, though assailed on all hands, and threatened with destruction, never wavered from religious tolerance. In their wars against the Christians they respected churches, monasteries, and religious persons, and never forced the conquered folk to change their faith. And this has been the law of El Islam throughout the centuries, though Muslims have occasionally fallen short of it.”

3. Muhammad Asad

By birth a Jew by the name of Leopold Weiss who grew up in Austria, Muhammad Asad (1900–1992) converted to Islam in 1926. His English translation of the Quran with detailed commentary, *The Message of the Quran*, again well-known, was published in 1980. Extracts from his footnotes are given below:

“On the strength of the above categorical prohibition of coercion in anything that pertains to faith or religion, all Islamic jurists, without any exception, hold that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the unbelievers the alternative of ‘conversion or the sword’.” — note 249 on verse 2:256

“Consequently, *jihad* denotes ‘striving in the cause of God’ in the widest sense of this expression: that is to say, it applies not merely to physical warfare but to any righteous struggle in the moral sense as well; thus, for instance, the Prophet described man’s struggle against his own passions and weaknesses as the ‘greatest *jihad*’.” — note 122 on verse 4:95

“This and the following verses lay down unequivocally that only self-defence (in the widest sense of the word) makes war permissible for Muslims. ... The defensive character of a fight ‘in God’s cause’ ... is moreover self-evident in the reference to ‘those

who wage war against you’, and has been still further clarified in 22:39 — ‘permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged’ ... That this early, fundamental principle of self-defence as the only possible justification of war has been maintained throughout the Quran is evident from 60:8, as well as from the concluding sentence of 4:91, both of which belong to a later period than the above verse.” — note 167 on verse 2:190

“Thus, although the believers are enjoined to fight back whenever they are attacked, the concluding words of the above verse make it clear that they must, when fighting, abstain from all atrocities, including the killing of non-combatants.” — note 172 on verse 2:194

“In accordance with the injunctions, ‘if they incline to peace, incline thou to it as well’ (8:61), and ‘if they desist [from fighting], then all hostility shall cease’ (2:193), the believers are obliged to make peace with an enemy who makes it clear that he wants to come to an equitable understanding; similarly, they must show every consideration to individual persons from among the enemies who do not actively participate in the hostilities.” — note 105 on verse 4:86

4. T.B. Irving

Dr Thomas Irving (d. 2002) was an academic and author originally from Canada who accepted Islam in the 1950s, and produced a translation of the Quran first published in 1985 as ‘the first American version’. In a paper about translating the Quran he writes:

“One more point might be mentioned: *Jihad* or the spiritual ‘struggle’ or ‘striving’ is not one of the Five Pillars of Islam. In proper translation it does not mean ‘holy war’ except by extension, but it has been debased by this meaning, which is a journalistic usage.”⁴

⁴ *Islamic Perspectives*, published by the Islamic Foundation, England, 1979, p. 132.

5. Maulvi Chiragh Ali

In 1885 Maulvi Chiragh Ali published from Hyderabad Deccan, India, a comprehensive work in English entitled *A Critical Exposition of the Popular Jihad*. At the outset, he writes as follows:⁵

“In publishing this work, my chief object is to remove the general and erroneous impression from the minds of European and Christian writers regarding Islam, that Mohammad waged wars of conquest, extirpation, as well as of proselytizing against the Koreish, other Arab tribes, the Jews, and Christians; that he held the Koran in one hand and the scimitar in the other, and compelled people to believe in his mission. I have endeavoured in this book, I believe on sufficient grounds, to show that neither the wars of Mohammad were offensive, nor did he in any way use force or compulsion in the matter of belief. All the wars of Mohammad were defensive.” — p. i

Later he quotes a British author as making the allegation that “the one common duty laid upon the Faithful is to be the agents of God’s vengeance on those who believe not”, and writes in reply:

“Mohammad did not wage war against the Koreish and the Jews because they did not believe in his mission, nor because he was to be the instrument of God’s vengeance on them; on the contrary, he said: ‘The truth is from your Lord, let him then who will, believe; and let him who will, be an unbeliever’ [18:29]. ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion’ [2:256]. ... Even during active hostilities, those who did not believe were allowed to come and hear the preaching, and were then conveyed to their place of safety [9:6].” — p. 42

“...Mohammad merely took up arms in the instances of self-preservation. Had he neglected to defend himself after his settlement at Medina against the continued attacks of the Koreish and their allies, he with his followers would, in all probability, have been exterminated. They fought in defence of their lives as well as their moral and religious liberties.

⁵ Edition used here reprinted by Karimsons, Karachi, Pakistan, 1977. The author’s name in the original book is spelt as Moulavi Cheragh Ali.

“In this sense the contest might be called a religious war, as the hostilities were commenced on religious grounds. Because the Koreish persecuted the Moslems, and expelled them for the reason that they had forsaken the religion of their forefathers, i.e., idolatry, and embraced the faith of Islam, the worship of One True God; but it was never a religious war in the sense of attacking the unbelievers aggressively to impose his own religion forcibly on them.” — p. 43

The author devotes an Appendix of 30 pages to a study of the meaning of the word *jihad* as used in the Quran, in which he refers to standard dictionaries of classical Arabic and refutes the wrong translation of this word by Western writers as “war”. He writes:

“It is only a post-classical and technical meaning of *Jihad* to use the word as signifying fighting against an enemy.” — p. 164

“It is admitted by all lexicologists, commentators and jurists that *Jihad* in classical Arabic means to labour, strive earnestly, and that the change of its meaning or the technical signification occurred only in the post-classical period, i.e., long after the publication of the Koran.” — p. 170

“*Jihad* does not mean the waging of war. ... I believe that I have clearly shown by means of a careful comparison between the translators and commentators and the original passages in the Koran, that the word *Jahd* or *Jihad* in the classical Arabic and as used in the Koran does not mean waging war or fighting, but only to do one’s utmost and to exert, labour or toil. ... I do not mean to contend that the Koran does not contain injunctions to fight or wage war. There are many verses enjoining the Prophet’s followers to prosecute a defensive war, but not one of aggression.” — p. 192

6. Sir Muhammad Iqbal

Iqbal, the great national hero of Pakistan, and world-renowned poet and philosopher of Islam, stated in a letter written in Urdu:

“The critic is wrong in saying that ‘Iqbal supports war in this progressive age’. I do not support war, nor can any Muslim do so in view of the clear limits set by the Shariah. According to the

teaching of the Quran, there can only be two forms of *jihad* or war: defensive and corrective. In the first case, that is, when Muslims are persecuted and driven out of their homes, they are allowed, not ordered, to take up the sword.

“The second case, in which *jihad* is obligatory, is given in 49:9 [in the Holy Quran]. Reading those verses carefully you will realize that what was referred to by Sir Samuel Hoare as ‘collective security’ at the meeting of the League of Nations, the Quran has explained the principle of the same with simplicity and eloquence. ... Besides the two kinds of war mentioned above, I know of no other war. To wage war to satisfy territorial greed is prohibited in Islam. By this reasoning, it is also forbidden to raise the sword for the propagation of the faith.”⁶

7. Chief Justice S.A. Rahman

Dr S.A. Rahman, a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in the 1960s, wrote a book entitled *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, reprinted recently. This work of 140 pages consists of a comprehensive discussion of the issue of apostasy as treated by the Quran, the Hadith, their classical and modern translations and commentaries, other writings on Islam old and new, and the earliest Muslim jurists. We quote below the author’s comments and conclusions:⁷

“In matters concerning the individual conscience, the Quran places no fetters on free choice.” — p. 13

“Duress or coercion in matters of belief does not enter into the composition of the social system envisaged by the Quran. Clear guidance in a truly humanitarian spirit of tolerance is given to the Muslims in this field in several verses which recognise the existence of a pluralistic milieu...” — p. 15

“Guidance for the good life is furnished [by the Quran] but not at the cost of suppression of human dignity. Vistas of a future

⁶ *Iqbal Nama*, Part I, Collected Letters of Iqbal, Lahore, 1945, pp. 203–204.

⁷ Edition used here reprinted by Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, India, 2006.

life in which the fruits of action in the present life are to be harvested are also held up before the thinking individual, but the existential choice is left up to the individual himself. No reward can be earned by action motivated by coercion ... Islam to be Islam must be accepted absolutely voluntarily by a free person.” — p. 31

“A principle that stands out conspicuously in the socio-political dispensation of the Book of God is epitomised in the noble words: ‘There is no compulsion in religion’. This principle finds endorsement in several other verses of the Quran, which manifestly tolerate, though they disapprove of, divergences from the Straight Path. ... Man is free to choose between truth and falsehood and the Prophet’s function is to convey the message, exemplify it in his own life and to leave the rest to God — he is no warder over men to compel them to adopt particular beliefs. Liberty of conscience is thus a value of good life itself and must be kept in view when studying the incidents and effects of Hadith reports, the practice during the Rightly-Guided Caliphate or the opinions of Doctors of Law which must not depart from the letter or the spirit of God’s Word.” — p. 130

“Our study of the relevant Quranic verses establishes that the punishment for apostasy is postponed to the Hereafter, in the same way as that for original disbelief. There is absolutely no mention in the Quran of mundane punishment for defection from the faith by a believer ... He should, however, be free to profess and propagate the faith of his choice, so long as he keeps within the bounds of law and morality, and to enjoy all other rights as a peaceful citizen of the State, in common with his Muslim co-citizens.” — pp. 130–131

8. Dr G.W. Leitner

Although not a Muslim, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (d. 1899) was an academic, linguist and scholar of Arabic and Islam, being well known as the man who built the mosque at Woking (in Surrey, England), in 1889. In a paper on *Jihad* published in his *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, for October 1886, he has expressed similar

views to those already quoted above.⁸ While trying to avoid repetition we reproduce some of his other observations of interest:

“... when people say that *jihad* means the duty of the Muhammadans to wage war against a non-Muhammadan government or country and call this *jihad* (although it is possible to conceive that under certain circumstances this use of the word might be legitimate), they really talk nonsense, and cast an undeserved libel on a religion with which they are not acquainted.”

“When some people applied to Muhammad for permission to join in a holy war against those who were oppressing Muhammadans, he replied to them, “Your true *jihad* is in endeavouring to serve your parents.” The Koran, when using the word *jihad*, seems preferentially to use it for war with sin: *Whoever wages jihad in morality We will show him the true way*. Elsewhere (25:52), the Koran exhorts us to fight infidels with the “great *jihad*”, the sword of the spirit and the arguments of the Muhammadan Bible. In the traditions regarding the sayings and doings of the Prophet, a band of holy warriors is returning cheerfully from a victorious war with infidels to the peace of their homes and the tranquil observation of their faith. In passing the Prophet, they exclaim: ‘We have returned from the small *jihad*, the war with the aggressors on the Muhammadan faith, to the great *jihad*, the war with sin.’ ”

“No violence is to be used in religious matters, although the popular impression is that this is the very essence of Muhammadanism. The second chapter of the Koran distinctly lays down, *Let there be no violence in religion* (2:256). This passage was particularly directed to some of Muhammad’s first proselytes, who, having sons who had been brought up in idolatry or Judaism, wished to compel them to embrace Muhammadanism. Indeed, even when the mothers of non-Muhammadan children wanted to take them away from their believing relatives, Muhammad prevented every attempt to retain them.”

“It is, on the contrary, distinctly laid down in the chapter

⁸ The entire paper may be read at:
www.wokingmuslim.org/pers/leitner/jihad.htm

called *The Pilgrimage*, that the object of *jihad* is to protect mosques, churches, synagogues, and monasteries from destruction (22:40), and we have yet to learn the name of the Christian crusader whose object it was to protect mosques or synagogues. Of course, when the Arabs were driven from Spain, to which they had brought their industry and learning, by Ferdinand and Isabella, and were driven into opposition to Christians, the modern meaning of *jihad* as hostility to Christianity was naturally accentuated. Indeed, *jihad* is so essentially an *effort* for the protection of Muhammadanism against assault, that the Muhammadan generals were distinctly commanded not to attack any place in which the Muhammadan call to prayer could be performed or in which a single Muhammadan could live unmolested as a witness to the faith.”

9. Sir T.W. Arnold

There is a renowned scholarly historical research work entitled *The Preaching of Islam — A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, of some 460 pages, by the British, Christian orientalist Sir Thomas Arnold. He writes in the Introduction:⁹

“In the hours of its political degradation, Islam has achieved some of its most brilliant spiritual conquests: on two great historical occasions, infidel barbarians have set their feet on the necks of the followers of the Prophet ... and in each case the conquerors have accepted the religion of the conquered. Unaided also by the temporal power, Muslim missionaries have carried their faith into Central Africa, China and the East India Islands.” — p. 2

So very far from Islam spreading by force, even those unbelieving nations which defeated and ruled over the Muslims in later Islamic history eventually embraced Islam, as Arnold shows.

⁹ Quotations here are from the second edition (Constable & Co., London 1913). Sir Thomas Walker Arnold (1864–1930), after studying at Cambridge, served as teacher and professor of philosophy in famous colleges in India, and from 1921 till his death was Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He was an eminent Christian scholar of Arabic and Persian, and of Islamic cultural history.

Then quoting earlier verses of the Quran revealed at Makkah which tell Muslims to preach Islam by argument, he writes:

“Similar injunctions are found also in the Medinite Surahs, delivered at a time when Muhammad was at the head of a large army and at the height of his power.” — p. 3–4

There was, thus, no difference in the teachings of Islam in the later verses of the Quran from the earlier ones as regards preaching the faith peacefully by argument. Arnold goes on to write:

“...the Prophet himself stands at the head of a long series of Muslim missionaries *who have won an entrance for their faith into the hearts of unbelievers*. Moreover it is not in the cruelties of the persecutor or the fury of the fanatic that we should look for the evidences of the missionary spirit of Islam, any more than in the exploits of *that mythical personage, the Muslim warrior with sword in one hand and Quran in the other* — but in the quiet, unobtrusive labours of the preacher and the trader who have carried their faith into every quarter of the globe. Such peaceful methods of preaching and persuasion were not adopted, as some would have us believe, only when political circumstances made force and violence impossible or impolitic, but were most strictly enjoined in numerous passages of the Quran, as follows.” — p. 4–5 (italics ours)

The author illustrates this by quoting ten verses from the Quran which belong to the earlier period. He then writes:

“Such precepts are not confined to the Meccan Surahs, but are found in abundance also in those delivered at Medina, as follows.” — p. 6

Here Arnold quotes seven verses of the later period, for example, “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256) and “obey God and obey the Messenger; but if you turn away, the duty of Our Messenger is only to deliver the message clearly” (64:12). Thus he disposes of the mistaken notion that verses revealed during the later stages of the Holy Prophet’s mission taught intolerance and use of violence to spread Islam.

Speaking of the mass conversions to Islam after the conquest

of Makkah by the Holy Prophet, Arnold writes:

“Among those who came in after the fall of Mecca were some of the most bitter persecutors of Muhammad in the earlier days of his mission, to whom his noble forbearance and forgiveness now gave a place in the brotherhood of Islam.” — p. 38

“The Arab tribes were thus impelled to give in their submission to the Prophet, not merely as the head of the strongest military force in Arabia, but as the exponent of a theory of social life that was making all others weak and ineffective. Muhammad had succeeded in introducing into the anarchical society of his time a sentiment of national unity, a consciousness of rights and duties towards one another such as the Arabs had not felt before.” — p. 40–41

Arnold then states the object of his book:

“Thus, from the very beginning, Islam bears the stamp of a missionary religion that *seeks to win the hearts of men*, to convert them and *persuade them* to enter the brotherhood of the faithful; and as it was in the beginning, so has it continued to be up to the present day, as will be the object of the following pages to show.” — p. 44 (Italics ours)

Moving on to the conversion of Christian tribes to Islam during and shortly after the Holy Prophet’s time, Arnold expresses this view:

“That force was not the determining factor in these conversions may be judged from the amicable relations that existed between the Christian and the Muslim Arabs. Muhammad himself had entered into treaty with several Christian tribes, promising them his protection and guaranteeing them the free exercise of their religion and to their clergy undisturbed enjoyment of their old rights and authority. A similar bond of friendship united his followers with their fellow-countrymen of the older faith, many of whom voluntarily came forward to assist the Muslims in their military expeditions...” — p. 47–48

“From the examples given above of the toleration extended towards the Christian Arabs by the victorious Muslims of the first

century of the Hijrah and continued by succeeding generations, we may surely infer that *those Christians tribes that did embrace Islam, did so of their own choice and free will.*” — p. 51–52 (italics ours)

In his conclusion, Arnold writes:

“...on the whole, unbelievers have enjoyed under Muhammadan rule a measure of toleration, the like of which is not to be found in Europe until quite modern times. Forcible conversion was forbidden, in accordance with the precepts of the Quran... The very existence of so many Christian sects and communities in countries that have been for centuries under Muhammadan rule is an abiding testimony to the toleration they have enjoyed, and shows that the persecutions they have from time to time been called upon to endure at the hands of bigots and fanatics, have been excited by some special and local circumstances rather than inspired by a settled principle of intolerance. ... *But such oppression is wholly without the sanction of Muhammadan law, either religious or civil.* The passages in the Quran that forbid forced conversion and enjoin preaching as the sole legitimate method of spreading the faith have already been quoted above ... and the same doctrine is upheld by the decisions of the Muhammadan doctors. — p. 420–421 (italics ours)

“... it would have been easy for any of the powerful rulers of Islam to have utterly rooted out their Christian subjects or banished them from their dominions, as the Spaniards did the Moors, or the English the Jews for nearly four centuries. ... The muftis [Muslim religious experts] who turned the minds of their masters from such a cruel practice, did so as the exponents of Muslim law and Muslim tolerance.” — p. 422–423