

Lecture Two: Defence or Aggression

A- Christianity's Protest against Islam

Previously we stated that Christianity has determined that the concept of jihad is a weakness within Islam. This is so because they believe the law of jihad means that Islam is a religion of war, and not peace, while Christianity is a religion of peace. In their view, war is inherently bad and peace is good, and any religion that is divinely founded must advocate only peace, a good thing, and not war, a bad thing.

Until yesterday in historical time, Christianity had analyzed things within the context of morals exclusive to the Christian context; namely, morals that call for one to “turn the other cheek” and foster limpidity. But today Christianity has switched positions and changed its face. It now carries its propaganda through an alternative channel; namely, the channel of calling for essential human rights, including the essential human right to freedom.

From the channel of war as a total opposition to the right of freedom it has moved to freedom of belief, to freedom of will, to freedom of choice of religion, nationality and other things. But we Muslims look at the issue from both angles, both from an angle of morality and moral standards, and the angle of human rights and “new” human standards. I stated the answer to this matter in the previous sitting. It is self-evident and clear that what the Christians are saying is not at all valid.

Of course, peace is good. There is no doubt about it. And war, for the sake of aggression against other people – people who have no intentions against the aggressor, no intentions against that aggressive society – war for the sake of occupying that unsuspecting nation's lands and of grabbing their property, for the sake of enslaving its people, for the sake of subjecting them to the influence and laws of the aggressors, is undoubtedly bad. That which is bad is transgression and aggression. Aggression is bad.

But all war, on all sides, is not always aggression. War can be aggressive and it can also be a reply to aggression, for sometimes the reply to aggression must be given by force. There are times that force is the only reply that can be given.

Any religion, if it is a complete religion, must have thought about what it will do on that day when it is faced with aggression, or, let us suppose, it is not itself faced with aggression but another people are. It is for such a day that religion must have a law of war, a law of jihad. The Christians say that peace is good, and we agree; peace is good. But what about submission, humiliation and misery? Are submission, humiliation and misery also good?

If one power is faced with another power and both advocate peace, both of them desire, in today's terms, to live in peaceful coexistence -- this is peace. When both powers can live together without one power wishing to oppress the other, both of them willing to live in peace with reciprocal rights and mutual respect, then this is peace. This peace is good and essential. There is a time, however, when one group is the aggressor and, on the pretext of war being bad, the other group accepts surrender, and the humiliation of tolerating the other's aggression becomes imposed on it.

This cannot be called peace.

Rather, this is the willing acceptance of humiliation and misery. Such a submission in the face of force can never be called peace. For example, while you are passing a desert, an armed bandit attacks you suddenly and orders you to "get off your car quickly, raise your hand and give me anything you have."

Here you submit yourself and say to him: "I am an advocate of peace and opposed to war completely. I'll accept anything you order. I give you my money, my luggage and baggage, my car and I'll obey anything you say. Say anything you want and I will give it to you, because I advocate peace."

This is not advocating peace; this is accepting humiliation. In this case a man must defend his property and his prestige unless he knows for certain that in this defense his property will be abolished, his blood will be shed, and in short, there is no purpose in defense whatsoever.

Of course, it must be also known that often blood is very effective, and fighting is very worthwhile. But sometimes resistance here is not wise and one must sacrifice one's money and wealth in order to save one's life.

There is a difference between advocating peace and accepting humiliation. Islam never permits humiliation; at the same time, it strongly advocates peace.

I wish to stress the importance of this issue, which Christians and others have used as a pretext to protest Islam, claiming it to be Islam's weak point. They claim the life of the Holy Prophet was one where he advocated Islam as a religion of the sword; that Muslims raised the sword over the heads of people and forced them to choose between Islam and death; and that people accepted Islam only in order to stay alive.

Therefore, I think it is necessary for us to discuss this issue thoroughly and minutely, and we will use not only verses from the Qur'an, but also confirmed traditions of the Prophet and glimpses from his life. We

shall start with the Qur'anic verses:

B- Unconditional verses about Jihad

I said that some of the Qur'anic instructions about jihad against kuffar (disbelievers) are unconditional, which means they state only this: "O Prophet Fight with the Kuffar and the hypocrites." Or, in the case the verse pertaining to which we recited, after a period which is given to the polytheists (four months), if they have not adopted Islam or haven't migrated, then they are to be killed. (Note: Whether this migration means to the surroundings of Mecca and around, or elsewhere, is a question to be discussed later.) Or that verse with which we began our discussion and which is about the People of the Book.

« Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth» (9:29).

or another verse:

« O Prophet! strive hard against the unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them. » (9:73).

If we were to pay attention only to this verse, we would say that Islam fully instructs the Muslims to fight against kuffar and hypocrites and they (Muslims) must never be in a state of peace with them, that Muslims must fight them, as vehemently as they can. They *must* fight them. If we maintain this rhetoric, we will come to believe that the Qur'an unconditionally tells us to fight the non-Muslims.

I stated, however, that there is a scholastic rule that when both an unconditional and a conditional command exist, i.e. when there is an instruction that in one place is unconditional but in another place has a condition attached, then, according to the ulama', the unconditional must be interpreted as the conditional. The verses I have just recited are unconditional.

Other verses exist that are conditional, meaning that they read like this: "O Muslims. Fight against those polytheists for the reason that they are in aggression against you, because they are in a state of war with you, and therefore you definitely have to fight against them."

Thus it becomes clear that where the Qur'an says: "O Prophet Fight against the kuffar and hypocrites," it means that we must fight those kuffar and hypocrites who are fighting us and who will continue fighting if we fight them.

C- Conditional Verses

In Suratul-Baqarah, the Qur'an tells us:

« Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth

not transgressors.» (2: 190)

The Qur'an calls to those of faith, to fight those who will fight them – i.e. fight them because they are fighting – but do not violate the limit. What does this mean, not to violate the limit? Does it mean to not be the transgressor?

The obvious meaning of this verse is that we are to fight only those who are fighting us, not anyone else. Moreover, we are to fight only on the battleground, against a certain group of people (soldiers employed by the other side), the men of war whom they prepared for war against us. It is these who we are to fight, and we cannot turn away in cowardice. We must cross swords, exchange bullets, and fight.

But with everyone else – those who are not men of war, soldiers, not in a state of combat, including old men, women of all ages, and children – we cannot interfere, and we cannot transgress their rights. Acts of transgressions we are forbidden from doing include, among other things, ruining their economic resources (cutting down their trees, filling their canals).

Do not be misled to believe that the destruction of homes and property is inevitable if we are to engage in war with enemy soldiers. The question of avoiding these occasions is a separate issue. In Islam, military operations directed at damaging houses and other personal property are forbidden unless there is no other option.

Another conditional verse is the one we discussed from Suratul-Hajj. In fact these are five to six consecutive verses, and the first revealed verses on jihad. These verses say that because the other side has lifted its sword in opposition to us, we can do the same.

In another verse of Surah at-Tawba, we are told:

«... fight the Pagans all together as they fight you all together...» (9:36)

D- Rushing to the Defense of the Oppressed

Before touching this subject and the verses relating to it, a point must be mentioned. I stated that the permission for jihad is subject to some conditions. What are these conditions? One is that the opposing side must be in a state of aggression. Those comprising this side are attacking us, and because they are fighting against us, we must fight them. Are the conditions for jihad in fact limited to only this scenario that the other side wishes to fight against us?

Or are there other factors? Perhaps the other side does not propose to fight us, but is guilty of a gross injustice towards another group of human beings. We have it in our power to save those human beings from the clutches of that aggressor. If we do nothing, the effect is that we have helped the oppressor's oppression against the oppressed.

We may be in a situation whereby a party has not transgressed against us but has committed some type of injustice against a group from another people, who may be Muslims or non-Muslims. If they are Muslims – like today's plight of the Palestinians who have been exiled from their homes, whose wealth has been seized, who have been subjected to all kinds of transgression – while, for the moment, the transgressor has no intentions against us, is it permissible for us in such circumstances to hurry to the help of those oppressed Muslims and deliver them, or is this is not permissible?

Certainly this too is permissible. In fact, it is obligatory. It is not a case of commencing hostilities when we rush to the defense of the oppressed, especially if they are Muslims, to deliver them from the clutches of oppression.

If the tyrannized person or party is not a Muslim, then the tyranny can be of two types. There is a time when the oppressor has positioned a people in a vacuum and blocks the call of Islam. Islam gives itself the right to spread its message throughout the world, but this depends upon there being the freedom for it to spread.

Imagine some government that says to the Muslims who are delivering the call of Islam to a nation: “You have no right to say what you are saying. We do not allow it.” In these circumstances it is not permissible for us to fight with that nation, with those people who are blameless and unaware.

But is it permissible for us to fight against that corrupt regime which props itself up with a putrid ideology that it uses like a chain around the necks of the people to imprison them in a blind alley, isolates from the call of truth; a regime which acts as a barrier against that call? Is it permissible for us to fight that regime so as to remove that obstacle?

Or, in real terms, is it permissible for us to fight against that prison of depression or not? In the view of Islam this is also permissible for this is itself an uprising against zulm, against injustice and oppression. It may be the case that the mazlum, the wronged, the oppressed, are not aware of the nature of the injustice and have not sought for help. In fact, there is no need for them to request help.

The seeking of help raises another issue. Assuming that the oppressed seek help from us, is it permissible or obligatory for us to help them? Even if they do not apply for help, is it still permissible for us to help them, or even obligatory? The answer is that it is not necessary for them to seek our help.

The simple fact that the oppressed are oppressed, that an oppressive regime has erected a wall, a barrier, for its own well-being, and has prevented a nation from becoming aware of the Call wherein lies the prosperity and happiness of that nation, the Call which if they hear and become aware of, they are sure to accept; prompts Islam to say that we can break that barrier which, between it and those people, exists in the form of a repressive government.

E- Wars of Early Islam

Many of the wars of Early Islam were fought for this very reason. The Muslims who went to war used to say that they had no conflict with the people of the world; rather, they were fighting governments in order to rescue peoples from the misery and slavery, imposed on them by those governments.

When Rustam, the pre-Islamic champion of Persia asked those Muslims what was their goal, they replied: "To change the worship of worshippers from the worship of those who worship to the worship of God." – "Our aim is to free these creatures of God, these people whom, by your tricks and violence, you have placed under the yoke of slavery and bondage to your own selves.

We are going to deliver them from the yoke of bondage to you. We are going to set them free, make them the devotees of God the Sublime, the devotees of their Creator; not the devotees of what is created by Him just as they themselves are."

In the letters that the Holy Prophet of Islam wrote to the People of the Book he particularly used to include this Qur'anic verse:

«Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah."» (3:64)

This verse instructed the Prophet to invite the People of the Book (those same people about whom the instructions of jihad were revealed) to accept an expression, an expression that was the same in respect to them as it is in respect to us. It does not say that they are to accept an expression that is for our benefit and related only to us. It says that they are to accept the expression that is the same for all and the concern of all.

If, for example, we say to a people: "Come, O people, accept our language," then those people have the right to say: "Why? We ourselves have a language, why should we come and accept yours?" Or we might say: "Come and accept our special habits and customs," and they may say: "Why should we accept your habits and customs? We have our own."

But if we say: "Come and accept this thing that is not ours and not yours, but is everyone's; God is the God of us all, so accept Him," this relates no more only to us. When we say: "Worship He Who is both our Creator and your Creator, rather He Who is the Creator of all," then this is the same for them as it is for us.

The Qur'an says:

«... come to common terms as between us and you....» (3:64)

Only God, the Creator of us all, is to be worshipped. And another expression that is supremely, profitable both for us and for them is:

«... that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah ...» (3:64)

This means that the social order of master and servant is canceled, and the order of equality between human beings is established.

This verse reveals that if we fight, we fight for a thing that is the same in regards to all mankind. Having stated this, we can now say that one of the conditions which the unconditional verse can be subjected to is that if a people are bearing the oppression of a certain group, it becomes permissible for us to fight to free those people.

Now there are two other verses that I wish to recite, the first one of which is a verse from Suratul-Anfal:

« And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah altogether and everywhere...» (8:39)

What is the meaning of this? It means that we are to fight with those who create chaos amongst us and who want to cause us Muslims to relinquish our religion. We are to fight until the chaos has been eliminated. This is itself a condition. A further condition is contained in verse 75 from Surah an-Nisa:

« And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)? » (4:75)

O Muslims why are you not fighting in the way of God and in the way of those men, women, and children, who are helpless in distress? Why do you not fight to save them?

F– Interpreting the Unconditional as the Conditional

These five verses that we have spoken about have shown us that, if the instructions of Islam about jihad given in some places are unconditional, in other places they are conditional, and in the terms of the scholars, the unconditional must be interpreted as the conditional.

G– No Compulsion in Religion

In the Qur'an we have a group of verses which specify that religion is to be accepted freely and cannot be forced upon someone. This confirms what we have been saying; namely, that in Islam no one can be coerced, be told either to become Muslims or die. These verses illuminate those unconditional verses in a different way.

One is a part of Ayatul-kursi (2:255–257) and is well-known;

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ

«La ikraha fid-din. Qat-tabayanar-rushdo min al-ghayy.»

« **Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error** » (2:256)

This means that we must clearly explain the right path to people; its own reality, is manifest. There is no place for the use of compulsion in religion, no one must be obliged to accept the religion of Islam. This verse is explicit in its meaning.

In the Qur'anic commentaries it is written that an Ansari who had previously been a polytheist had two sons who had converted to Christianity. These two sons had become fascinated by Christianity and very devoted to it, but their father was now a Muslim and upset that his sons had become Christians. He went to the Holy Prophet and said to him: "Rasul Allah! What can I do to these sons of mine who have become Christians? Whatever I have tried, still they do not accept Islam. Do you give me permission to force them to leave their religion and become Muslims?" The Prophet said: "No. La ikraha fid-din, there is no compulsion in religion."

About the circumstances in which this verse was revealed, it is also written that there were two tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj. They were of the original inhabitants of Medina. At the dawn of Islam they lived there together several large Jewish tribes who had come to Medina at a later period. One was the tribe, Bani Nazil, and another was the Bani Qoraizeh, while there was yet another large tribe of Jews that lived on the fringes of the city.

The Jews, having Judaism as their religion and having also a holy book, came to be more or less considered as the learned of that society; meanwhile, amongst the original inhabitants of Medina, who were polytheists and generally illiterate, there had newly come into existence a small group also able to read and write. The Jews, as a result of their superior culture and the wide dimension of their thoughts, exercised quite an influence on this group.

Thus, despite the fact that the religion of the Aws and Khazraj was different from that of the Jews, these peoples allowed themselves to be influenced by Jewish ideas. As a result, they would sometimes send their children to the Jews to be educated, and while they were among the Jews, the children would once in a while renounce their pagan religion of polytheism and convert to Judaism.

When the Holy Prophet entered Medina, a group of these boys from that city were being trained by the Jews and had chosen for themselves the Jewish religion. There were others who chose not to renounce. The parents of these children became Muslims, yet the children did not give up Judaism.

And when it was settled that the Jews should leave Medina (as a punishment for the chaos they had instigated), those children also left with their fellow Jews. Their fathers came to the Holy Prophet asking him for permission for them to separate their children from the Jews, to force them to relinquish Judaism

and to become Muslims. The Holy Prophet did not grant this permission. They said: “O Rasul Allah! Allow us to force them to leave their religion and embrace Islam.” The Holy Prophet told them: “No. Now that they have chosen to go with the Jews, let them go with them.” And the commentators say that it was then that the verse:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ

«La ikraha fid-din. Qat-tabayanar-rushdo min al-ghayy» (2:256)

was revealed.

Another famous verse is:

« Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious... » (16: 125)

The verse asks people to invite others to the path of your Rabb, not with the use of the sword, but with beautiful admonitions and advice.

« ...and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious... » (16: 125)

This says that we must dispute beautifully those who dispute with us. This verse has introduced clearly the way for Islam to be embraced.

In another verse we are told:

«Say, "The truth is from your Lord": Let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it)...» (18:29)

Whoever wants to believe will believe, and whoever wants to be a kafir will be a kafir. This verse makes clear that faith and rejection, iman and kufr, must be freely chosen, and cannot be forced onto others. Islam says that whoever wants to believe will believe, and whoever does not want to, will not.

There is also this verse:

«If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed,– all who are on earth! wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe! » (10:99)

The verse is addressed to the Prophet. The Holy Prophet really loved the people and wanted them to be true believers. The Qur'an says that the use of force in the matter of belief is meaningless. If force was valid, God Himself, with His own Power of creation would have made believers of all the people, but belief is a thing that people must choose for themselves.

God with all His Powers of creation and compulsion has not forced mankind to be true believers and has given them the free will to choose. Thus, for the same reason the Prophet also was to let them choose for themselves. He whose heart has the desire will become a good believer, and he whose heart does not want to, will not.

Another verse addressed to the Prophet says:

«It may be thou frettest thy soul with grief, that they do not become Believers.» (26: 3)

« If (such) were Our Will, We could send down to them from the sky a Sign, to which they would bend their necks in humility. » (26:4)

Here God says that if He wanted to send down from the sky a sign, an affliction, and tell the people that they must either become true believers or be destroyed by that affliction, all the people under compulsion would become believers. But, He does not do so because He wants the people to choose for themselves.

These verses further clarify the idea of jihad in Islam and make clear that jihad in Islam is not that which some self-interested parties have said it is. These verses clarify that Islam's aim is not compulsion; that it does not command Muslims to raise the sword over the head of whoever is not a Muslim and offer the simple choice of Islam or death. That this is not the purpose of jihad.

H- Peace

There is another group of verses occurring in the Qur'an which are also worth mentioning. On the whole, Islam gives much importance to the issue of peace. In one verse, it is explicitly defined:

«Was-solho Khayro» (...settlement is best...) (4: 128)

Though, as we have said, peace is not the same as violence, misery and submission to an oppressor. In another verse we are told:

« O ye who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly...» (2:208)

But more illuminating still is this verse:

«But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah: for He is One that heareth and knoweth (all things). » (8:61)

Here, the Prophet is told that if the opponents advocate peace and make sincere efforts to obtain it, he, too, should make peace. If they sincerely desire peace, he, too, is to desire peace. These verses clearly show that the soul of Islam is the soul of peace.

In another verse which is in Surah an-Nisa, the Prophet is also told:

«Therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (Guarantees of) peace, then Allah Hath opened no way for you (to war against them)..» (4:90)

“O Prophet, if they have withdrawn from war, and have not fought against you, and have made a manifestation of peace, if they have said that they are ready to make peace with you, then God does not give you permission to advance any further and fight them.”

In the same surah, it is further stated, this time about the hypocrites:

« But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them; and (in any case) take no friends or helpers from their ranks. Except those who join a group between whom and you there is a treaty (of peace), or those who approach you with hearts restraining them from fighting you as well as fighting their own people...» (4:89-90)

If the hypocrites who are fighting us run away, they are to be taken and killed wherever they are. They are not to be taken as friends; nor are we allowed to accept help from them, except from those who have a treaty with people with whom we have a treaty, and who are ready to come to an agreement with us. These we are not to kill and with those who are tired of fighting, we are also not to fight.

Thus, we have looked at four series of verses. One series consisted of those verses that tell us unconditionally to fight; if we had ears and heard only these and not the others, it would be possible for us to think that Islam is a religion of war.

The second series consist of verses that give the order to fight but with certain conditions; conditions such as the opposing side being in a state of war with us, or a mass of Muslims or non-Muslims having been placed under the heels of a group from amongst themselves which has trampled on their freedom and rights.

The third series of verses make it perfectly clear to us that the call of Islam is not sounded with any force of arms.

And in the fourth group Islam decisively announces its love of peace.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/jihad-holy-war-islam-and-its-legitimacy-quran-murtadha-mutahhari/lecture-two-defence-or-aggression#comment-0>