whole, without disregarding the spiritual dimension of their existence and their spiritual needs, and without forgetting that human life is not limited to this moral life and that all people have a great craving for eternity, democracy could reach its peak of perfection and bring even more happiness to humanity. Islamic principles of equality, tolerance, and justice can help it do just that.

CHAPTER 5

Religious Liberty: A Muslim Perspective

Mohamed Talbi

Born in 1921 in Tunis, Mohamed Talbi is one of Tunisia’s most respected historians and an influential figure in the current reformist Muslim discourse. An accomplished and well-respected Professor of History at the University of Tunis, he is also an acknowledged authority on Qur’anic exegetics and Islamic thought. As a historian, Talbi specializes in the history of medieval North Africa. As a scholar of Islam, his primary focus is to explore and elaborate on the essentially pluralist nature of Islam and its detailed attention to mutual respect (ikhrām mutabādala) and dialogue (hiwāt). Not surprisingly, Talbi is an active advocate of interfaith dialogue between Islam and other world religions. Similarly, he has expounded on the synthesis between Qur’anic principles and modernity, particularly liberal democracy and equality between the sexes.

Talbi has published two highly significant works on Islamic thought, namely ‘I‘yd Allah (Families of God) and ‘Ummat al-Wasat (Community of Moderation), both in Arabic. Families of God comprises questions posed to Talbi on a variety of Islamic issues, and his answers. Community of Moderation contains a wide range of essays on topics related to Islam that Talbi considers important. The following essay, which in many ways encapsulates Talbi’s thesis on the relationship between Islam and pluralism, is among one of his few publications in English. The essay originally appeared in Mohamed Talbi, “Religious Liberty: A Muslim Perspective,” in Leonard Swindler (ed), Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue (Lewiston, NY: The Edinboro Mellon Press, 1992), pp 465–82.

From old relations to a new context

From the outset we have to remember that the problem of religious liberty as a common human concern and international preoccupation is relatively new. In former times the problem was totally irrelevant. During antiquity all felt that it was natural to worship the deities of their city. It was the task of these deities to protect the house, look after the family, and ensure the welfare of the state. Along with their worshippers, they took the rough with the smooth. The deities of Carthage, for example, were by nature the
enemies of the deities of Rome. In that context the refusal to worship the
deities of the city was felt essentially as an act of disloyalty towards the
state.

In the beginning the situation was almost the same in the biblical tra-
dition. In the Bible, Yahweh acts as the Hebrews’ God. God constantly warns
the people not to worship any other deity and to follow the Torah. This
people, with its one God, is also an association of an ethnic entity—the 12
tribes descended from Abraham via Isaac and Jacob—with a land, Israel.
The Hebrew community is an ideal prototype of unity: it obeys at one
and the same time the *ius gentium, ius loci, et religionis*, the law of blood,
thieves, and religion. It is the perfect prototype of an ethnically homoge-
nous community rooted in religion and a land shaped into a state. In a
way, to speak of religious liberty in such a case is literally absurd. There
was no choice other than adhering to the state community or leaving it.
Therefore Jews who converted to another religion *ipso facto* ceased to belong
to their state-community. Their conversions were felt as betrayals, and as
such they warranted the penalty of death. If we dwell on the case of the
Jewish community as a prototype, it is because that case is not without
some similarities to the classical Islamic *Ummah* as it has been shaped by
radical theology.

For historical reasons, the situation changed completely with the appear-
cance of Christian preaching and the destruction of the Jewish state in 70CE.
From the beginning Christian preaching was not linked with a state: Jesus
ordered his disciples “to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and
unto God the things which are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). This revolutionary
attempt to dissociate the state and the religion and to ensure the freedom
of individual conscience failed. The time was not yet ripe. Consequently
the early Christians and the Jews after 70CE were often considered disloyal
objects by the Roman Empire because of their refusal to pay homage to the
cities of their city and of their social group. Accordingly, they were often
treated as rebels, were even called atheists—because they were monotheists!
He right to self-determination and religious liberty was denied to them as
individuals.

To cut a long story short, let us say that political power and religion
reserved more or less, or resumed, their old relations. They needed each
ther too much. The intolerance of the dominant social group asserted itself
everywhere in the world with internal and external wars and many forms of
violence or less severe discrimination. Of course the Islamic world, though rela-
tively tolerant, was no exception. As everywhere else in the world, human
rights have been violated in this area, and it still happens that they are, here
and there, more or less overridden. That does not mean, however, as we shall
see, that Islam as such authorizes the violation of these fundamental rights.

Now, to avoid looking only on the dark side of things, we should note
that our common past was not entirely so somber and so ugly. We can also
cite some brilliant periods of tolerance, respect, comprehension, and
dialogue. Nevertheless, we had to wait until the nineteenth century to see
freedom of conscience clearly claimed. Political and philosophical liberalism
were then in vogue, but in fact what was claimed was not so much the right
of freedom of conscience as the right not to believe. Thus the concept of
religious liberty unfortunately became synonymous with secularism, agnost-
icism, and atheism. As a result, a stubborn fight was launched against it.
For us to deal with the subject honestly and with equanimity, we need to
free ourselves of this false identification.

It must be granted that today religious liberty is, as a matter of fact,
definitively rooted in our social life. Since the Declaration of Human Rights
in 1948, this concept has become an essential part of international law.
Moreover, we already live in a pluralistic world, and our world is going to
be more and more pluralistic in the near future. I have written elsewhere
that each person has the right to be different and that at the same time our
planet is already too small for all our ambitions and dreams. In this new
world, which is expanding rapidly before our eyes, there is no longer room
for exclusiveness. We have to accept each other as we are. Diversity is the law
of our time. Today, by virtue of an increasingly comprehensive and sophisti-
cated mass media, every person is truly the neighbor of every other person.

In our Islamic countries we have since the beginning been in the habit
of living side by side with communities of different faiths. It has not been
evertheless, 6,700 years ago, some recent events again make painfully clear. However, it is
only recently that we have begun to be confronted with secularism. It is now
our turn to experience from inside the growth of agnosticism and atheism.
We have to be conscious of this overwhelming change in our societies and
accordingly we have to exercise our theological thinking in this new and
unprecedented context.

Before going further we must first ask more precisely what religious
liberty is. Is it only the right to be an unbeliever? One may indeed say
that religious liberty has very often been exclusively identified with atheism.
However, this is only one aspect of the question, and from my point of view
a negative one. In fact, religious liberty is basically the right to decide for
onself, without any kind of pressure, fear, or anxiety, whether to believe or
not to believe, the right to assume with full consciousness one’s destiny—
the right, of course, to jettison every kind of faith as superstitions inherited
from the Dark Ages, but also the right to espouse the faith of one’s choice, o worship, and to bear witness freely. Is this definition in harmony with the Qur’an’s basic teachings?

The Qur’an’s basic principles

In my opinion, religious liberty is basically grounded, from a Qur’anic perspective, first and foremost on the divinely ordered nature of humanity. A human is not just another being among many others. Among the whole range of creatures only humans have duties and obligations. They are exceptional beings. They cannot be reduced to their bodies because, bove everything else, humans are spirits, spirits which have been given the ower to conceive the Absolute and to ascend to God. If humans have this exceptional power, this privileged position in creation, it is because God breathed into him something of His spirit” (32:9). Of course humans, like all living animals, are material. They have bodies created “from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape” (15:28). But they received the Spirit, they have two sides: a lower side—the clay—and a higher side—the Spirit of God. This higher side, comments A. Yusuf Ali, “if rightly used, would give man superiority over other creatures.” Humanity’s privileged position in the order of creation is strikingly illustrated in the Qur’an in the scene where the angels are ordered to prostrate themselves before Adam (15:29, 3:72), the heavenly prototype of humanity. In a way, and provided we keep humanity in its proper place as creature, we may as Muslims, along with other members of Abraham’s spiritual descendants, Jews and Christians, y that humanity was created in God’s image. A hadith (a saying of the Prophet), although questioned, authorizes this statement.

So we can say that on the level of the Spirit, all persons, whatever their physical or intellectual abilities and aptitudes may be, are truly equal. They ve the same “Breath” of God in them, and by virtue of this “Breath” they have the ability to ascend to God and to respond freely to God’s call. Consequently, they have the same dignity and sacredness, and because of is dignity and sacredness they are fully and equally entitled to enjoy the right to self-determination on earth and for the hereafter. Thus from a Qur’anic perspective we may say that human rights are rooted in what every man is by nature, and this is by virtue of God’s plan and creation. Now goes without saying that the cornerstone of all human rights is religious liberty, for religion, which is the “explanation of the meaning of life and w to live accordingly,” is the most fundamental and comprehensive of man institutions.

It is evident from a Muslim perspective that humanity is not the fruit of mere “chance and necessity.” Its creation follows a plan and purpose. Through the “Breath” humanity has received the faculty to be at one with God, and its response, to have a meaning, must be free. The teachings of the Qur’an are clear: humans are privileged beings with “divine favors” (27:70); they have not been “created in jest” (23:115); they have a mission and they are God’s “vicegerents on Earth” (2:30). Proceeding from God, with a mission to fulfill, human destiny is ultimately to return to God. “Whoso does right, does it for his own soul; and whoso does wrong, does so to its detriment. Then to your Lord will you all be brought back” (45:15).

For that to happen it is absolutely necessary that each person be able to choose freely and without any kind of coercion. Every person ought in full consciousness to build his or her own destiny. The Qur’an states clearly that compulsion is incompatible with religion: “There should be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from Error. Whosoever rejects Evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing” (2:256).

To the best of my knowledge, among all the revealed texts, only the Qur’an stresses religious liberty in such a precise and unambiguous way. Indeed, the Qur’an defines in clear and indisputable words, it is to be a voluntary act born out of conviction and freedom.

In fact, even God refrains from overpowering humans to the point of subduing them against their will. This too is clearly expressed in the Qur’an. Faith is then a free gift, God’s gift. Humanity can accept or refuse it. It has the capacity to open its heart and its reason to God’s gift. A guidance (budan) has been sent it. It is warmly invited to listen to God’s call. God warns it in clear and unambiguous terms. As it is underlined in the cited verse stressing human freedom, “Truth stands out clear from Error.” It is up to humanity to make its choice. The human condition—and that is the reason for humanity’s dignity and sacredness—is not without something tragic about it. Humans can be misled. They are able to make the wrong choice and to stray from the right path. They have the capacity to resist God’s call, and this capacity is the criterion of their true freedom.
Even the Messenger, whose mission properly is to convey God's call and message, is helpless in such a situation. He is clearly and firmly warned to expect human freedom and God's mystery. "If it had been thy Lord's will, all who are on the earth would have believed, all of them. Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?" (10:99). A. Yusuf Ali, in his translation of the Qur'an, comments on that verse in this way:

"Men of faith must not be impatient or angry if they have 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."

The Apostle's mission—and all the more ours—is stringently restricted to advise, warn, convey a message, and admonish without compelling. He is ordered: "Admonish, for thou art but an admonisher. Thou hast no authority to compel them" (88:21-2). In other words, God has set humanity truly and tragically free. What God wants is, in full consciousness and freedom, a willing and obedient response to the divine call, and that is the very meaning of the Arabic word "Islam."

Now we must emphasize that this does not mean that we have to adopt an attitude of abandon and indifference. We must in fact avoid both Scylla and Charybdis. First, we must, of course, refrain from interfering in the inner life of others, and we have already stressed this aspect of the problem. It is time to add that, secondly, we must also avoid being indifferent, everything, being careless about others. We need to remember that the her is our neighbor. We must bear witness to and convey God's message, as too needs stressing.

We are too tempted today to shut ourselves up and to live comfortably in our own thoughts. But this is not God's purpose. Respectfulness and indifference. God sets the example, for God is nearer to humanity than the man's own jugular vein" (50:16), and God knows better than we our innermost desires, and what these desires "whisper [tsuwutuzu]" to (50:16). Thus God stands by us and speaks unceasingly to each one of us, warning and promising with a divine pedagogy that fits all persons of different social and intellectual classes, at all times, using images, symbols, words that only God may use with a total sovereignty.

And God urges us to follow the divine example and to turn our steps towards all our sisters and brothers in humanity, beyond all kinds of frontiers, religious ones included.

O mankind! We created you from a male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily, the most honourable among you, in the sight of God, is he who is the most righteous of you. And God is all knowing, All-Aware (49:13).

This is addressed to all mankind, and not only to the Muslim brotherhood, though it is understood that in a perfect world the two would be synonymous. As it is, mankind is descended from one pair of parents. Their tribes, races, and nations are convenient labels by which we may know certain differing characteristics. Before God they are all one, and he gets most honor who is most righteous.

In other words, humans are not created for solitariness and impervious individuality. They are created for community, relationship, and dialogue. Their fulfillment is in their reconciliation at once to God and to persons. We have to find the way, in each case, to realize this double reconciliation, without betraying God and without damaging the inner life of the other. To do so we have to listen to God's advice:

Do not argue with the People of the Book unless it is in the most courteous manner, except for those of them who do wrong. And say: We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit (29:46).

Let us note that the Arabic word used in the verse and rendered in the translation by the verb "to submit" is "muslimun" (= Muslims). So, to be a true Muslim is to live in a courteous dialogue with all peoples of other faiths and ideologies, and ultimately to submit to God. We must show concern to our neighbors. We have duties toward them; we are not isles of loneliness. The attitude of respectful courtesy recommended by the Qur'an must of course be enlarged to the whole of humankind, believers and unbelievers, except for those who "do wrong," that is to say, those who are unjust and violent and resort deliberately to the argument of the fist, physically or in words. In such a case it is much better to avoid a so-called dialogue in order to avoid worse.

In short, from the Muslim perspective that is mine, our duty is simply to bear witness in the most courteous way that is most respectful of the inner liberty of our neighbors and their sacredness. We must also be ready at the same time to listen to them in truthfulness. We have to remember, as Muslims, that a hadith of our Prophet states: "The believer is unceasingly in search of wisdom, wherever he finds it he grasps it." Another saying adds: "Look for knowledge everywhere, even as far as in China." And finally, it is up to God to judge, for we, as limited human beings, know only in part. Let me quote:
To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. And if God had enforced His Will, He would have made of you all one people. But His plan is to test you in what He hath given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God. Then will He inform you of that wherein you differed (5:51).

Say: O God! Creator of the heavens and the earth! Knower of all that is hidden and open! It is thou that wilt judge between Thy Servants in those matters about which they have differed (39:46).

Beyond the limits imposed by traditional theology

though all Muslims are bound by the Qur'an's basic teachings, Muslim idional theology developed in a way that, for historical reasons, does not, in my opinion, always fit in with the spirit of the Qur'an. Let us briefly call two important cases: on the one hand, the dhimmis case, that is to say, the situation of the religious minorities inside the Islamic empire during mideval times, and, on the other hand, the apostate case.

Let us start with the dhimmis. First, we must emphasize that, although the doors of many countries (not all of them, however) were opened (fath) force or Jihad as it was the general custom then—to pave the way for Islam itself has almost never been imposed by compulsion. This point the Qur'anic teachings have been followed. They provided dhimmis with a sound protection against the most unbearable forms religious intolerance. In particular, with two or three historical exceptions, the dhimmis have never been prevented from following the religion their choice, from worshipping, or from organizing their communities in accordance with their own law. We can even say that in the beginning their treatment was often greatly improved by Islamic conquest. They enjoyed long odds of tolerance and real prosperity, very often holding high positions in administrative, court, and economic activities.

But it is a fact that at certain times and places they suffered from discrimination. Roughly speaking, things began seriously to worsen for them from the reign of al-Mutawakkil (847–861 CE). The discrimination, especially in terms of dress, took on an openly humiliating shape. The oppression culminated in Egypt during the reign of al-Hakim (996–1021 CE), who perhaps insane.

In the medieval context of wars, hostilities, and treacheries, this policy of discrimination or open oppression was always prompted, or strongly ed, by the theologians. To understand that, we have to remember that that is not then a virtue—according to the medieval mentality everywhere world, and within all communities—to consider all human beings as l. How could one consider as equal Truth and Error, true believers and heretics?

Thus in our appraisal of the past we must always take the circumstances into account, but above all we must strive to avoid the recurrence of the same situations and errors. In any case, the Qur'an's basic teachings, the inner meaning of which we tried to put into relief, lay down for us a clear line of conduct. They teach us to respect the dignity of the other and his/her total freedom. In a world where giant holocausts have been perpetrated, where human rights are still at stake, manipulated or totally ignored, our modern Muslim theologians must denounce loudly all kinds of discrimination as crimes strictly and explicitly condemned by the Qur'an's basic teachings.

However, we must consider the apostate case. In this field, too, traditional theology did not follow the spirit of the Qur'an. This theology abridged seriously the liberty of choice of one's religion. According to this theology, though the conversion to Islam must be, and is in fact, without coercion, it is practically impossible, once inside Islam, to get out of it. The conversion from Islam to another religion is considered treason, and the apostate is liable to the penalty of death. The traditional theologians in their elaboration rely on the one hand on the precedent of the first caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr (632–634 CE), who energetically fought the tribes that rejected his authority after the Prophet's death and refused to pay him the alms taxes, likening their rebellion to apostasy. On the other hand the theologians mainly put forward the authority of this hadith: “Anyone who changes his religion must be put to death.”

I know of no implementation throughout the history of Islam of the law condemning the apostate to death—until the hanging of Mahmoud Taha in the Sudan in 1985. This law has remained mostly theoretical, but it is not irrelevant to draw attention to the fact that during the 1970s, in Egypt, the Islamic conservatives narrowly missed enforcing this law against Copts who, without due consideration, converted to Islam, generally to marry Muslim women, and who, in case of the failure of the marriage, returned to their former religion. Recently, too, some Tunisian atheists expressed their concern. So, the case of the apostate in Islam, though mostly theoretical, needs to be cleared up.

Let us first point out that the hadith upon which the penalty of death essentially rests is always more or less mixed with rebellion and highway robbery in the Tradition books. The cited cases of “apostates” killed during the Prophet’s life or shortly after his death are all without exception of persons who as consequence of their “apostasy” turned their weapons against the Muslims, whose community at that time was still small and vulnerable.
The penalty of death appears in these circumstances as an act of self-defense in a war situation. It is undoubtedly for that reason that the Hanafi school finds it does not condemn a woman apostate to death, "because women, nay, men, are not fit for war."

Further, the hadith authorizing the death penalty is not, technically, mutawaddi, and consequently it is not, according to the traditional system hadith, binding. Above all, from a modern point of view, this hadith cannot be questioned. In my opinion, there are many persuasive reasons to consider it undoubtedly forged. It may have been forged under the influence of Leviticus (24:16) and Deuteronomy (13:21)—where the stoning of the apostate to death is ordered—if not directly, then perhaps indirectly —and the Jews and Christians converted to Islam.

In any case, the hadith in question is as a matter of fact at variance with teachings of the Qur'an, where there is no mention of a required death penalty against the apostate. Even during the life of the Prophet, the case was left to d's judgment and to the afterlife. In all these verses, without a single exception, the punishment of the apostate who persists in rejection of Islam after having embraced it is left to d's judgment and to the afterlife. In all the cases mentioned in the Qur'an, I by the commentators, it is a question, on the one hand, of timeserving—individuals or tribes, who, according to the circumstances, became nocoats—and, on the other hand, of hesitating persons attracted to the "People of the Book" (2:109, 3:99–100), Jews and Christians. In taking into account the special situation, the Qur'an argues, warns, recommends the proper attitude to be adopted, without ever threatening death.

From a Muslim perspective, the Qur'an recognizes all the previous relations and authenticates and perfects them:

Say: We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between anyone of them, and to God we submit (musliman) 3:84.

It does not follow that all are permitted, at the convenience of the next, to change their religion as they change their coats. Such behavior was in fact a lack of true faith. It is for this reason that the following insists on the universal significance of Islam, as a call directed to the le of humankind: "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never let it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers" 5.

Accordingly, the apostates are warned: those who choose apostasy, after being convinced in their innermost thoughts that Islam is the truth, are unjust, and as such they are bereft of God's guidance, with all the consequences that follow for their salvation. "How shall God guide those who reject faith after it has been established, and who bear witness that the Apostle was true, and that clear signs had come to them? But God guides not a people unjust" (3:86; see also verses 87–91).

Nevertheless, the Qur'an denounces the attitude of "the People of the Book," who exerted pressure on the newly converted to Islam to induce them to retract. There is no doubt that the polemics between the dawning Islam and the old religions were sharp. In this atmosphere the Qur'an urges the persons who espoused Islam to adhere firmly to their new faith, till their death, to close their ranks, to refuse to listen to those who strive to lure them to apostasy, and to avoid their snares. They are also reminded of their former state of disunion when they were "on the brink of the Pit of Fire," and they are exhorted to be a people "inviting to all that is good" in order to ensure their final salvation. Let us quote:

Say: O People of the Book: Why obstruct ye those who believe from the Path of God, seeking to make it crooked, while ye were yourselves witness thereof? But God is not unmindful of all that ye do.

O ye who believe! If you obey a faction of those who have been given the Book, they will turn you back into disbelievers after you have believed.

And how would you disbelieve, while to you are rehearsed the signs of God, and His Messenger is among you? And he who holds fast to God is indeed guided to the Right Path.

O ye who believe! Fear God as He should be feared, and die not except in a state of Islam.

And hold fast, all together, by the Rope of God, and be not divided, and remember God's favor on you: for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make His Signs clear to you, that ye may be guided.

Let there arise out of you a Community inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. They are the ones to attain felicity (3:99–104).

Thus, unceasingly and by all means, the Qur'an strives to raise the new Muslims' spirit, in order to prevent them from falling into apostasy. The argumentation is only moral, however. The Qur'an goes on: It is "from selfish envy" (2:109) that "quite a number of the People of the Book wish they
could turn you back to infidelity” (2:109; see also 3:149); you have not
to fear them, “God is your Protector, and He is the best of helpers, soon
shall He cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers” (3:150–1); “your real
friends are God, His Messenger, and the believers … it is the party of God
that must certainly triumph … therefore take not for friends those who take
your religion for a mockery or sport” (5:58–60). And finally, those who, in
spite of all that, allow themselves to be tempted by apostasy are forewarned:
if they desert the cause, the cause nevertheless will not fail. Others will carry
t forward:

O ye who believe! If any from among you turn back from his faith, soon will
God produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him, holy with the
Believers, mighty against the Rejecters, striving in the way of God, and never
afraid of the reproaches of a fault finder. That is the grace of God, which He
will bestow on whom He pleases. And God is bountiful, All-Knowing (5:57;
see also 47:38).

Finally the apostates are given this notice: they “will not injure God in the
east, but He will make their deeds of no effect” (47:32).

The young Muslim community was thus given many reasons to adhere
to its new religion. The members of this community are also warned that
or their salvation they should not depart from their faith. They are urged
to follow the true spirit of Islam, and this spirit is defined in two ways: first,
they will love God and God will love them; second, they will be humble
among their brothers and sisters, but they will not fear the wrongdoers,
and they will not join with them. If by fear, weakness, or time-serving, they
depart from this line of conduct and fall into apostasy, the loss will be their
own, and the punishment will be hard in the hereafter. “And if any of them
turn back from their faith, and die in unbelief, their works will bear no fruit
in this life. And in the Hereafter they will be companions of the Fire, and
will abide therein” (2:217). The apostates lay themselves open to “the curse
of God, of His angels, and of all mankind” (3:87), “except for those who
spent thereafter, and amend, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (3:89).
But there is no hope for those who persist in their apostasy (3:90–1). These
obstinate apostates will “taste the penalty for rejecting faith” (3:106; see also 3:140). Such persons are entirely in the hands of evil (47:25). They
secretly plot with the enemies (47:26–7), and “they obstruct the way to
God” (47:2, 34). As a result “God will not forgive them” (47:34).

How should such obstinate and ill-disposed apostates be dealt with?
How should those be treated who try to draw others into their camp or to
manipulate others? Let us underline once more that there is no mention
in the Qur’an of any kind of penalty, neither death nor any other one. To

use the technical Arab word, we would say that there is no specified hadd
in this matter. On the contrary, the Muslims are advised to “forgive and
overlook till God accomplishes His purpose, for God hath power over all
things” (2:109). In other words, there is no punishment on earth. The case
is not answerable to the Law. The debate is between God and the apostate’s
conscience, and it is not our role to interfere in it.

Muslims are authorized to take up arms only in one case, the case of
self-defense, when they are attacked and their faith is seriously jeopardized.
In such a case “fighting” (al-qital) is “prescribed” (kutiba) for them, even if
they “dislike it” (kurhah lakum) (2:216), and it is so even during the sacred
month of Pilgrimage (2:217, 2:194). To summarize, Muslims are urged not
to yield when their conscience is at stake and to rise up in arms against
“those who will not cease fighting you until they turn you back from your
faith, if they can” (2:217).

It is thus evident that the problem of religious liberty, with all its ramifications,
is not new within Islam. The Qur’an deals with it at the heart of this problem we meet the ticklish subject of apostasy, and we have seen that with regard to this subject the Qur’an argues, warns, and
advises, but it never resorts to the argument of the sword. This is because
that argument is meaningless in the matter of faith. In our pluralistic world
our modern theologians must take that into account.

We can never stress too much that religious liberty is not an act of charity
or a tolerant concession towards misled persons. It is, rather, a fundamental
right of everyone. To claim it for myself implies ipso facto that I am disposed
to claim it for my neighbor too. But religious liberty is not reduced to the
equivalent of atheism. My right and my duty also, are to bear witness, by
fair means, to my own faith and to convey God’s call. Ultimately, however,
it is up to each person to respond to this call or not, freely and in full
consciousness.

From a Muslim perspective, and on the basis of the Qur’an’s basic teachings,
whose letter and spirit we have tried to adduce, religious liberty is fundamentally and ultimately an act of respect for God’s sovereignty and for
the mystery of God’s plan for humanity, which has been given the terrible
privilege of shaping entirely on its own responsibility its destiny on earth
and hereafter. Ultimately, to respect humanity’s freedom is to respect God’s
plan. To be a true Muslim is to submit to this plan. It is to put one’s self,
voluntarily and freely, with confidence and love, into the hands of God.