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BREPOLS
"NO COMPULSION IN RELIGION"
Q. 2:256 in medieval and modern interpretation

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Sura 2:256 famously contains a statement which, read on its own, sounds to the modern ear like a declaration of a human right: là ikhidha fi al-dīn, “there is no compulsion in religion”. Read as part of the unit formed by verses 255-257, it seems less a declaration of rights than a reference to a point taken for granted by both the speaker and his audience¹, but that does not make it any less liberal. Since a relativity based on religion cannot coexist with unlimited freedom of religion, the verse was a problem to the early exegetes, who reacted by interpreting it restrictively². It is only in modern times that the verse has come to be understood as a declaration of universal religious tolerance. In the words of a Chief Justice of Pakistan, the verse contains “a charter of freedom of conscience unparalleled in the religious annals of mankind... It is with regret mingled by perturbation that one notices attempts made by Muslim scholars themselves to whittle down its broad humanistic meaning”³. Given that they did whittle it down, how was it possible to broaden it again? The answer offered here is that two Muʿtazilite interpretations of Q. 2:256 played a major role in facilitating the modernist reinterpretation of the verse in Sufism and Shiism alike, without their Muʿtazilite roots being acknowledged, or even known. I discuss the history of these interpretations against the background of the exegetical literature on Q. 2:256 in general in the first part of this article, ending with post-revolutionary Iran. The second part is in the nature of an appendix on three questions that suggest themselves in the course of the first half of the article: how do the Sunni Islamists handle the verse? How do the modernists and Islamists who interpret the verse as a declaration of religious freedom dispose of unwanted parts of the tradition? And just what did the verse actually mean when it was first recited? Should the reader wonder how a mediaevalist such as myself

¹ I should like to thank the ten graduates with whom I read interpretations of Q. 2:256 at Princeton University in the spring term of 2004 and without whose energy, enthusiasm and high level of competence I would never have been able to cover so many exegetical works. They provided me with several references too (acknowledged in the appropriate places), and one of them, Karen Bauer, commented helpfully on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful to John Balfé, Rainer Brüderl and Michael Cook for most helpful comments, and to Aron Zosow for first casting doubt on the reading of Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī that I presented in Medieval Islamic Political Thought. Unfortunately, it was not until it was too late to change the book that I realized how right he was.


³ S. A. Rahman, Punishment of Apostasy in Islam, Lahore 1978², p. 16.
The mainstream and Mu'tazilite interpretations

The salaf

When the curtain opens on the exegetical literature, it presents us with three positions regarding the meaning of َّالِكِرْحَةُ ِفِي الْدِّينَ that remained canonical down to modern times (henceforth the three traditional interpretations). The first is that the verse had been abrogated by the Qur’ānic injunction to fight, a view upheld, among others, by the foremost jurist of late Umayyad Syria.1 The second is that the verse referred to a bygone historical situation in Medina to do with Ansārī women whose children had been raised among the Jews in pre-Islamic times, or alternatively an Ansārī whose sons had converted to Christianity before the rise of Islam; in both cases the parents wanted to force their children to become Muslims when Islam came to Medina, whereupon the "no compulsion" verse was revealed, telling them not to. This interpretation, which deprieved the verse of current relevance, was sometimes combined with the view that the Verse had been abrogated.2 The third position was that the verse granted religious freedom to jizya-paying infidels by ruling that it was unlawful to convert them by force.3 In fact, all jurists, whatever their views on this verse, accepted that jizya-paying infidels were free to practise their own religion, but the verse

4. Thus Sulaymān b. Miḥāl (below, note 5); Zayd b. Aslām (d. 136/754) in Ibn Wal gh, Jami, fol. 20a, p. 12f; the same and his son, Ibn Yāza (d. 187/798) in Tabari, Ta’rifat, vol. 5, no. 5825, 5833, and other works; Ibn Sādū and Ibn Majdūd (d. 335/946) in Thahālī, Kastf, vol. 2, p. 234; Ikrima (d. 107/725 or later) and al-Sulaymān (d. 17/745) in Ibn Abī Hālim al-Ruṣālī, Ta’rifat, vol. 2, no. 2615. It is also one of the opinions transmitted from al-Dhahībāk b. Muzhdīm (d. 107/724) (cf. his reconstructed Tafsīr, no. 261 without use of the word mansūkh). The abrogating verse is usually Q. 9:5, the so-called sword verse ("Kill them wherever you find them."), or Q. 9:73 ("Fight the unbelievers and hypocrites"), but Ikrima strangely identifies it as Q. 2:285 ("They say: we hear and obey."). In Māturīdī, Sīwālī, p. 595, the abrogator is the hadīth in which the Prophet says that he has come to fight people until they profess the oneness of God.


6. Ansārī women would have their children fostered by Jews, and/or Ansārī women who had trouble producing viable offspring would vow to bring up their children as Jews if they lived. When the Banū Nadir were expelled, there were Ansārī children among them, and their parents wanted them to stay as Muslims; thus Sād b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d (95/713) (sometimes from Ibn ʿAbdās), Muḥammad (101/718 or later) (sometimes from al-Hasan), and al-Sād (100/721 or later) in Tabari, Ta’rifat, vol. 5, no. 5812, 5811, 5820-4, 5826.

7. Abī al-Hasanī had two sons who were converted to Christianity by traders coming from Syria. When they wanted to leave for Syria, he asked the Prophet to stop them: thus al-Sulaymān and Ikrima or Sād b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d in Ibn Ḥajar, al-Kāfīr al-mansūkh. 8. Thus for example Ibn ʿAbdās b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d in Ibn Abī Ḥālim in Tabari, Ta’rifat, vol. 5, no. 5817, 5819. For a collection of the hadīths relating the verse to the Ansārī affair, see Ibn ʿAbdās, al-Jāmiʿ al-mansūkh, vol. 2, p. 1099f.

8. For example Ibn ʿAbdās b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d b. Ṣa’d in Ibn Abī Ḥālim in Tabari, Ta’rifat, vol. 5, no. 5827-30, cf. also Ibn Abī Ḥālim in no. 5832.

9. Thus Qatāda (d. 117/735) and al-Ḍāhīrī in Tabari, Ta’rifat, vol. 5, no. 5827-30, cf. also Ibn Abī Ḥālim in no. 5832.


12. Thus the verse revealed when an Ansārī forced his black slave to convert (Muḥammad in Wāḥīdī, Ḡaṣab al-mazalī, p. 45), or Muḥammad told a Christian slave to convert (Abī al-Ruṣālī, Ta’rifat, vol. 1, no. 329; Taḥālī, Kastf, vol. 5, no. 5831); a Roman slave of Umar’s invoked the verse when Umar told him to convert (Ibn Sādū, Taḥālīh, vol. 6, no. 190 [vol. 6, no. 159], s.v. "Usūṣ”; Abī Usayd, Awmāl, vol. 48, no. 87; al-Nāṣirī b. l-mansūkh, p. 97, and elsewhere); and al-Hasan (al-Basrī) cited it when asked about forcing slaves to convert (Ibn Abī Ḥālim al-Ruṣālī, Ta’rifat, vol. 2, no. 2613, cf. 2610 on Usūṣ, 266, and Sulaymān b. Mas‘ūd’s disagreements. Listed as a rule about captives (no coercion if they are adult kinah) in Qurāḥī, Abūdī, vol. 3, p. 283 (doctrine 6); Shawkānī, Farh, vol. 1, p. 278 (citing Shawkānī).

13. The applicability of the verse is limited to the Jews that it was revealed about. As for compelling infidels to (submit to) the religion of truth, it is obligatory, and for this reason we fight them until they convert or pay jizya, accepting to be ruled by the religion’, as the fourth/tenth-century al-Khaṭābī says (Muṣlim al-sunan, vol. 2, p. 287).


15. See below, p. 137.
and late Medina respectively), but all three identify the import of the verse as īnāl and construe the words īā ikrāha as a negative command ("do not use force"). Differently put, all three understand the verse as prescriptive.

From as early as the ninth century, other interpretations appeared. These later interpretations usually construe īā ikrāha as a statement of fact, so that the meaning of the verse is descriptive rather than prescriptive. They do not seem to be meant as alternatives to the three traditional interpretations, merely as additional ways of putting the verse to work, and the meaning they find in it is typically what we would broadly call theological. The Malzumists and Juhaimis (1960, 196), for example, understood īkrah as "compulsion", as karāha as "dislike", and took the verse to say that there was nothing in the religion (of Islam) for its adherents, as opposed to hypocrites, to dislike. In the same vein, unidentified exegetes cited by al-Māturīdī held the verse to proclaim that God installed such love of the divine commands in the hearts of the believers that they obeyed them willingly, without the need for compulsion.18

Fourth-century Mutazilites, on the other hand, read the verse as a statement that God did not compel His servants to believe but that the free will of humans had free will. And still other Mutazilites of the same period construed the verse as saying, or simply presupposing, that humans could not force others to believe: their innermost selves were inaccessible. It is with the last two arguments that the first part of this article is concerned. I shall refer to them as the first and the second Mutazilite arguments, though only the first articulates a central Mutazilite doctrine; the second reflects a common idea which the Mutazilites may not have originated.

The two Mutazilite interpretations

The first Mutazilite interpretation, i.e. the understanding of 2:256 as meaning "there is no (dire) compulsion in religion", seems first to be attested in the exegesis of Abū Muslim al-Isbāhānī, a Mutazilite secretary who worked in Baghdad and Isfahan and died in 322/934.19

His exegetical work is lost, but quotations survive, and his comments on 2:256 are cited by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī together with those of al-Qāḍī al-Shāhī (1356/976), a Shī`ite jurist who was once a Mutazilite, and whose commentary on the Qur`ān (also lost) was written in his Mutazilite and whose commentary on the Qur`ān (also lost) was written in his Mutazilite

18. Cited in Jihānnī (also known as Juhānnī), Taḥdīd, fol. 95b, 5 up. My thanks to Sabir Moudar, who is preparing an edition of the manuscript, for a photocopy of the section relating to 2:256.

19. Māturīdī, Taʿwīlāt, p. 594f., where Māturīdī himself compares the verse with Q. 22:78 (Dar he has imposed no difficulties upon you in religion). This interpretation was also known to the Isma`īlīs (cf. Makālī, Bihār al-anwār, vol. 5, p. 98).


21. Ma` bānd an`ār al-ṭawāb `alā al-ghab wa-l-qār wa-l-lāmam wa-l-خطأ `alā al-qamālah wa-ikhāy inyay. He could have this from Zamakhshari, who has lam `abar allah an`ār al-ṭawāb `alā al-ghab wa-l-qār wa-l-līmam wa-l-خطأ `alā al-qamālah wa-ikhāy

latter, God set out the proofs of monotheism and then said, “the infidel no longer has any excuse for remaining an infidel, now that these proofs have been made clear; rather, he ought to be forced and coerced to adopt the faith: but this is not possible (ālā i`lā) in this world, which is a world of tribulation (dirālah), given that compulsion and compulsion nullify trial and tribulation”22. A modern reader is apt to read both Abū Muslim and al-Qāḍī’s statements as prohibitions of human compulsion in matters of faith. Who would God be speaking to if not to human beings, and why else should He characterize things as possible or allowed? Besides, al-Qāḍī addresses two Qur`ānic verses in which God told the Prophet not to compel people to become believers, Q. 18:29 (Lest he who will believe, and him who will disbelieve) and Q. 10:9 (If your Lord had wanted it, every one on earth would believe, all of them; so will you force people to become believers?). If God told the Prophet not to force people to convert, surely the message is that lesser human beings may not do so either. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī seems to agree when he adds that al-Qāḍī’s interpretation is supported by the statement, qīm guidance has become distinct from error (which follows lā ikrāha fi al-ṭawāb) and glosses it as meaning that “the proofs have been made manifest and the evidence made clear, so now there is no method other than coercion, compulsion and force; but this is not allowed possible, given that it rules out moral responsibility (a`fā yy)); for all that, there can be no doubt that Abū Muslim, al-Qāḍī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī all read the verse as a statement about free will: al-Qāḍī invokes God’s words to the Prophet in illustration of God’s wish to let the unbelievers choose for themselves, not for the injunction to the Prophet to refrain from using force (which was later abrogated). When, in a recent book of mine, I read Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s passage as prohibiting forced conversion, I was unwittingly adopting the modernist interpretation of the verse.23

That Abū Muslim, al-Qāḍī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were concerned with free will is made explicit in several ta`ṣīls by later scholars that will come to be in due course and whose understanding of the tradition is undoubtedly correct24. For one thing, the concatenation of free will with the Qur`ānic idea of life as a test is standard in Qadarism. Thus al-Hasan al-Hasrī (d. 110/728) explains that in Q. 6:65 God reproaches the Prophet for his sadness when the polytheists would
not believe and tells him that if He had wanted to force them (yujubhahum) to obey, He could have done so, but He had not done so because He wanted to test them (yujubhahum), so that He could recompense them for their actions.25 Al-Hasan, too, quotes Q. 10:99: “If your Lord had wanted it, every one on earth would believe, all of them; so will you force people to become believers?” Al-Mas'udi (d. 345/956 or 346) mentions the Mu'tazilite belief that “If He had wanted to, He would have compelled (jabara) human beings to obey Him... but He does not because that would eliminate trial (ma'na) and put an end to tribulation (balhah)”.26

Further, the Mu'tazilite al-Hākim al-Isḥāqī (d. 494/1101) also interprets Q. 2:256 in an anti-determinist vein. He lists the view that “there is no compulsion by God in the religion (lāyfa fi al-dīn ʿirāk min Allāh)” among the diverse interpretations of the verse and later explains it as meaning that God had wanted His servants to believe voluntarily (yāraḍu min al-īlāh al-īmān yāraḍu). In his view the verse demonstrated that the determinists (muqabbirūn) were wrong and that faith was not something created by God, but rather a human act (wa-l-īmān fi'l al-ībād; “it is the servant who chooses (al-'abd muhchār); if it were otherwise, His statement Right guidance has been distinguished from falsehood until the end of the verse would not be correct”.27

To this may be added that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī cites al-Qāḍīnī again in his comments on another verse, apparently once more from the latter’s taṣfīr; and here al-Qāḍīnī not only approves of forced conversion, but positively praises it:28 the means of fighting in the cause of religion could not be denied by any fair-minded person, he says, for people cling to their wrong religions out of habit; but when they were forced to adopt the true religion for fear of being killed, their love of the false religion would gradually vanish while their love of the true one would grow, so that eventually they would achieve salvation instead of everlasting punishment.29 Clearly, the religious freedom he envisages as granted by the “no compulsion” verse is not freedom from coercion by humans.

It may seem odd that al-Qāḍīnī should believe God to abstain from compulsion in matters of faith and yet approve of humans practising it, but the Mu'tazilites had an answer to this in the form of the second interpretation of 2:256: the verse said was presupposed that forced conversion was not really coercion to believe, for it was impossible to change the inner beliefs of other people; coercion only affects external conformity. This is what the Ḥanāfi and Mu'tazilite jurist al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) tells us in a legal work in answer to the question why the Prophet gave the pagans Arabs the choice between Islam and the sword when it was well known that forced converts did not become real Muslims. The Arabs were only forced in terms of external observance (iẓārāt), he says, not religious conviction (i'tiqād), which is beyond compulsion; but having been forced to live as Muslims, such people would gradually come to accept Islam, or their children would. In other words, he distinguished between religion as internal conviction and religion as communal affiliation, deeming it a good thing to force people into the community on the same grounds as al-Qāḍīnī: it made it easier for them to see the truth.30 In answer to the question how killing (read: fighting?) could be obligatory if there was no compulsion in religion, al-Isḥāqī said that people were given the choice between conversion, acceptance of jizya, and fighting, which did not in his view amount to compulsion in religion. As he saw it, there was not really any such thing as forced conversion at all: “religion is what people adhere to by conviction, and one can only conceive of coercing somebody to behave as an adherent of the religion, not to believe in the religion” (al-dīn mā yutamassukh bihi i'tiqād fa-imānā yutamassukh bihi); al-īrāk al-īlāh ʿalā ʿirāk al-dīn lā al-dīn al-dīn).31 Unlike al-Isḥāqī, al-Qāḍīnī read the lā ʿirākha verse as a legal command, entertaining the possibility that it was an injunction of global tolerance of infidels which had later been narrowed down by the order to fight, but his denial that inner conviction could be forced does seem to be linked to his theology. To a Mu'tazilite, there was neither divine nor human coercion where it really mattered: people were free to choose their own convictions in their innermost selves.

The distinction between inner conviction and communal affiliation was not unique to the Mu'tazilites, and there were others too who brought it to bear on Q. 2:236. According to the grammarian al-Zajjaj (d. 311/923), some scholars read the verse as a command not to say that people who had been incorporated into the Muslim community after war had become Muslims by force, on the grounds that when they had become genuine Muslims, it would not be by force.32 This statement is widely encountered in the literature after him, often as an anonymous opinion, sometimes as his.31 Jishmi is among those who cite it, explicitly crediting it to al-Zajjaj.34 Apparently, al-Zajjaj and unexpected others construed ʿirāk as meaning “no calling (forced converts) reluctant”, not as a factual statement that coercion could not affect religion in the sense of inner conviction; but Ibn al-Athūrī (d. 328/940), another grammarians and a pupil of the Hanbalite Thalāth, is cited as commenting that only that which people have accepted in their hearts...
counts as religion, not what they are simply forced to do. This view, which is also mentioned by al-Maurūdi, corresponds to al-Jaṣṣāṣ’s position. Many grammarians were said to be Muṭṭazzālīs, but al-Zājlajī and Ibn al-Arba’īn are not among them, so whether this interpretation was actually pioneered by the Muṭṭazzālīs is hard to say. It would have helped to know what Abū ‘Alī al-Jahbārī (d. 3039/519) Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī (also known as al-Karbī, d. 319/931) and al-Rummānī (d. 384/994) said about the verse, but it is not covered in the quotations from the (lost) works of the first two scholars collected by Gilmore and Nakābi respectively or in the Paris fragment of the (incompletely preserved and unpublished) taṣfīḥ of the third. Whatever the answer, the Ismā‘īlī read the verse in the light of the distinction between external observance and inner conviction, as we shall see, but with a different implication. One would have expected the Sufis to have done so as well. Kāshānī (d. 730/1332) says that religion is inner guidance, which is not amenable to coercion, and the much later Šūfī ‘Alī Shāh Ganjkūb (d. 1327/1909) makes the same point in more elaborate terms. But most Sufis say little or nothing about the la ikhrārha statement, which does not seem to have interested them much.

The tenth-century context

There cannot be much doubt that the Muṭṭazzālīs who denied that forced coercion existed while at the same declaring it a good thing were responding to a situation in which the use of force in the service of religion had come to be seen as problematic. When al-Qāḍīfī asserts that no fair-minded person could deny the merit of fighting in the cause of religion, it was precisely because it had been denied, even by Muslims; and when al-Jaṣṣāṣ explains why the Prophet forced the Arabs to convert, it was because some people had come to find it unacceptable. To that extent, the tenth-century exegetes were facing much the same problems as twentieth-century modernists responding to Western criticisms of jihād.

Unlike the modernists, however, the tenth-century exegetes were not trying to rewrite Islamic law as a religion which had renounced the use of force, thus rendering jihād as secular warfare, but rather to distinguish their religion as a set of beliefs about eternal matters from the obligations it prescribed regarding life in the here and now. Islam was both a set of doctrines about the transcendent and a civic religion. In its second capacity it regulated a society that most people entered for reasons beyond their control, usually by being born into it, sometimes by being dragged into it. Many thinking men in the fourth/tenth century had a strong sense that such external vicissitudes were separate from people’s innermost convictions: communal affiliation was not to be conflated with religion in the sense of individual faith; social obligations were one thing, individual salvation was something else. In the context of Q. 2:256 adherents of this view would insist that only individual conviction counted as religion (din), which comes across as forced in linguistic terms, given that din was often used synonymously with sharta’ (a, civic religion); but they had to say it because it was din that the verse located in the conviction-free zone. To a modern reader their reading also comes across as self-serving in that it allowed them to endorse the use of compulsion in religious matters while claiming to do nothing of the kind; but it did have the satisfying effect not just of reconciling the law with the la ikhrārha verse, but also of identifying the individual as an autonomous agent responsible for his own salvation.

The later history of the two interpretations

Both the first and the second Muṭṭazzālī interpretation of the la ikhrārha verse became standard in Ismā‘īlī esegesis, as will be seen. On the Sunnī side the second interpretation reappears in two works on al-Qāsim al-Qurānī, by the Shāfi‘ī ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Hārīṣī (d. 504/1110) and the Mālikī Ibn al-Arba’īn (d. 543/1148) respectively, but not in any verse-by verse tafsīr to Q. 2:256 that I have seen before modern times. The Sunnīs did pick up the interpretation of la ikhrārha as relating to free will, however. After ‘Abū al-Qāsim al-Qāḍīfī and al-Hūṣaini al-Jishānī, the interpretation appears in the Muṭṭazzālī al-Zamakhshārī (d. 538/1144), a Sunnī by adoption, “God did not make the matter of faith a matter of compulsion and coercion but rather of enablement and choice”, he says, probably quoting ‘Abū al-Qāsim al-Jishānī; like so many, perhaps including ‘Abū al-Qāsim himself, he adds

36. Māturūdī, Taṣfīḥ, p. 594 (“Some people say, No compulsion is there in religion; i.e. no religion is accepted by force; that is not faith”).
37. Cf. C. H. M. Versteegh, Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking, Leiden 1977, p. 150 (my thanks to Monique Bernard for a reference which led to this one).
38. Cf. D. Gilmore (ed.), Une lecture muṭṭazzalī de la Coran: al-Tafsīr d’Al-Qāsim al-ṣaḥḥah (Leiden, 1994); Abū al-Qāsim al-Karbī al-Balkhī, Tafsīr, ed. Kh. M. Nakābi, Beirut 2007 (my thanks to Houssein Hansa for showing me this work); al-Rummānī’s Tafsīr, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS arabe 6523: it starts with Q. 3:355 (I am much indebted to Maroun Aoun for checking the manuscript for me). But there are other manuscripts, possibly containing different fragments of it.
42. There are no comments on the verse in Ḥafṣī, Tafsīr, p. 37; Sulami, Ḥaqīqāt, vol. 1, p. 56; or id., Minor Qur’ān Commentary, p. 17-19; Ruḥbānī Bahāli, ‘Arrādī, vol. 1, p. 53f. Ḥaqqalīh might explain that the proofs are clear (La‘līṣ, vol. 1, p. 210); ‘Ummān Allīhī Ṣughayrī merely paraphrases the text (Fawwādī, vol. 1, p. 87); and ‘Ummān Allīhī Ṣughayrī merely quotes (without mentioning them) Shāhīzdād, Ḥabbiyya, p. 570, on jīza-payers versus the Arab pagans and Abū al-Sīrīd, Tafsīr, vol. 1, p. 386, on how the rational person will choose the religion of his own accord, in his Tafsīr al-ṣaḥīḥ min tafsīr nār al-baydān, vol. 1, p. 206ff. He does have considerably more to say about the verse in the unabbreviated edition (Tafsīr rāh al-baydān, vol. 1, p. 406ff), but not about the word la ikhrārha (my thanks to Ludmila Zamah for introducing me to ‘Ummān Allīhī’s and to Susan Gutasz for drawing my attention to the unabbreviated edition). But for a highbrow Sufi interpretation centering on la ikhrārha, understood as divine coercion, see al-Hārīṣī al-Bahlī, ‘Arrādī, vol. 4, p. 40ff.
43. Cf. P. Cane, Medieval Islamic Political Thought, p. 375ff.
Q. 10:99 as well (if your Lord had wanted it, all those on earth would have believed together. Will you then force people to become believers?)45. After al-Zamakhshari, the interpretation appears in Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, as seen already, and thereafter it is cited, now from al-Zamakhshari and now from Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, occasionally from both, by Niẓām al-Dīn al-Ḥasan b. Muhammad al-Qurānī al-Nayshābūrī (d. 728/1327)46, Abū Hayyān al-Andalūsī (d. 745/1344), Mustāfar b. Ḥabīb b. Ishāq b. Khurshaf al-Tamīmī al-Ḥanafi (d. 880/1475)47, the Yemini al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834), a Zaydi who was a virtual Sunnite48, the Iraqi al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 1254/1838)49 and the Bhāri al-Shawkānī) the Indian Muhammad Sīdīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1307/1890)50. Alas apart, it is not clear from any of these authors that the reference is from freedom divine rather than human compulsion unless one knows the tradition.

Non-Mu'ta'zilite developments

The Mu'tazilites were not the only exegetes to express themselves in a fashion that laid them open to misunderstanding by modern readers. Traditionalist scholars will sometimes gloss lā ikhrāh fi al-dīn as meaning: "Do not force anyone to convert." Contrary to what one might think, this is not a global prohibition of forced conversion, but rather a statement regarding the eligibility of infidels other than Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians for status as jizya-paying dhimmis. According to the Shāfi'ites and many Hanbalis, only Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians could be accepted as jizya-payers; all other infidels had to be either converted or killed. "Do not force anyone from among the People of the Book or the Zoroastrians to become monothelites after the conversion of the Arabs", as Ibn Wahḥab al-Dīnaharī (d. 308/920) put it, meaning that all other infidels should be forced51. But the Hanafīs and most Mālikīs held that all infidels other than the now extinct pagan Arabs (or just the now extinct pagan Quraysh) could be accepted52 and this is what they mean when they say that nobody at all should be forced to convert. "Do not force anyone to adopt the faith after the conquest of Mecca and the conversion of the Arabs", as Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 370/980) said53. Apostates still had to be given the choice between conversion and death. The jurists were of course well aware that the verse could be read as a universal grant of tolerance incommensurable with the duty to execute apostates and wage jihād against non-Muslims; but those who understood it in that vein always added that it had been abrogated. The meaning was either general and abrogated or specific and concerned with jizya-payers, as al-Ṭūsī said54.

Some mediaeval scholars voiced dissident views. Thus the Andalusian Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064) held that even Christians and Jews had to be fought until they were either converted or killed, on the grounds that the kāthās mentioned by God in the jizya verse (Q. 9:29) had died out and others had appeared who plainly were not those who had been given the pre-Qur'ānic scriptures55. Tolerance was not for him. Nor was it for the later Andalusian Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), who took the meaning of Q. 2:256 to be both general and valid on the grounds that what it prohibited was compelling people to adopt falsehood: Muslims could not be forced to convert to other faiths. As for compelling people with truth on one's side (brī-haqq), it was part of the religion, he said56. The militance of these two scholars should presumably be related to the Christian reconquest.

In a diametrically opposed vein, the Hanbalī Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) argued in a number of non-exegetical works that even Arab polytheists qualified for jizya-paying status (though as it happened, they no longer existed). The only reason they had been forced to convert, he said in one work, was that the jizya-verse (Q. 9:29) had not been revealed until year 9, by which time there were no idolaters left in Arabia57. The plain meaning of the "no compulsion" verse was that all infidels without exception qualified for jizya-paying status and that none of them should be forced to convert when they were conquered. Indeed, he claimed in another work, "to anyone who carefully considers the life of the Prophet it will be clear that he did not ever force anyone to adopt his religion, and that he only forced those who fought him". Where leaves that the pagan Arabs are not clear58. In a third work he lays down that spiritual struggle (jihād al-nafs), or battling with one's own devilish inclinations, must always precede physical warfare, as it did in the case of the Prophet; one has to master every form of jihād to fight the enemies of God with one's heart, tongue, hand and property, and thus make God's word uppermost59. It sounds extraordinarily modern. He owed his conviction that the Prophet only fought defensive wars and never compelled anyone to convert to his teacher Ibn Taimiyah (d. 728/1328), who also insisted (in some of his works) that infidels were only to be fought for their transgressions, not for their unbelief on its own, and he added the lā ikhrāh verse in support of this.

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45. Zamakhshari, Kashshāf, vol. 1, p. 387. Unfortunately, Lane does not discuss Zamakhshari's use of earlier Mu'tazilite taṣfīr in his chapter on the sources of the Kashshāf.
49. Abū Ḥāmid, al-Muḥātār, vol. 3, p. 18 (some people say that the meaning is lā ikhrāh fī al-dīn ikhrāh min allāh among them al-Qazwīnī clearly from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razi).
51. Dīnaharī, Wāḥidī, vol. 1, p. 85; similarly Fīwūzāhī, Tawāfīq, ad loc., (unpaginated), cf. Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion, p. 76f. This view is also reported in Hāfiz b. Mahkīm, Taṣfīr, vol. 1, p. 240, but whether the Ibādis adopted it is not clear, cf. below, note 70.
57. Ibn Jawziyya, Ḳādirī, Taṣfīr, vol. 1, p. 414, expressing his agreement with the Ibrāhīmī and Madhūnīs "even though they except some idolaters" (i.e. Arab pagans). Ibn al-Qayyim did not actually write a taṣfīr; this work is a modern compilation from his writings (cf. the editorial introduction, p. 160f).
58. Ibn Jawziyya, Baddālī, Taṣfīr, vol. 1, p. 414, expressing his agreement with the Ibrāhīmī and Madhūnīs "even though they except some idolaters" (i.e. Arab pagans). Ibn al-Qayyim did not actually write a taṣfīr; this work is a modern compilation from his writings (cf. the editorial introduction, p. 160f).
view.

In Ibn Taymiyya's case it should perhaps be seen as the converse of the high standards of obedience to Islamic law that he demanded within the Muslim community, at least for purposes of excluding the newly converted Mongols and their Muslim collaborators from it, declaring jihād to be obligatory against them;

64. See for example: "Belief in the Prophet's Kinship (al-Ahadith)" in Ibn Taymiyya's book "Al-Iklīl" (Cairo, 1952).

but as mere unbelief did not suffice to make people an object of jihād, so mere profession of the faith did not suffice to shield against it; what counted was behaviour. But there may well be more to it. It is far beyond my competence, however, and I must limit myself to the observation that neither Ibn Taymiyya nor Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya make their comments on lā ikhšād in formal works of tafsīr, lest alone those of the masūṣa (verse-by-verse) type, which tend to be more conservative than most.

In line with this, their views are not cited in later exegetical comments on the verse either.

The two exegetes constantly cited in the post-Timurid period, al-Bayḍawī (d. 685/1286 or later) and Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), also make some modern-sounding statements. Al-Bayḍawī, a Shāfī‘ī keen to purge al-Zamakhsharī's tafsīr of its Muḥaddīṣī elements, explains that there is no (human) compulsion in religion (as far as jiyāa-paying (in)divs are concerned) because compulsion is forcing somebody to do something that he does not regard as good, and this is not necessary now that right guidance has become distinct from falsehood; any rational person will hasten to embrace the faith. It was with this statement that he replaced al-Zamakhsharī's reading of the verse as a proclamation of free will, and his reading is certainly more persuasive, if only without my parenthetical additions. The second parentheses are necessary because he accepted the traditional limitations on religious freedom: as far as the legal import of the verse was concerned, it was either abandoned or concerned with kālidīs alone, as he declared in agreement with al-Zamakhsharī, adding the story of the Ansārī father of two Christian sons. (This story, originally set in Medina before the permission to fight and the institution of the jizya rules, was increasingly coming to be read as a story about the rights of jizya payers.) When he casts the truth as something freely chosen, he means it as mere praise of Islam: there was nothing in it for its adherents to dislike, as al-Asamm had said; its obligations were so light that everybody obeyed them of their own accord, as others had put it; the evidence in its favour was so clear that every rational person would hasten to adopt it, al-Bayḍawī now added himself.

In the same vein Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) glosses the verse as meaning "do not force anyone to adopt the religion of Islam", explaining that the evidence in favour of the truth of Islam is manifest and clear, so that compulsion is unnecessary; he whom God guides to Islam will adopt it and he whose heart God makes blind will not benefit from being forced into it. This is close to al-Bayḍawī, though the wording is different, and again no legal claim beyond the usual prohibition of the forced conversion of dhimmīs seems to be made for. At all events, it is impossible not to be struck by the distancing tone in which forced conversion is mentioned in these tafsīrīs, especially that of Ibn Kathir. The latter takes us back to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's Damascus and the enigma of how all these modern-sounding statements are to be explained.

Later exegetical works often mention that Islam is too obviously true to be in need of compulsion. In fact, Ottoman tafsīrīs on Q. 2:256 seem to be mostly commentaries on and paraphrases of either al-Zamakhsharī or al-Bayḍawī.

Sectarian interpretations

Neither the Shī‘īs nor, so far as one can tell, the Khurjījīs seem to have taken a particular interest in Q. 2:256. But some Shī‘īs did come up with views of their own.


63. The only citation of Ibn al-Qayyim's views that I have encountered is in the motets of Al-Ghamdān's edition of Ibn Taymiyya's treatise Qullū ya maṣnaaṣara fī qītāl al-kaffār, intended to persuade misguided Muslim youth that shedding innocent blood is not in accordance with Islam or the model of the Prophet (p. 6, cf. 12, 17f).


66. That it was revealed before the order to fight scripturaries is noted e.g. by al-Suddi in Wāhīdt, 185f. Ibn ʿAtīyya, Tafsīr, vol. 1, p. 357; Qurtubi, Abhām, vol. 3, p. 281. Contrast Shī‘ī, ʿArab, vol. 1, p. 88f; Fāyūd, Sawādī, vol. 1, p. 238f where the Ansārī is barely recognizable); and later works.


69. I am indebted to Susan Gamasti for discussions of this point.

70. Only ḥiṣārīs survive, and they are not numerous. Of those available, that of Hūd Muhīmk al-Hawwārī (mid-3rd/9th cent.) could have been written by a mainstream Basran, as indeed in a sense it was, since it is based on the commentary of Yusuf b. Sullām (d. 690/1291) (cf. C. Giliot, "Les commentaires de Hūd b. Muḥāmmad b. Muḥāmmad", Arabica 44 [1997], p. 181ff); and the late 3rd/9thcent. Abū al-Hawwārī omits the verse from his Dirāṣa. The epitite attributed to Sālim b. Ḍhu'kān makes it clear that the "tolerance verses" were abrogated by the permission to fight, but does not cite Q. 2:256 (F. Creutz and P. Zimmermann (eds. and trs.), The Epistle of Sālim b. Ḍhu'kān, Oxford 196f, p. 63f), for the expression "tolerance verses", which Sālim does not use, see below, note 110). The modern Shī‘ī ʿAbīfayṣī (d. 1322/1941) merely says that nobody should be forced to convert to Islam (Ṭayyir al-tafsīr, vol. 1, p. 41f; cf. below note 72) also that it is illegal to force others other than ḥiṣārīs and Zara'ūsūrians should be killed if they do not convert (Huṣnāna al-zid, vol. 3, p. 358).
Ismalis

The most interesting Shi‘ite interpretation is that of the Ismailis, who voice it outside the genre of ta‘ifah. In his work on prophethood, the missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāżī (d. 322/934) declares that jihād is meant to bring people under the law (the zāhir; once this has been achieved, they are to be left to choose their own saving faith without further compulsion; this, in his view, is what the lā ikrahā verse proclaimed). Here we have the distinction between outer and inner man that we met in the Mūtazzilite justification of forced conversion: outer man is subject to compulsion; inner man is free. But there are two significant differences. First, the freedom that al-Jassās had described as a plain fact, arising from the impossibility of forcing people to believe, is here a legal right: Abū Ḥātim is saying that it is not allowed to force people to believe. Secondly, Abū Ḥātim is not talking about infidels living as hypocrites under Islamic law, but about Muslims living as dissenters under that law: what the verse established was that they were free to choose their own path to salvation; as long as they observed the law, their beliefs were a private matter and nobody had the right to interfere with them. In other words, the Ismailis read the verse as a proclamation of tolerance of Muslim dissidence. They were the only Muslims to do so until modern times. (The Ibāḍi Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aftāyishīsh (d. 1332/1914) does comment that opponents are not to be forced to adopt “our religion”, but whether this ruling is of pre-modern origin is impossible to say.) One would assume the Ismailis originally to have adopted this interpretation in an attempt to legalise their own position, but they applied their understanding of the verse to mainstream Muslims living under Ismaili rule as well.

Given that the distinction between outer and inner man was widely made in the tenth century and that Abū Ḥātim al-Rāżī died almost half a century before al-Qūfī (d. 365/976) and al-Jassās (d. 370/981), it seems unlikely that the Ismailis should be indebted to Mūtazzilism here. But Mūtazzilism does seem to be involved when we reach Abū al-Fawāris (fl. c. 400/1000). In answer to the question why Ali did not take up the sword when he was deprived of the caliphate, Abū al-Fawāris replies that jihād (against other Muslims) was obligatory only in connection with apostasy and addsuces Q. 2:256 in support of this view, explaining that acts performed under compulsion have no moral value and that “all these tests (ismāḥān) and trials (fīsam)… have been instigated as a respite for the devils so that they can lead astray and tempt and cause people to deviate from God’s path by way of trial (ikhbārān) and tribulation (tāhīm) for the community”. This does sound remarkably Mūtazzilite. Here as in Abū Ḥātim and other Ismaili attestations, however, the verse is understood, not as a description of God’s refusal to coerce human beings to believe, but rather as God’s injunction to humans to refrain from using force against others in matters of faith as long as they abide by the law: it was in obedience to this verse that Ali had abstained from taking up arms against his opponents. The tolerance granted by the Ismailis only to adherents of any religion, so we are still a long way from the modernist interpretation.

Zaydis

The Zaydis also came up with an interpretation of their own. According to them, the Imam al-Hādī (d. 298/911) took the verse to mean there could be no such thing as forced conversion of Muslims. He said that the verse was revealed to Muhammad after the treaty of Hudaibiyya: in accordance with that treaty, Muhammad would return Meccans who came to him, and back in Mecca the unbelievers would force them to renounce Islam; God put an end to this situation by telling Muhammad to stop sending converts back and permitting the Muslims to use force against the unbelievers until they had been either converted or annihilated. In other words, God forbade forced conversion to falsehood and permitted forced conversion to the truth: this is the interpretation that later crops up in the Andalusi Latin Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 543/1148). Since the Andalusi is not likely to have read Zaydi literature, one would take the interpretation to have enjoyed wider currency than the exegetical tradition currently available suggests. It crops up in modern times too, as will be seen. Then as now the condemnation of forced conversion to falsehood is not a plea for tolerance by a beleaguered minority, but rather a refusal by militants to practise tolerance themselves: the verse established religious freedom for Muslims, not for anyone else.

The Zaydis were also familiar with the traditional interpretations of Q. 2:256 and at some point they adopted the first Mūtazzilite interpretation as well. Presumably, they were introduced to it by al-Jishānī (d. 494/1101), given that the latter, who started as a Ḥanafī, ended as a Zaydi. But they also knew it from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

Imāmīs

Unlike the Zaydis and the Ismailis, the Imāmīs do not seem to have come up with their own interpretation of lā ikhrāh, which does not in fact seem to have interested them very much. Their earliest exegesis only comment on other parts of Q. 2:256 or omit the verse altogether; the same is true of several later exegeses.

73. Cf. P. Crone, Medieval Islamic Political Thought, p. 380.
The view that lá ikrāha referred to the ease with which the Islamic precepts were obeyed appears in ʿImām ḥadīth, but not, it seems, in the extant works of ṭafṣīr.

The earliest ʿImām exegetes to comment on lá ikrāha, ʿal-ʿUmmī (d. c. 307/919), merely cites ʿAlī al-Ridā (d. 203/818) as commenting that nobody is (or should be?) forced to convert (lā yakārahu aḥad `alā diṣn; rather, people come (should come?) to the truth after seeing the difference between right guidance and falsehood.48 Exactly what he meant is unclear, but he could be referring to the imposition of coercion upon the inner man. Some later scholars list the verse as abrogated (read: fought?) over it, he gives the same answer as al-Jīshmī, but in different words: there is no compulsion in that which is truly religion (fīmā hawa din fi al-ḥaqiqā), which is the acts of the heart, as opposed to that which is open to coercion, namely external conformity; the people compelled to utter the two shahādāt does not actually adopt the religion, any more than the person forced to profess unbelief actually becomes an unbeliever.49 He is endorsing the second ʿUmdatul Ṭalīḥī interpretation. Ibn ʿĪdrīs al-Ḥillī (d. 598/1202) reproduces al-Ṭūsī’s statement50, and a condensed version of Ibn ʿĪdrīs appears in al-Shaybānī (d. 994/1585).51 Al-Zajjāj’s injunction also appears in other ʿImāmī works without being linked to the ʿUmutul Ṭalīḥī interpretation.52 The first ʿUmutul Ṭalīḥī interpretation appears with al-Ṭabarī (d. 548/1154). The verse means that “the affairs of religion are based on ability and choice (al-tamakkan wa-l-kiṭbīyāt), not on force and coercion (al-qasr wa-l-gharāʾ).” He says, adding Q. 10:99 and drawing on either ʿAbū Muslim ʿal-ʿIshbānī or al-Zamakhshārī,53 “The meaning is that there is no divine coercion in religion (layṣa fi al-dīn ikrāh min Allāh; rather, the servant is given a choice (al-ʿabd mukhayyara),” he says in another work, using the same words as al-Jīshmī and adding al-Ṭūsī’s explanation that true religion is in the acts of the heart, not the profession of the two shahādāt (which can be imposed by human force).54 Here he is fusing the two ʿUmutul Ṭalīḥī interpretations. The same seems to hold true of Nūr al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d. after 1115/1703f), according to whom “God did not base faith (imān) and Shīʿism on force and coercion but rather on enablement and choice, unlike ʿislām (i.e. membership of the Muslim community)”55. The words are ʿAbū Ṭalib’s (or al-Zamakhshārī’s) on free will, but what they are being made to support appears to be the claim that inner man remains free even when outer man is coerced by other human beings.

With al-Shaybānī and Nūr al-Dīn al-Kāshānī we have reached the Saʿūdī period, when Iran was being converted to Shīʿism by force, and what al-Kāshānī is saying may be that people cannot be forced to become Shīʿites in terms of imān, inner faith, but only in terms of ʿislām, external practice: if so, he is condoning the forced conversion of Sunnis on the grounds that their inner convictions are left alone. But one can also read him as saying that people can only be forced to become Muslims, not Shīʿites, since Shīʿism is inner faith. If so, the passage is critical of the forced conversion of Sunnis. Criticism certainly seems to be what we encounter in Nūr al-Dīn al-Kāshānī’s grandfather, Muḥsin Fayd al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680). This scholar starts by citing ʿUmmī on how nobody should be forced to convert, al-Bayḍawī (unnamed) on how there is no need for compulsion because any rational person will embrace the faith, and the traditional view that the verse should be understood as a general proclamation of tolerance which had been abrogated or limited to the People of the Book. He proceeds to conclude that if the word din means Shīʿism here, as it does in the ḥadīth of Ibn Yafūr, then the verse should be understood as prohibiting the use of force in Shīʿism without recourse to postulates of abrogation or limitation.56 This sounds like polemics against current policies.

But the polemics, if such they are, can hardly be described as resounding, and it is impossible to discern any reference to current affairs in other exegeses, whether Saʿūdī or later. Some refrain from commenting on lá ikrāha altogether.57 Mīrza Muhammad al-Maḥḍahī (d. 1125/1713) glosses the statement with some words from al-Bayḍawī (unnamed), construing the right guidance (rashīd) that has become clear from error in the next line as evidence that there must be an infallible guide at all times.58 ‘Alī b. al-Husayn al-ʿAmīlī (d. after 1168/1754f) repeats that God did not base faith (imān) on compulsion, only on choice, but does not develop the theme.59 Shāhīb (d. 1242/1826f) says the same, adding Q. 10:99.60 Exegeses writing in Persian stick to the three traditional interpretations.61 There can be no doubt that the verse-by-verse commentary (ṭafṣīr masāʿūlā) was an extremely conservative genre.

82. Cf. above, note 19.
83. ʿUmmī, Ṭafṣīr, vol. 1, p. 92; also cited in Majlīsī, Bihār, vol. 92, p. 263f, where it is attributed to ʿAlī al-Ridā.
86. Ibn ʿĪdrīs al-Ḥillī, Manāhīj, p. 95.
87. Shaybānī, Mukhayyara nahī al-bayḍāʾ, p. 42.
88. Thus the first ʿImām Ṭafṣīr in Persian, ʿAlī b. Fath al-Ridā, Ruh al-ṣināʿa, vol. 2, p. 238 (probably using al-Thālibī), and Mullā Fath Allāh Kāshānī, Manāhīj al-ṣidāqāt, p. 96; cf. also below, note 90, on al-Ṭabarī.
89. Tāʾiṣ, Jawāmiʿ, vol. 1, p. 167f.
90. Tāʾiṣ, Majnūn al-bayḍāʾ, vol. 2, p. 306. He also cites al-Zajjāj’s injunction, but separately from his ʿUmutul Ṭalīḥī interpretation.
The nineteenth and twentieth centuries

The Sunnis

We now reach the period in which the great wrench from the tradition begins. It does not always show: some exegetes continue to write much as before, even into the 1990s98. But they are greatly outnumbered by those in whom change can be discerned.

There is an early modernist in al-Qāsimī, a Damascene who died in 1332/1913. He cites Ibn Kathīr (Do not force anyone to convert) and, without naming him, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the first Mu'tazilite argument (God did not base religion on force and compulsion: force would be incompatible with this world as a place of trial and tribulation, with al-Qādīya's explanation). His modernism shows in the fact that he takes the two statements to mean the same, namely that the "sword of jahād ... is not employed to force people to adopt religion, but rather as protection for the mission on behalf of religion and surrender to its sovereignty and just rule"99. What he is trying to rebut, without mentioning it, is the old charge that Islam had been spread by force, now taken up by the all too powerful Westerners. Al-Qāsimī, whose argument recurs in later Syrian ṭafṣīr100, rebuts the charge by reading the verse as an unconditional rejection of force in matters of religion and explaining that the armies involved in the expansion of Islam had been acting as mere protectors of the missionaries. This was a good argument because it was how the Christian detractors of Islam had often legitimated their own use of military force. The idea that conquest would allow missionaries to go about their business as is old as Gregory I (d. 604101). Pope Innocent IV (d. 1254) had formally ruled that infidel rulers could be forced to allow the free movement of missionaries in their lands, and the Spanish had used that argument to legitimate their conquest of the Americas102. Where the Muslims traditionally fused the roles of warrior and missionary, the Christians traditionally separated them103; this was what al-Qāsimī was now doing as well.

Al-Qāsimī does not mention the Western charges that he is trying to dismiss, but they are explicit in Rashīd Rūdā (d. 1354/1935), a reformist whose comments on Q 2:256 are based on Muhammad Abdūl's lectures. Many of our enemies claim that the religion was established by the sword (gāma bt-l-sayyid), he says, but this is not true; for in Mecca, Islam was persecuted and in Medina the "no coercion" verse was revealed as soon as the idea of forcing somebody to convert suggested itself, namely when Ansārī parents wanted to compel their Jewish or Christian children to become Muslims; it was other religious communities that

98. See for example Āl Muhārak, Tawāfīq, vol. 1, p. 331; Tiwālah, Fath al-nubuṭa, vol. 1, p. 3086; Ḥikmat b. Bāshīr b. Ṣayf, Taḥfīr – three Saudis who could all have written a thousand years earlier.
100. Cf. Sāhi, Kardī and al-Sudī, and Zuhaybī, below, notes 111, 159, without mentioning his name. Note also the concept of harā riot al-dawā in Sayyid Qāhī, below, note 137.
103. They did so in the Crusades as well. The Crusaders were out to liberate Jerusalem, not to convert the Muslims.
106. Rashīd Rūdā is quoted by name by Shāhīzī (below, note 124), and without acknowledgement in Ahmadī Sabzawārī (below, note 130).
110. Ḥijāzī, Taḥfīr, vol. 1, p. 7. The author is not otherwise known to me.
111. Šāhīzī, Karanlī and al-Sudī, Taḥfīr, vol. 1, p. 283f. They also use al-Baydāwī and al-Qāsimī without naming them.
universal tolerance. The Tunisian Ibn 'Asāhir (d. 1970) echoes al-Zamakhšāri on how faith is based on enablement and choice in his discussion of Q. 2:256 as a grant of universal tolerance, in which there are also shades of al-Bayḍāwī on how rational people will accept Islam of their own accord. (He plays around with the chronology of revelation, too, as will be seen.) 108 Tantawi (published 1977) quotes al-'Alīsī's rendition of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, as well as Ibn Kathīr and al-Bayḍāwī, without naming any names, retaining al-'Alīsī's explicit identification of la ikhrād as a denial of divine compulsion, but nonetheless concluding that the verse prohibits forced conversion (by humans); and Shīhāz (1980s) repeats Tantawi's comments, also without naming his source. 109 The modernist recasting of the first Mu'tazīlī interpretation is carried into the Islamicist literature in English by Sachdeva on al-Zamakhšāri, and by McAuliffe and, much as I regret it, myself on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. 110

In short, both Mu'tazīlī interpretations have served to provide anchorage in Sunnī for the interpretation of Q. 2:256 as a universal declaration of religious tolerance. Their Mu'tazīlī origins have clearly been forgotten, partly thanks to the old habit among Muslim scholars of quoting other people's statements as their own and partly as a result of the constant invocation of al-Bayḍāwī, Ibn Kathīr and other Sunnī authorities in the same context. 111 It is undoubtedly as a timeless grant of universal tolerance that the vast majority of educated Muslims understand the verse today, especially when they write in English. One can read it on the web, and on bumper stickers. 112 Even the mujāhīds who kidnapped the American journalist Jill Carroll in Iraq in January 2006 kept insisting, during their attempts to convert her to Islam, that there was "no pressure" on her to follow their religion. 113 It was also as a timeless grant of universal tolerance that the Muslim response to the papal speech at Regensburg in September 2006 presented the verse, though the formulation seemed to make an alarmingly Mu'tazīlī distinction between inner and outer man. 114

108. Hamza, Barīnāzī and Awīns, Tafsīr, vol. 3, p. 26. The authors are not otherwise known to me.
112. There is a neat example in Ralphman, Punishment of Apostasy, p. 24: he cites Abī Muslim and Qaṭfīl from Abī Hayyān al-Andalūsī, not knowing that their taḥfīz were Mu'tazīlī, adding Zamakhšāri (who is probably also citing Abī Muslim) without giving a thought to his Mu'tazīlīism, and mentioning that the same reasoning is found in Abī Ṭālib, not knowing that he too is summarizing Abī Muslim and al-Qaṭfīl (from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī). He cops it all by citing Ibn Kathīr on the uselessness of coercion.
113. Orī Bashkīn directed my attention to the web (see for example the Islamic Supreme Council of America on "Democracy according to Traditional Islamic Sources", 2/2 (http://www.islamic supremecouncil.org/Publications/Papers/ismalddemocracy-09152.html?view=print&print=1), Joseph Lowry saw a bumper sticker saying "No compulsion in Islam" in Philadelphia on 14th April 2006.
114. "They'd kidnapped me, they all had guns ready to kill me, but oh no, no pressure there," as she comments (http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0816/pdlt01-wqsl.htm; drawn to my attention by Karen Bauer).

The Imāmīs

Modernism took much longer to make its appearance in Imāmī than in Sunni commentaries on Q. 2:256. 120 The first break with tradition seems to come in the work of the Lebanese Mughniyya (or Mughniyya, published 1968). According to him, the verse proclaims that Islam does not force anyone to embrace it by force, as also shown by Q. 10:99 (Will you force people to become believers?). This is the standard modernist interpretation, presumably blown into Imāmī society by winds from the wider Sunni world around it. It is also what Mughniyya would like the verse to mean, but he is too well schooled in the tradition to find it problematic. He has the reader ask what the point of prohibiting the use of force would be, given that the heart is beyond the reach of compulsion, clearly a reference to the second Mu'tazīlī interpretation. Unlike the Sunnis who simply rewrite the Mu'tazīlī description as a prescription (human beings cannot, i.e. may not, force others to convert), Mughniyya sees that the Mu'tazīlī and the modernist interpretations are actually at loggerheads: if human beings simply cannot be forced to convert, why bother to legislate against it? He replies by reiterating that if the verse is read as a negative command rather than a factual statement, it prohibits forced conversion. But he concedes that one of the aims of war in Islam was dhūr al-islām, the external adoption of Islam. Only somebody infallible, i.e. the Imam, or his deputy can wage such war, he adds, but this does not of course disprove that it is enjoined. In sum, he leaves the problem unresolved. 121

Hūsain Taṭbāqī (published 1970), on the other hand, takes the verse to state that either that compulsion only affects external acts or that the use of compulsion is prohibited: either way, he is implicitly taking the issue to be human relations with other humans. According to him, the verse proves that Islam was not spread by the sword, though he makes no attempt to deny the religious nature of the fighting it prescribes: its purpose is not to spread religion by force, he says, but rather to revive the truth (īlyā al-haq) and defend monotheists, whose religion is that of human nature (al-firās). Once all have been subjected to the religion of prophethood, there will be no problem about tolerating other monotheists, whether Jews and Christians. Whether human nature leaves room for Zoroastrians, Bahā'īs, atheists or pagans he does not say.

With some exceptions, the works written over the next three decades take their cue from Taṭbāqī: all proclaim Islam to be a religion of tolerance while at the same time endorsing the use of force; all angrily deny that Islam was spread by the sword, yet frequently justify coercion with reference to the distinction between inner and outer man and/or the idea of Islam (or monotheism in general) as the
inborn religion of mankind, and all tacitly or explicitly limit the grant of tolerance to Jews and Christians. Thus Makārīm Shirāzī (published 1974, in Persian) argues that there is no need to convert people by force, given the wealth of proofs in favour of Islam; it is not actually possible to do so either, given that compulsion does not reach the heart; and on top of that is it forbidden by Q. 2:256, revealed in response to the Anšārī who wanted to compel his two sons to become Muslims124; this Anšārī behaved in the manner of tyrannical rulers, he says: to him as to Sayyid Quṭb, possibly his source of inspiration, it is sectarian rulers who are guilty of trying to change people's convictions by force125. If even a father was not allowed to do so, a fortiori it was ruled out for others, he says. All this decisively refutes the poisoned propaganda of the Church (or, as the Arabic translation has it, the Crusaders) that Islam was spread by the sword. However, Shirāzī adds, idolatry is not a religion from the point of view of Islam, so there is no contradiction between Q. 2:256 and the Qur'ānic verses ordering polytheists to be fought126. The Lebanese Fadīllāh (published 1983) similarly declares that Islam does not consider polytheism or atheism (ilāḥī) to be religions and so cannot coexist with their adherents, who must be forcibly made to live as Muslims as far as their external behaviour is concerned, whereas People of the Book can be offered freedom of religion if they accept the conditions of dhimmā127. Both he and Dr al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Sādiqī (1985f) observe that the use of force is enjoined by the duty of al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf, thereby making it clear that the issue is the right to coerce other Muslims. But such use of force is not really coercion according to al-Sādiqī; rather it is bringing people into line with their own nature and sound rationality (al-qālāyih al-salīma) and in any case, what they believe in their hearts is not open to coercion at all128. Al-Karāmī (published 1981f) similarly justifies coercing people to "return" to the truth on the grounds that there is no suspicion of force in the innermost heart129, while the Ayatollah Ḥājī al-Ṣāhib Shirāzī (published 1997) declares coercion to be unnecessary, impossible, and forbidden. Islam was not established by the sword, he says, for the Muslims were persecuted in Mecca. But Muslims fight in a defensive vine for the revival of the truth (ihya' al-haqiq) and the return of people to their original nature, and since Islam is in conformity with an intact original nature (al-fira al-salīma), he who denies it is actually denying his own identity (huwa'iyah) and will (irada). Besides, coercion only affects the external man. On top of that, compulsion can also be good, both for the public order and for the victim; indeed, what could be morally more repugnant than leaving somebody to work for his own eternal damnation? What the verse forbids, he says, is the use of compulsion without right (bi-ghayr al-haqiq), such as that employed by despots and tyrants (al-tawāghīh wa-l-jabāhīra), or maybe it forbids compelling believers to adopt unbelief, in the same way as Q. 16:106 (Anyone who uttereth unbelief after accepting belief in God, except under compulsion...).130

All this is remarkably incoherent. If there had not been a religious revolution, the Ikhāns would presumably have used the first Mutazilite argument in the standard modernist way to prove that Islam prescribes religious freedom. But a revolution there was, and so it is the second Mutazilite argument that dominates their discussions, countering their modernist affirmations of religious freedom with what amounts to the traditional Mutazilite position on forced conversion: it is a good thing and no such thing exists. The incoherence arises from the fact that doctrines concerning two different aspects of life—the individual's relationship with God on the one hand and with fellow human beings on the other—have been collapsed into a single doctrine about the same reality: it is the same human beings who grant religious freedom, circumscribe it, and take it away again; God is not in the picture any more, except as the higher cause in the name of which the grant is made and revoked. In combination with the old doctrine that Islam is the religion of original human nature (fira), this gives the modern Ikhānī arguments a totalitarian intrusiveness all too familiar from other twentieth-century ideologies. However self-serving the Mutazilite arguments may have been, they did at least have the merit of leaving the individual in control of his own inner self, responsible only to God. In the Ikhānī arguments of the revolutionary period, by contrast, even inner man has been subjected to definition by the upholders of civic religion. Like the Marxist notion of false consciousness or the Freudian idea of the subconscious, the modern Ikhānī concept of the fira allows external authorities to identify the mental processes in the most private recesses of the individual's inner self, so that he has nowhere to retreat: others claim to know better than he does himself what his true nature is; humans have taken over the role of God in this particular case in the name of God. What we encounter here is true modernity with its lack of sacred barriers, its flat reality shorn of metaphysics, its uniformly bureaucratic management of everything—the world in which most of us live. Nowhere is it more obvious that whatever Islamists may be up to, it is not the re-enchantment of the world131.

How far this style argument continues today I do not know, but new tones are certainly heard as well. Mullahs who argue in favour of religious pluralism have appeared in Iran132, and Fadīllāh has also changed his tune. In response to a question regarding the incompatibility of lā kāriha and ideological coercion legalised by court jurists in the past, he now explains that some jurists understand Islamic concepts "in a partial and arbitrary way", perhaps unduly influenced by verses that call for toughness vis-à-vis unbelievers, so that they forget that in peacetime the dialogue (a word he now likes to use) should be friendly and based on

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124. He quotes the story from the Taḥfūṣ al-mawā'ir, explicitly saying so.
125. See p. 148 below.
128. He makes much the same point, now as Dr Ayatallah al-Ṣāhid, in his short Taḥfūṣ al-qr'ān bi-t-qr'ān, p. 42.
arguments that can find their way to the heart without any coercion134. Such views still do not seem to have found their way into verse-by-verse tafsir.

The three further questions

This completes the main assignment of this paper, bringing us to the three further questions. First, how do the Sunni Islamists cope with the verse? Secondly, how do modernists and many Muslims who read the verse as a grant of religious freedom cope with inconvenient parts of the tradition? (Under this heading I shall consider the subsidiary question why modern historians and believers so often find themselves at odds). And finally, what might a modern historian take the meaning of the verse to be?

The Sunni Islamists

The term “Islamists” is here used to mean Muslims who want Islam to be the basis of public life again, to serve as the authoritative source in political and social affairs no less than private ones, which makes them a species of reformists and distinguishes them from modernists, who typically adopt secular ideologies (such as nationalism, socialism or liberalism) for the regulation of the public space. In the Shi'ite world modernism arrived late and Islamism triumphed early, so that for practical purposes they had to be treated together. But in the Sunni case they are distinct.

Like their Shi'ite counterparts, Sunni Islamists usually regard religious freedom as a characteristic so positive that it must be found in Islam, yet often want to legitimate misgivings of the in. They do not seem to make use of the idea that Islam is the religion of human nature, however, but rather reconcile their incompatibles desires by identifying the religious freedom granted by Q. 2:256 as the right to live as a Muslim, in public no less than private affairs. This makes for a perfectly coherent stance, though only as long as the rights of non-Muslims are not considered too.

Mawardi barely comments on Q. 2:256 in his exegesis (written in 1942-49)135, and the Islamist interpretation is first encountered in Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), who writes about the verse at length. Freedom of belief (burārīyat al-ta'īdāq) is a fundamental human right, he says: take away that freedom and you have removed the very humanity of man; and if forced conversion to Islam is forbidden, a forion so is the forced imposition of harsh worldly decrees by the government. Here we have Q. 2:256 as a declaration of the right to live as a Muslim, an interpretation also found among Imamī Islamists, as we have seen136. The freedom demanded includes the right to wage holy war. Contrary to what people think, Sayyid Qutb says, there is no contradiction between Q. 2:256 and the duty to fight when war is forced, no matter the religion is God’s (Q. 2:193). On the contrary, jihād is waged for the very freedom that the “no compulsion” verse enjoins, namely free-
ting forced conversion: "It is not permitted for Muslims to convert infidels to the faith by force, for that kind of thing is no use, leads to no good, and does not bring about faith in the hearts of their own free will". It is not necessary to use force either, he adds, since Islam is a clear religion based on cogent arguments; on the contrary, that method is characteristic of vacuous, odious, self-absorbed egotists and oppressive authorities. But, he adds, the verse was revealed specifically about the People of the Book: idolaters and similar godless and permisive people (muḥādthin wa-ibāḥiyayn) are to be compelled to adopt Islam, since they cannot be accepted as jizya-payers and do not deserve any consideration because of their godlessness, stupidity, error and falsehoodness. The modern wording and incoherence apart, it is not very different from al-Bayḍāwī.

The fact is that the modern concept of religious freedom and the sharīʿa rules regarding infidels simply do not go together, so that there are only two ways of being coherent, namely to acknowledge that what worked in the past does not work today or to reject the whole notion of religious freedom as mistaken. Open recognition of the timebound nature of the tradition is still uncommon, at least in the material on the lā ikhraṣa verse that I have seen, but it is represented by at least one mullah in Iran, Kadivar, and some Muslims writing in English. Outright rejection of religious freedom is also rare, if only in the sense that those who deride the concept, equating it with the freedom to live by any moral system that one likes, usually retain the label for the freedom to be a Muslim or, under Muslim sovereignty, a Christian or a Jew. Thus construed, it is protected, or indeed spread, by force. When during the trial of the blind sheikh Umār b. Abd al-Rahmān for complicity in the assassination of Sadat in 1981, the judge adduced Q. 2:256 to show that Islam was not spread by fighting and cannot be imposed by force, the blind sheikh replied by citing the Andalusian Ibn al-ʿArabi: was the infidel fought for anything other than religion? The Prophet ordered the Muslims to fight people until they accepted the unity of God and Muhammad's message; the verse was abrogated, or it referred to People of the Book paying jizya, or it forbade the forced imposition of falsehood. Some Saudi professors similarly reject the idea of religious freedom, thus finding themselves able simply to reaffirm the traditional rules regarding apostates and dhimmis, and to declare that "those who have no religion other than polytheism and unbelief" must for their own good be fought until they adopt Islam. In striking contrast to all this, the Sudanese Hasan al-Turābī (published 2004) gives us a modernist variation on the Mu'tazilite theme:

141. Abd al-Azīz, Taṣfīr, vol. 1, p. 390ff. His Arabic has the stilted and pretentious character familiar from much contemporary English academic prose.
143. Only the Saudi Habib seems to find the very expression distasteful (Turābī, vol. 2, p. 185).
144. Kallimat al-haqq, p. 125; cf. above, note 56.

147. The first to make this explicit seems to be Rashād Khalīf.
148. See the paraphrase of Qutbī in Thulābī, Kudhī, vol. 2, p. 235; Wāhīdī, Waft, vol. 1, p. 369; abbreviated in his Wilāyī, p. 183 (none of the occasions of revelation he lists in his Asbāb an-nuʿūm is compatible with this view); Enghāwī, Muḥāmīd, p. 124 (a work drawn from al-Thulâbī's, see C. Brockelman, Geschichte der arabischen Literatur, Supplementband, vol. 1, Leiden 1937, p. 622); Qutbī's statement does not itself have any chronological implications (cf. above, note 41), nor is it normally cited or paraphrased as having any in other works (see for example, al-Hādīdd al-Yāmānī, Khānīb, vol. 1, p. 405; Sayyāfī, Durr, vol. 3, p. 21f).
149. Above, note 58.
and endorsed (abqait) fighting aimed at the expansion of the sovereignty of Islam (tawfiq sulṭānī)\textsuperscript{150}. In other words, missionary warfare prevailed till Arabia had been conquered, thereafter there was just political expansion of the normal type. This is the argument that Montgomery Watt propagated in the 1970s: "For many centuries most Europeans believed that Islam was a religion of violence which spread by the sword... [but] the early wars of expansion of the Islamic state... had political and materialistic ends and were not directed to the religious conversion of the conquered peoples"\textsuperscript{151}.

Another solution was simply to omit all reference to the problem. This is the easy way out, which Ibn al-Quyyim also adopted in one of his works\textsuperscript{152}, and which was followed by Rashid Ridā and the many others who counter the charge that Islam was spread by the sword with the observation that the Muslims were a persecuted minority in Mecca. That the Muslims were persecuted in Mecca had in fact been used against critics of holy war already by the philosopher al-Āmirī (d. 381/992), but the latter had freely conceded that the Prophet used the sword in Medina, merely insisting that he had done so as a last resort and in the best interest of the victims\textsuperscript{153}. Ridā, by contrast, claims that Q. 2:256 was revealed so early in Medina that the Muslims never had time to use force, without a word about either the injunction to fight or the fate of the Arab pagans\textsuperscript{154}. This interpretation has also entered the Islamicist literature in English: "It is well known that the Qurān formally and repeatedly forbids to coerce or compel anybody to embrace Islam. The whole life of the Prophet shows that he sought liberty to preach his message", as Hamidullah says\textsuperscript{155}.

\textit{Jihād}

If there is no compulsion in religion, how can jihād be an obligation? This is much more problematic, for whereas the pagans of Arabia can be forgotten, the expansion of Islam outside Arabia is not so easy to overlook, and to deny the ongoing duty to wage jihād is to risk defining oneself out of the Muslim community altogether.

a. A common response is to stress that jihād is not waged for forced conversions: thus al-Qāsimī, al-Ḥijāzī, Sayyid Quth, Sa’dī Ḥusnawī, Ibn Ḥasūr, al-Muwaili, Shiḥbās, al-Zahāyli, Sīsī and co-authors, Ṣafāwī, Ḥajjālāh and no doubt many others too. It has the advantage of being basically true. It is not wholly true, for according to the Ṣafāwīs and most Ḥanbalīs, all infidels other than Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians must be given the same choice between Islam and death as the pagan Arabs – this is the rule that the Saudi saʿīfīs and modern radicals are reaffirming. But even without that rule jihād is a problem, for forcing non-Mus-

152. "He who looks carefully at the conduct of the Prophet will see that he did not ever force anyone to adopt his religion" (Ibn Quyyim al-Jawziyya, Radd al-tafsīr, vol. 1, p. 414).
154. Cf. the reference given above, note 104.

\textit{No compulsion in religion}

\textsuperscript{156} See the references given above, notes 15, 56.
157. Cf. Chehabi Ah, A Critical Exposition of the Popular "Jihād": Showing that all the Wars of Muhammad were Defensive, and that Aggressive War, as Compulsory Conversion, is not Allowed in the Koran, Calcutta 1885 (reprinted Karachi 1977). For the context, see P. Hardy, The Muslims of British India, Cambridge 1972, ch. IV.
158. "He only fought those who fought him", as Ibn al-Quyyim says. For al-Āmirī, see above, note 153.
159. E.g. Ḥijāzī, Tafsīr, 1/8; Sayyid Quth, Ṣafādī, 293f; Shiḥbās, Tafsīr, vol. 3, p. 29; Zuhaylī, Tafsīr, vol. 3, p. 216.
or Islam, then they have in effect declared war on the Muslims, who must fight a defensive war against them\textsuperscript{160}.

The most interesting argument in favour of jihad as purely defensive is by Mahmūd Shālūtī (d. 1685), a rector of al-Azhār who wrote a well-known treatise on the Qurān and jihad. He argued that the Qurān gives mankind the freedom to choose between faith and unbelief, that it nowhere permits coercion in matters of religion but on the contrary forbids it (in Q. 2:256 and other verses) and that the permission to fight was revealed in response to the persecution endured by the Muslims in Mecca. All this is squarely based on the Qurān itself with almost complete disregard of traditional interpretations, and his apologetic intent notwithstanding, he often seems to come much closer to what a historian would consider likely to be the original meaning of the verses than his traditionalist predecessors. He achieves his radical results by refusing to write in the musallal genre, which he declares to be based on extra-Qurānic principles that cause verses to be explained “in ways completely opposed to their real meanings”, or “even considered to have been abrogated”, so that for example no less than seven verses are declared to have been abrogated because they are incompatible with the legitimacy of fighting; this, he says, clashes with the fact that the Qurān is supposed to be the primary source of Islam\textsuperscript{161}. He could have added that commenting verse by verse makes it almost impossible not to be swept away by the tradition (the only exegete who has managed to be completely original in that genre seems to be Sayyid Qutb). Shālūtī’s reluctance to invoke the theory of abrogation is characteristic of all modern exegetes: not one of them, whether modernist or Islamist, holds Q. 2:256 to be abrogated. But though thematic safsīr has risen to prominence since he wrote, the musallal genre seems to be as popular as ever.

Another solution, particularly popular in the West today, is to imply that jihad in the sense of holy war is an Orientalist misconception, usually on the grounds that the word jihad does not really mean fighting and that true jihad is spiritual battle against one’s own evil inclinations, often known as the Greater Jihad\textsuperscript{162}. This is really more of a diversionary tactic than a solution since spiritual jihad was never meant to replace the type enjoined in the law, however important it was deemed to be. One does not find this solution in safsīrs.

All in all, it is probably fair to say that just as most educated Muslims today assume the lā ikhrāja verse to be a declaration of universal tolerance, so most of them hold jihad to be defensive and dismiss Western-style historians who say otherwise as biased against Islam. It is of course up to the believers to decide what they want their Islamic institutions to be today, and most people are probably cheered by their definition of jihad as defensive, as also by the modernists understanding of the lā ikhrāja verse. What Western-style historians deny is simply that this is how either was understood in the past.

Historians and believers tend to misunderstand each other because the believers typically reinterpret their doctrines without acknowledging that this is what they are doing, projecting their modern beliefs back into the past. Historians who show that Muslims held different views in the past are seen as trying to undermine the validity of beliefs prevailing today, sometimes because the believers find it impossible to distinguish past Muslims from themselves (unless they disagree with them) and sometimes because doctrinal change is not recognized as legitimate. There is an instructive example of such backprojection in the furore over Foyt Benedict XVI’s treatment of the lā ikhrāja verse in his speech at Regensburg on 12th September, 2006. The Pope mentioned that according to some experts, Q. 2:256 probably dated from “the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat” and that other rules had later been added concerning holy war; in other words, he adopted the traditional interpretation according to which the verse had been revealed in Mecca and abrogated in Medina\textsuperscript{163}. Thirty-eight Muslim scholars responded (as did an Islamicist) that he was wrong\textsuperscript{164}; the verse had been revealed in Medina in connection with some Jews or Christians who had wanted to force their children to convert to Islam, as one could read in al-Ṭabarī and other early commentators; it did not date from the period when the Muslims were weak and powerless, but rather from their period of political ascendancy, and it taught them that “they could not force another’s heart to believe”\textsuperscript{165}.

The Pope’s choice of the interpretation according to which the verse had been abrogated is unlikely to have been innocent. One can however read the interpretation he discussed in al-Ṭabarī, too, and the Pope did at least acknowledge that there were other views on the meaning. One might have expected the thirty-eight Muslim scholars to respond that he was out of date, and that he was about as right about modern Islam as a Muslim cleric citing Thomas Aquinas would be about modern Christianity. But this is not what they said. Instead, they wrote as if the interpretation adopted by the Pope was simply mistaken, and corrected him with reference to another traditional interpretation; and in so doing, they read the verse as a negative prohibition in connection with the Anšārīs, but reformulated it in their presentation of its enduring message as a factual statement about the impossibility of coercing the inner man: it was this hybrid that they claimed to have read in al-Ṭabarī and other early exegesis. (Whether they were tacitly respecting the right to use force against outer man one cannot tell.) In other words, they engaged in what to a historian was misrepresentation of their own tradition, refusing to


162. For an example A. Rahman, Islam: Ideology and the Way of Life, London 1980 (distributed by the Muslim Schools Trust), ch XV, where jihad is declared the most misunderstood Islamic concept: non-believers always take it to mean war and fighting, and many Orientalists take it to be a duty to propagate Islam by means of force. Like Shālūtī, he bases his account entirely on the Qurān (including Q. 2:256).

163. Zenith News Agency – The World Seen from Rome, at http://www.zenith.org/english/visualizza...html?id=94748. The response of the thirty-eight Muslim scholars quote the Pope as saying “according to the experts” rather than “according to some of the experts”, which makes the correction unduly sweeping. What he actually said I do not know. The web-site identifies the version quoted as the version he read.

164. The Islamicist is Juan Cole, who thinks the Pope ought to apologize to the Muslims for getting his facts so wrong as to claim that the verse was revealed in Mecca and later abrogated, cf. his “Informal Comment” at http://www.juancole.com/2006/09/pope-gets-it-wrong-on-islam-popc.html.

acknowledge that past Muslims had subscribed to doctrines that they themselves no longer believed to be valid.

Modern-educated Muslims who dismiss Western-style historians as biased against Islam are more often than not ignorant of their own tradition, but that certainly cannot be true of the thirty-eight scholars. They were writing as theologians staking out a position, not as historians, however; and to a historian they were guilty of traducing the past. Had one put this to them, however, they might have responded that historians are guilty of traducing the present, for by insisting that the past must be understood in its own light, historians remove the support of the tradition from the present; if change is a sign of falsehood, historians undermine the authority of current interpretations by showing them to be historically conditioned rather than perennial truths. The relationship between believers and historians would not be so tense if the possibility of legitimate doctrinal change were acknowledged, but it rarely is, in part no doubt because Muslims are feeling on the defensive. So the two parties tend to misunderstand each other, as one sees with depressing frequency in discussions of jihad.

Apostates and heretics

If Q. 2:256 is a declaration of religious freedom, how can Islamic law decreed death for apostates? The pre-modern exegetes do not often discuss this question. As we have seen, al-Tabari (d. 310/923) explicitly notes that apostates are an exception to the grant of tolerance (they are not in the category of infidels from whom jizya can be taken, as the jurists will say). In the same vein the modern Saudi exegete al-Handi presents the death penalty for apostasy as a given fact in the light of which the Qur'anic verse has to be interpreted, and since he explicitly rejects the concept of religious freedom, this is perfectly coherent166. Others only discuss forced apostasy, i.e., the secularisation they see their governments as imposing on them: the verse shows that nobody can be forced to enter Islam or to leave it, al-Khaṭṭāb al-Mawṣūlī says, defecting the question whether one can be forced to stay in it. There can be no ikhrāj ‘alā tarkihā, as the Iranian Sādiqī says, again without a word about apostates167. There is much discussion of apostasy in English, often in the context of human rights and often on the web, almost always in a liberal vein. The website Religioustolerance.org, for example, tells us that "There is a very strong movement within Islam which argues ‘Let there be no compulsion in the religion’. ... They also point out that there is no historical record which indicates that Muhammad (pbuh) or any of his companions ever sentenced anyone to death for apostasy. The hadiths (sayings of Muhammad) which seem to call for execution are very weak and suspect"168. Even if all the reports were authentic, the fact that the infallible Imams are no longer with us means that we


cannot execute the penalty they call for, the Imamī Kadivar observes169, "Islam does not punish departure from it (al-ikhrāj ‘alā l-islām), only revolts against it" (al-ikhrāj al-salāhī), as an article on Q. 2:256 in the Lebanese newspaper al-Hayāt declared in July 2006170. But the debate still comes across as subdued; and as might be expected, no taṣfīr musalsal seems to voice such views.

Muslim dissenters

If apostates are rarely mentioned in discussions of Q. 2:256 (at least in the works known to me), dissenters are completely absent, except, as has been seen, in Ismaili works. To this day the Ismailis remain the only Muslims to have interpreted "no compulsion in religion" as an affirmation of the right to hold dissenting views without being outlawed. Other Muslims assumed the lā ikhrāh verse to be about infidels alone, taking the verses on correcting wrong practices and beliefs (al-amīr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa-l-nāfī ‘an al-munkar) to be about fellow-Muslims. The two injunctions were rarely considered together, and this remains true today as well, even though it is common for al-amīr bi-l-ma‘rūf to be considered in relation to modern freedoms of other kinds171. But a few attempts have been made to relate them, in the context of the enforcement of public morality rather than belief.

One pre-modern example seems to be known: the Damascene scholar Abū al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī (d. 1143/1731) invoked lā ikhrāh and other tolerance verses to forbid the use of force in the performance of the duty of al-amīr bi-l-ma‘rūf by laymen172. Nowadays, people also seek protection in the lā ikhrāh verse when they are tyrannized by Islamists. Thus the Lebanese Fadlallah complains in his publication of 1983 that some people have impugned the legitimacy of using force in the performance of the duty to correct "with the hand" on the grounds that coercion in religious matters is forbidden (his response is that there is no point in having a law if people are free to disobey it and that "Islam does not believe in this individual freedom, but rather legislates for the individual in his private as in his public life"). It is presumably in response to similar objections that the Iranian Imamī al-Sādiqī claims that the use of force by way of al-amīr bi-l-ma‘rūf is not really compulsory, given that people are being made to practise what they themselves believe173. On November 19th, 2005, the Lebanese newspaper al-Hayāt carried an article by a Lebanese professor of Islamic studies suggesting that the lā ikhrāh verse should be read as forbidding Muslims to compel fellow-Muslims in matters Islamic174. Explicitly directed against the use of taṣfīr and religious violence today, it argued that this was compatible with the duty of al-amīr bi-l-ma‘rūf on the assumption that changing things "with the hand" did not mean using violence, but rather engaging...

169. Kadivar, “Freedom of thought” 19 (dispelling the traditions on the grounds that they are ḥādat).
172. Cook, Commanding Right, p. 326.
173. Fadlallah, Wādī, vol. 5, p. 28f; Sādiqī, Farqūn, p. 223.
Patricia Crone

in any practical activity likely to change the world for the better; in the author’s view, the duty of al-amr be-l-mudfr had so far been unheeded in too narrow a vein, as concerned with alcohol, entertainment and women’s clothing rather than moral issues. How this was received I do not know, but it seems likely that there will be further developments along these lines in the future.

Late antiquity and the Qurʾān

The reader who has got this far has now read some 17,000 words in explanation of a mere four. Just what did those four words mean when they were first uttered? he or she may well ask. The short answer is that we do not know. The long answer is that while we do not know, some suggestions can be made.

The first point to note is that the words plainly are not meant in a lawgiving vein. They are preceded by the throne verse, a sublime description of God: “There is no god but He, the living, the everlasting. No slumber seizes Him, nor any sleep. His are all things in the heavens as on earth. Who can intercede with Him except with His permission?” (2:255). Our verse continues in the same exalted style: “No compulsion is there in religion. Right guidance has become clear from error. Whoever rejects idols (al-ṣūhrū) and places his faith in God, he has grasped the firm rope which cannot break…” And 2:257 concludes, still in the same elevated style, that “God is the friend of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them into His light. Those who reject faith, their friends are idols (al-ṣūhrū), who will lead them from light into the depths of darkness…” The pericope is a glorification of God intended to persuade the audience to join His side, not to introduce a new rule of conduct. That there is no place for compulsion in religion is mentioned as a well-known fact which serves to highlight the self-evident nature of what you must do: nobody is forcing you, choose what you like, but do you want to end up in Hell? The alternatives are presented in such a way that no sensible person could choose not to be on God’s side, as many exegetes commented.

That this seemingly obvious reading of the verse is not standard in the Islamic literature reflects the fact that modern Islamicists tend to be remarkably faithful to the medievally method of tafsīr, which they imitate as part of their training: they do not read the verse as part of the pericope in which it appears, but rather detach it from its context to interpret it in the light of the history of the early Muslim community as known from tradition. That the throne verse and Q. 2:256 belong together is a common exegetical view, and that the entire passage from 2:255 to 2:257 should be read as a unit had been proposed by unknown exegetes already by the time of Alāʾī (d. 1270/1854). The trend that they and others (such as Shāfiʿī) represent is important. In general, scholars who study the Qurʾān as historians, writing mainly in Western languages, seem to be lagging behind those who study

as believers, writing mainly in Arabic: for purposes of understanding what the book originally meant, as opposed to what its readers later made of it, we must read it independently of the tradition. That still leaves us with the question whether it is God or humans whom the verse declares not to be forcing you. The Murathizae could be right that it is God, but it is not the most obvious reading. For one thing, God is the subject of verses 255 and 257, but not of 256, suggesting that a different agent is envisaged. For another, the statement that coercion has no place in religion implies that it does have a place elsewhere. In God’s mind. Above all, there are several other “tolerance verses” in the Qurʾān, above all Q. 10:59, so often addeduce as a parallel by the exegetes: “If your Lord had wanted it, all those on earth would have believed together. Will you then force people (a-faṣaṣṣu tākhā al-nāsā) to become believers? Here it is explicitly tākhā by humans as distinct from God which is being rejected. By contrast, Q. 2:256 would be the only verse in which God is said to abstain from tākhā. One would thus be inclined to agree with the earliest exegetes that tā ḫā tā ḫā fī al-dīn refers to the absence of human coercion.

If this is accepted, the pericope reflects a milieu in which everyone knew that one could not use compulsion in matters of religion, in the sense that it was wrong to do so (whether actually forbidden by the law or otherwise). This in its turn tells us that we are within the orbit of Greco-Roman culture in its late antique phase. The concept of religious freedom was pioneered by the North African Christian Tertullian (d. after 220), who also gave the concept its name (libertas religiosa). “It is ordained by both man-made and natural law that each person may worship whatever he wishes”, he said. “It is not for religion to compel religion (nece religiosam est cogere religionem), which is something taken up voluntarily, not under duress.” In the same vein another North African, Lactantius (wrote c. 300-317), merging prescription and description, said that “There is no need of force and injury, because religion cannot be forced…” “religion ought to be defended, not by killing but by dying, not by fury but by patience, not by crime but by faith…” There is nothing so voluntary as religion.” Thereafter we encounter the concept in Greek: “I do not consider it good practice to coerce people instead of persuading them”, Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389 or 390) said, gently chiding the emperor Theodosius while at the same time praising him for “winning over everybody gently and setting up voluntary action as the unwritten law of persuasion” “Christians are not allowed to use force or violence to combat error. They must provide for the salvation of men by persuasion, reason, and gentleness”, as John Chrysostom (d. 407) said By his time, the claim was widely out of step with actual practice, and indeed with his own recommendations elsewhere (“Slap them in the face, strike them around the mouth, sanctify your hand by the blow”, as he famously told the Antiiochenes with

175. It is this method that Shāfiʿī rebelled against (cf. above, note 161), as did others in Pakistan about the same time (cf. M. Mir, Coherence in the Qurʾān, Indianapolis, IN, 1986, drawn to my attention by J. Witztum. For a good example, see R. Pareet, “Sure 2. 256: žāʾ ikraḥa fi ḍī-dīn, Toleranz oder Resignation?”, Der Islam 45 (1969), p. 299; or id., Der Koran: Kommentar und Kommentatīr, Stuttgart 1983, ad 2:256.

176. Alāʾī, Rdb., vol. 3, p. 18 (where the view is rejected). It is also reported in Alftiyah, Tafsīr, vol. 1, p. 412. For its likely roots, compare M. Mir, Coherence in the Qurʾān, p. 176.


reference to blasphemers)\(^{181}\). None the less, the Christians continued to see themselves as people who converted and corrected others without recourse to force, since this was how they were described in the Gospels and other foundational sources. That their religion had spread without use of the sword was a point they were to make time and again in polemics against Islam\(^{182}\).

By the fourth century it was the turn of the pagans to stress the voluntary nature of religion: "There are things which escape constraint and are superior to threats and injunction, such as all the virtues and above all, reverence for the Divine", the philosopher Themistius (wrote 364) said, stressing that the emperor had provided legal freedom for every citizen to practise his own faith in imitation of God who "has decreed that the manner of worship be left to the decision of each individual: the man who applies force takes upon himself the authority which God has given up"\(^{183}\). Libanians (c. 293) repeatedly pleaded with the authorities for tolerance of non-Christian religions (not just his own): "In such matters one must persuade, not compel"\(^{184}\). The orator Symmachus (d. 402) goes so far as to endorse pluralism: "What does it matter by which wisdom each of us arrives at truth? It is not possible that only one road leads to so sublime a mystery"\(^{185}\).

By the end of the fourth century, however, Theodosius I (379-95) had ordered the pagan temples to be closed and banned public and private sacrifices along with other pagan devotional acts, classifying them as treason punishable by death (though well over half the population of the Roman empire may still have been pagan at the time)\(^{186}\). Thereafter life became increasingly difficult for pagans, and for Jews, Samaritans and disdained Christians too. Under Justinian (d. 565) even pagans who had “decided to espouse in word the name of Christians” were persecuted along with Manichaeans, Samaritans, Jews, Subbotians, Montanists, Arians and others\(^{187}\). ("These crucifiers of the son of God should not be allowed to live at all", as a sixth-century Syrian saint declared before setting fire to a synagogue\(^{188}\). Théodius II (d. 582) and Maurice (d. 602) also persecuted pagans\(^{189}\); and in 632, under Heraclius (d. 641), the Jews and Samaritans were forcibly converted\(^{190}\). Justinian's policies did strike some as excessively intolerant. "As the Deity allows various religions to exist, I do not dare impose one alone. For I remember reading that we should sacrifice to the Lord of our own will, not at the command of anyone who compels us. He who tries to do otherwise clearly opposes the heavenly decrees", the Ostrogotic king Theodahad (d. 536) wrote to the emperor\(^{191}\), using much the same argument as Q. 10:59. The historian Procopius (d. after 562) also approved, though he obviously could not be so outspoken. According to him, when the rural people were compelled to abandon their ancestral faith, they rebelled, to be cut down by soldiers or to take their own lives, in the case of the Montanists by shutting themselves up in their churches and setting fire to them, or fleeing from their homelands, so that "the whole Roman empire was filled with murder and with exiled men", while the Samaritans, resenting being made to change the beliefs of their fathers, "not by their own free choice, but under compulsion of the law", instantly inclined to the Manichaean and "the Polytheists, as they are called"\(^{192}\). Procopius also deemed it folly to enquire into the precise nature of God when humans could not even understand human things properly: "let each say about these things whatever he thinks he knows, both priest and layman"\(^{193}\).

Sure 2:256 must be downstream of all this, for what it expresses is a principle inconceivable in a genuinely pagan world. There was no religious freedom in the pagan Near East and Mediterranean before the rise of Christianity because civic religion was separate from the pursuit of absolute truths and otherworldly salvation (if any). Each ethnic and political community had its own gods; with the partial exception of the Jews, no one claimed exclusive access to the divine or denied other people’s gods, not because everybody was tolerant, but rather because what religion stood for was a particular set of laws and customs to which one adhered by virtue of having been born into the community in question. Religion was the ways of the ancestors, the worship that had kept your community alive, not a set of


184. R. van Loy (tr.), "Le ‘Pro Temples’ de Libanios", Revaloración 8 (1933), 30 (§ 29). This speech was occasioned by the rampage of the fourth-century equivalent of the Taleban, Cfr. also his letter in defence of Manichaeans (Ep. 1253) in S. N. C. Lieu, Manichaeism in Mesoopotamia and the Roman East, Leiden 1994, p. 55.


universally true beliefs. It was in philosophy that universally valid tenets were to be found, and one was certainly free to choose one's own philosophy, just as one was free to seek individual salvation in mystery religions and additional cults of other kinds. But this freedom did not rest on a principle, merely on the fact that such pursuits were not a matter of public interest as long as the demands of civic religion were respected.

The rise of Christianity changed all this by postulating a God who was true for everyone, irrespective of who or where or what one was, and who had to be worshipped, not in addition to one's ancestral religion or imperial cult, but rather instead of them. The Christians behaved as if civic religion was a matter of choice, and it was in response to the persecutions that they thereby brought upon themselves that they stressed the freedom of the individual to choose his or her own beliefs. The rise of Christianity deeply affected the pagan concept of religion as well, not only in the sense that the pagans began to defend the diversity of religions that they had hitherto taken for granted, but also in the sense that they too came to see religion as a matter of individual choice. Theophrastus's claim that moral and religious matters lay outside the sphere of legislation is an astonishing one for a champion of Hellenism, as Garnsey remarks.

Lā trāḥāfi al-dīn is closer in wording to the snappy formulations of Tertullian and Lactantius than to those of the Greek Christians, let alone the pagan philosophers (whose views on the many roads leading to the same truth reappear in the Rāsūlī Kitāb al-Šafā'). But what matters is that the concept of religion reflected in the verse is that of late antiquity, not that of a genuinely pagan world beyond it. In Q. 2:256 as elsewhere in the Qur'an, religion is a set of beliefs about a single universal God freely chosen by the individual, not communal ways centering on an ancestral god or gods. The Qur'an nowhere addresses its message to an ethnic or political group in the manner of the Old Testament. It opens its statements with vocatives such as "O you who believe," never "O ye Arabs" or "O you Quraysh" (ya maš'īr al-Ārab/Quraysh); it never casts Allāh as the ancestral god of the Arabs, as opposed to mankind at large; and though the muḍhrakan frequently justify their beliefs as ancestral, they never charge the believers with reasonable neglect of the civic/tribal cult by failure to venerate the deity or deities of the forefathers, to perform the customary sacrifices, or engage in other venerable rites. The issue between the believers and the polytheists (and Jews and Christians) in the Qur'an is universal truths to do with God's relationship with lesser beings on the one hand and the reality and timeliness of the judgement and resurrection on the other, not civic religion. Wherever exactly we are in Arabia, we are in a place that formed a cultural continuum with the Christian world around it, sharing its basic presuppositions and speaking the same cultural language, except that it formulated itself in a distinctive local idiom of its own and was somewhat out of date: Q. 2:256 articulates a norm that had long ceased to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance in the region in which it had originated.

What we encounter here seems to be a time-lag in the exchange of ideas between populations separated by linguistic, cultural and geographical distance.
freedom of religion in the Qur'an and the gradual dismemberment of the tradition. As the Islamists so clearly see, there is only one way to stop this dismemberment, namely to restore a political community based on religion. Whether they can do it is another question.

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AL-QA'DI AL-NUMAN, ISMA'ILI LAW AND ISMAMI SHIIISM

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The Ismai'lis split off from the rest of the Isma'ili Shi'is on the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in 148/765; other Ismai'ili groups were eventually consolidated into the Twelve (Ithna'ashari) community. The Isma'ili Shi'i doctrine of the imamate, which was conceptualized already in al-Sadiq's time, retained its centrality in the theological thought of both branches of Isma'ili Shi'ism, the Isma'iliyya and the Ithna'aschariya, despite pronounced differences in their political strategies. It was however in the Fatimid state, representing the crowning success of the revolutionary movement of the early Isma'ili, that the doctrine of the imamate also served to characterize the newly-founded legal system of the Isma'ili.

The modern progress in Isma'ili studies, based on a large number of Isma'ili manuscripts recovered in the twentieth century, has led to a new and more precise understanding of the Fatimid period. The Isma'iliYYa was a sophisticated and highly developed system of thought and practice, based on the teachings of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz in the early 10th century. The Isma'iliYYa was characterized by a unique approach to the study of the Quran and the Hadith, which was based on the interpretation of the works of their most important jurist, Abu ʿAbd al-Latif al-Mahdawi. The Isma'iliYYa was also characterized by a strong emphasis on the idea of the imamate, which was seen as the source of all power and authority in the world.

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