

## **Freedom of Thought in the Holy Qur'an**

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Thinking is one of the most important high faculties in human beings, which requires a proper social ground for its growth and development. Modern man considers social liberties as one of his aspirations and goals and continually attempts to achieve and preserve these and other kinds of liberties. Freedom of thought implies a number of things among which we can mention the following: preparing the ground, information and the means for facilitating free thinking, as well as removing the obstacles of thinking. In the Islamic culture, there are several narrations from the Prophet (PBUH) and Imams (AS) that praise thinking. For instance, we have it in our traditions that one hour's thinking is superior to seventy years spent praying. In this essay, we will discuss this concept in order to clarify whether Islam accepts or rejects freedom of thought.

Man is generally free to make his own decisions and there is nothing that threatens this freedom. In other words, this freedom lies in selecting the ways of logical thinking, without being affected or forced by the others, the information and the misleading means, to move in a particular direction towards certain good or bad outcomes. Each of these factors is considered a type of limitation to freedom of thought, because these external factors will cause man to be led towards a particular result, while if he had been free he would have achieved a different and even the opposite result.

Freedom of thought also implies removing the internal factors that restrict the intellect, particularly carnal desires and blind pursuit of

one's habits. All these factors are restrictive barriers to the intellect and push it towards certain predetermined results. Of course, it must be noted that the freedom of thought is also associated with the thinkers and their followers and supporters.

Thinking ability is the result of man's intellect. Freedom of thought is the result of the same human faculty that enables him to think. This faculty must necessarily be free. Man's development and evolution is dependent on this freedom. Thought is logic. Because man is a thinking creature, he can ponder on various things and as the result of this reflection, he can discover as much of the truth as it is possible for him to. In verse 42 of the Surah Anfal, "*...so that anyone who perished might perish in order to set an example, and anyone who survived might (also) survive as an example. God is so Alert, Aware!*"

Based on this verse, we can easily conclude that the Islamic method of promotion is to ask people to think. According to this verse, man must found his life, specially his religious life, on thinking and find reasons for his actions and beliefs. He must have good reasons for his ideological attitudes and daily practices.

In addition, in verses 98 and 99 of Surah Nisa, the Almighty says: "*Except for those men, women and children who are [really] helpless and cannot find any other means nor are they guided in any way; those God may eventually pardon. God is Pardoning, Forgiving.*"

Based on the concept of the above mentioned verses, those who can somehow free themselves of doubt and indecision or from the oppression of their intellectual and physical captors, but do otherwise, will never be pardoned before God and no excuses will

be accepted from them. Therefore, man must use all his material and spiritual powers in this regard in order that he can find divine truth and base his life on it. Islam has given man freedom to understand the Divine principles so that he can achieve and benefit from these principles after he has investigated and reflected upon them. Also, in verses 11 of Surah Baqarah, 24 of Surah Anbiah and 75 of Surah Qasas, man has been asked to think and this is indicative of the fact that Islam is based on thought and logic. All this shows the degree of Islam's emphasis on thinking. People who are free in their thoughts and behavior will finally come to discover Islam's truthfulness and will believe in it. The Holy Qur'an is full of verses that ask man to think, reason and use his intellectual faculty. The phrasing of these verses is testimony of freedom of thought.

In verse 24 of Surah Zukhruf, *“He said: “Even if I should bring you better guidance than what you found your forefathers had?”, they would say, ‘We reject anything you are sent with!’”* This verse and similar verses, in which God criticizes blind obedience to one's forefathers, point to the fact that man should discover the truth by thinking and then choose what is good for him. There is no doubt that in order to find the best, man is required to become familiar with different ideologies and think about them.

Verses 15 of Surah Isra, 47 of Surah Yunus and 24 of Surah Fatir all consider informing people and calling them to Islam as the aim of sending prophets, which all point to the importance of freedom of thought for discovering the truth. This demonstrates that using superior thought man can achieve better results. Islam does not just pay lip service to freedom of thought; as a result of thought the truth of Islam glows brighter.

Considering the above-mentioned verses, it is clear that Islam not only respects thinking and freedom of thought, but also considers freedom of thought as necessary for salvation. Since Islam is based on reasoning and logic, it calls man to God through the use of reasoning and encourages him to think before accepting the truth of Islam.

### **The Scope of Freedom of Thoughts**

Islam leaves freedom of thought unbounded. But this voluntary act of thinking is realized in two different ways: one is the proper way which leads to man's progress and perfection; the other is the wrong way which results in retrogression and decline. Therefore, Islam talks of useful and right thoughts in growing terms and criticizes useless and wrong thoughts, but it leaves both options open to the free man. Now, if man decides not to heed these warnings and involve himself in evil thoughts, he is still free and will not be punished as long as he has not put these thoughts into practice. However, as soon as he puts his evil thoughts into practice he will be punished for his wrongdoing and that is because he has adversely affected the external world with his malicious and corrupt thoughts. Practicing evil thoughts disturbs other people's thoughts and prevents them from achieving the truth, which is deemed an offence and thus punishable by law.

In the Holy Qur'an, numerous subjects have been introduced as proper, some examples of which are as follows: in verses 8 of Surah Rume, 42 of Surah Zomar and 24 of Surah Yunus., God has advised man to think about his creation, life and death and the essence of the universe. Also, in verses 6 of Surah Fath, 12 of Surah Hjarat and 103-105 of Surah Kahf., the Almighty has prohibited us from indulging in idle speculation and being deceived by appearances. In these verses, God has reproached

those who are deeply involved with appearances and have restricted their thoughts to superficial things; it has been stated that these people will not benefit from their thoughts. Therefore, in Islam constructive and beneficial thoughts, but not harmful ones, are highly valued. Accepting freedom of thought in Islam does not entail accepting everything that results from exercising this freedom because if man uses some suspect and unsubstantiated assumptions, he may sometimes come to the wrong conclusion. The Qur'an has repeatedly prohibited man from using suspect premises and invalid conclusions. It has criticized those who follow their suspicions. In verse 36 of Surah Yunus, God says that speculation will never obviate man's need for the truth.

Thus from a Qur'anic perspective, it is senseless to have freedom to follow one's suspicions, because suspicions even if they initially lead to the truth, may subsequently lead one astray. Of course from the Qur'an's point of view this attitude to doubtful conclusions takes on a different form when these conclusions affect the individual on the one hand and society on the other hand. That is to say, if doubtful conclusions prove harmful to society, they will be legally punishable. However, if the effects are only limited to the individual, then the individual himself or herself will have to suffer from their worldly and other-worldly consequences. Those who rely on doubtful premises must naturally be prepared to expect their unwanted consequences.

The foregoing discussion holds true for people who deliberately choose to use their dubious premises and conclusions; however, if somebody unknowingly considers uncertain premises as certain, he is not, from a Qur'anic perspective, to suffer the other-worldly consequences; he is considered among the helpless and may finally enjoy the Almighty's mercy. To sum up, from a Qur'anic perspective, definite conclusions are respectable. Whatever man considers doubtful is not suitable to serve as

the basis of his decisions and those who rely on their conjectures have been reproached in the Holy Qur'an.

In verse 12 of Surah Hojarat, addressing the believers, God says: *“You who believe, refrain from conjecturing too much: even a little suspicion forms a vice. Do not spy on one another, nor let any of you backbite others. Would one of you like to eat his dead brother's flesh? You would loathe it! Heed God, for God is Relenting, Merciful!”* Thoughts that are born out of carnal desires are not acceptable. The Qur'an calls man to piety in order to help him to avoid these thoughts. In verse 29 of Surah Anfal, God says: *“You who believe, if you heed God, He will grant you a Standard, absolve your evil deeds for you, and forgive you. God possesses such splendid bounty!”*

The effect of carnal desires on the thought has made the Qur'an warn man against these desires and advise him to keep them under control. Demonstrating the relationship between following one's suspicions and carnal desires in verses 23, 24 of Surah Najm, God says: *“They are only some names which you and your forefathers have called them; God has not sent down any authority for them. They merely follow conjecture and something their souls fancy. Yet guidance has already reached them from their Lord. Or may man have anything he hankers for?”*