

Freedom Dialogue Group

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*Whosoever wishes, then let them believe, and whosoever wishes,
then let them disbelieve
al-Qur'an*

The right to express one's views – to engage in theological, social and political discourse – must be underpinned by the right to intellectual inquiry. It is ontologically prior to any form of rights therefore to have the right to intellectual inquiry. The intellect, the mind, is not an inherently governed domain, but it must possess the right to such freedom to possess any rights, believe or reject beliefs, critique an idea or develop an idea. That's the case whether in the realm of science, philosophy, religious convictions, socio-political ideas – or in the realm of undertaking any act that an individual can be held morally or legally accountable.

Hence freedom of belief or intellectual inquiry becomes the fundamental right in any society that purports to grant rights or indeed impose duties or social obligations upon people. It is therefore an implicit and assumed foundational idea – a root if you like – from which all other ideas and rights arise. As such, if the net result of such ideas or actions were stifling intellect, it would thereby pull out its very own foundations. The fruit would be poisoning the root or the branch destroying its own foundations.

No religion, system of thought, or ideology can impose restrictions intellectually or seek to do so through coercion be it state or other power. It is for this reason in medieval times that Ibn Taymiya, the oft reviled Muslim theologian and lawyer, rejected the idea that a court of law could determine sound dogma, or the correct interpretation of the Qur'an, or even personal ethics, and impose it upon an individual. Milton made the very same point. Neither the authoritarian or the magisterium could impose its dogma on an individual from a salvific viewpoint – an individual required conviction – or from the point of view of State. It was this same perspective that Luther addressed in his essay on liberty.

The oft-cited Qur'anic verse, "let there be no compulsion in religion," is used by advocates of religious freedom to articulate the same point within a Muslim perspective. There are other verses stating one cannot force people to believe – they either do or they don't.

This, however, has greater ramifications beyond one's religious convictions.

Without freedom of thought, you cannot have the right to scientific criticism and therefore progress. Knowledge and technological developments and all that goes with this will be stifled. Jim al-Khalili makes that point emphatically in his work on Arabic science.

Without freedom of thought there is no free speech. And without free speech you cannot express your opinion so you are removed of all agency and sovereignty. There is no democracy or governance of the people without the right to express their will. Tyrannical rule and a violation of people's rights is all that remains as an alternative.

On an ethical level one is forced to "think" and behave in a manner that may not conform to your ethical and moral beliefs. Hypocrisy, immorality and corruption are the only net result - an amoral or immoral society is the only one that can be fostered.

It is for these very reasons that the Qur'anic injunction – let those who wish, believe and those who wish, disbelieve – is significant and ontologically necessary for any society to maintain religious, ethical, moral, and political integrity. We lose all of these without freedom. As such, any ideas, laws, institutions, or measures of government seeking to restrict it are unethical, immoral, and irreligious. They violate the basic conditions for the rule of law – fairness, justice, and a higher sense of ethical values than merely the decrees of those in authority.