

SŪRAH 109

Al-Kāfirūn

(The Unbelievers)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Say: 'Unbelievers! (1)

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿١﴾

I do not worship what you worship, (2)

لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢﴾

nor do you worship what I worship. (3)

وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ ﴿٣﴾

I shall never worship what you worship, (4)

وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ ﴿٤﴾

nor will you ever worship what I worship. (5)

وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ ﴿٥﴾

You have your own religion and I have mine.' (6)

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ ﴿٦﴾

No Meeting of the Ways

Although the Arabs before Islam did not deny God altogether, they did not know Him by His true identity as the One and the Eternal. They neither showed any true understanding of God, nor worshipped Him properly. On the contrary, they ascribed to Him, as partners, idols that were supposed to represent their great and pious ancestors or, in some cases, the angels whom they claimed to be God's daughters. Moreover, they alleged a kinship between Him and the *jinn*. They often ignored all

these qualifications, however, and worshipped those idols themselves. But in all cases they claimed, as the Qur'ān quotes them, that they *"only worship them [i.e. their various deities] so that they may bring us near to God."* (39: 3)

The Qur'ān also states: *"If you ask them who it is that has created the heavens and the earth, and subjected the sun and the moon (to fixed laws) they will say: God."* (29: 61) And again: *"If you ask them who it is that sends down water from the sky, and thereby revives the earth after it has died, they will say: God."* (29: 63) Moreover, God superseded their deities in their oaths and supplications.

But in spite of their belief in God, the polytheism they entertained fouled their concepts, traditions and rites to the extent that they assigned to their alleged deities a portion of their earnings and possessions, and even their offspring. In fact, they were at times forced to sacrifice their children. Concerning this, the Qur'ān has the following to say:

Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him].' Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners. How ill they judge! Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions. They say: Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions. They also say: 'That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women.' But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is Wise, All-Knowing. Losers indeed are those who, in their ignorance, foolishly kill their children and declare as forbidden what God has provided for them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God. They have gone astray and they have no guidance. (6: 136-140)

The Arabs were also convinced that they were the followers of the religion of Abraham and that they were better guided than the people of earlier revelations [i.e. the Jews and Christians] inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula at the time: the Jews and Christians preached respectively that Ezra and Jesus were the sons of God whereas they, the Arabs, worshipped angels and *jinn* – the true offspring of God according to them. Their belief, they maintained, was more logical and more conceivable than that of the Christians and Jews. Nonetheless, all were forms of idolatry.

When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) declared his religion to be that of Abraham, they argued that there was no reason for them to forsake their beliefs and follow Muḥammad's instead, since they too were of the same religion. In the meantime, they sought a sort of compromise with him proposing that he should prostrate himself before their deities in return for their prostration to his God, and that he should cease denouncing their deities and their manner of worship in reciprocation for whatever he demanded of them! This confusion in their concepts, vividly illustrated by their worship of various deities while acknowledging God, was perhaps what led them to believe that the gulf between them and Muḥammad was not unbridgeable. They thought an agreement was somehow possible by allowing the two camps to co-exist in the region and by granting him some personal concessions!

To clear up this muddle, to cut all arguments short and to firmly distinguish between one form of worship and the other, and indeed between one faith and the other, this *sūrah* was revealed in such a decisive, assertive tone. It was revealed in this manner to demarcate monotheism, i.e. *tawḥīd*, from polytheism, i.e. *shirk*, and to establish a true criterion, allowing no further wrangling or vain argument.

"Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine.'" (Verses 1-6) Following one form of negation, assertion and emphasis after another, the *sūrah* sets its message in absolute clarity. It starts with the word, 'Say,' which denotes a clear divine order stressing the fact that the whole affair of religion belongs exclusively to God. Nothing of it belongs to Muḥammad himself. Moreover, it implies that God is the only One to order and decide. Address them, Muḥammad, by their actual and true identity: *"Say: Unbelievers!"* (Verse 1) They follow no prescribed religion, nor do they believe in you. No meeting point exists between you and them anywhere. Thus the beginning of the *sūrah* brings to mind the reality of difference which cannot be ignored or overlooked.

"I do not worship what you worship," is a statement affirmed by *"I shall never worship what you worship."* Similarly, *"nor do you worship what I worship,"* is repeated for added emphasis and in order to eliminate all doubt or misinterpretation.

Finally, the whole argument is summed up in the last verse: *"You have your own religion, and I have mine,"* meaning that you, unbelievers, and I, Muḥammad, are very far apart, without any bridge to connect us. This is a complete distinction and a precise, intelligible demarcation.

Such an attitude was essential then in order to expose the fundamental discrepancies in the essence, source and concepts of the two beliefs, i.e. between monotheism and polytheism, faith and unbelief. Faith is the way of life which directs

man and the whole world towards God alone and determines for him the source of his religion, laws, values, criteria, ethics and morality. That source is God. Thus life proceeds for the believer, devoid of any form of idolatry. Idolatry on the other hand is the opposite of faith. The two never meet.

On the whole, the distinction we are dealing with here is indispensable both for those who call on people to accept Islam and the people themselves, because *jāhiliyyah* concepts are often mixed with those of Islam in those societies which previously followed the Islamic way of life, but have later deviated from it. Of all communities, they are certainly the most rigid and hostile to the idea of regaining faith in its healthy, clear and straightforward form, certainly more so than those who have not known Islam originally. They take it for granted that they are righteous while they grow more and more perverse!

The existence of noble beliefs and thoughts in those societies, albeit mixed with base ones, may tempt the advocate of the Islamic system to hope for their quick return, thinking he may be able to strengthen such good aspects and rightly correct undesirable features! Such temptation is, however, dangerously misleading.

Jāhiliyyah and Islam are two totally different entities, separated by a wide gulf. The only way to bridge that gulf is for *jāhiliyyah* to liquidate itself completely and substitute for all its laws, values, standards and concepts their Islamic counterparts. The first step that should be taken in this respect by the person calling on people to embrace Islam is to segregate himself from *jāhiliyyah*. He must be separated to the extent that any agreement or intercourse between him and *jāhiliyyah* is absolutely impossible unless and until the people of *jāhiliyyah* embrace Islam completely: no intermingling, no half measures or conciliation is permissible, however clever *jāhiliyyah* may be in usurping or reflecting the role of Islam. The chief characteristic of a person who calls on others to adopt Islam is the clarity of this fact within himself and his solemn conviction of being radically different from those who do not share his outlook. They have their own religion, and he has his. His task is to change their standing point so that they may follow his path without false pretence or compromise. Failing this, he must withdraw completely, detach himself from their life and openly declare to them: "*You have your own religion, and I have mine.*" (Verse 6)

This is a *sine qua non* for contemporary advocates of Islam. They badly need to realize that they are calling for Islam today in entirely *neo-jāhiliyyah* surroundings, amongst ex-Muslim people whose hearts have grown harder and whose beliefs have deteriorated considerably. They need to understand that there is no room for short-term or half-baked solutions, compromises, or partial redemption or adjustment, and that their call is for a uniquely distinguished Islam, in contrast to such people's conception. They must face these people bravely and put it to them explicitly: you have your own religion, and we have ours. Our religion is based on absolute

monotheism whose concepts, values, beliefs and laws cover all aspects of human life and are all received from God and no one else.

Without this basic separation confusion, double-dealing, doubt and distortion will certainly persist. And let it be clear in our minds here that the movement advocating Islam can never be constructed on any ambiguous or feeble foundations, but has to be built upon firmness, explicitness, frankness and fortitude as embodied in God's instruction to us to declare: *"You have your own religion, and I have mine."* (Verse 6) Such was the way adopted by the Islamic message in its early days.