

## Transcript: Practices, Striving in the way of God

Islam teaches that every human being is born *muslim*, in harmony with God and creation. But to remain in this state is not easy. As we go through life, we tend to forget the guidance of God and drift into disobedience. To counter this tendency, each Muslim is required to struggle against their wayward self [Q. 29:5-7].<sup>1</sup> This inner struggle or jihad is a compulsory duty for every Muslim. Every Muslim should be active in the fight against sin. Temptation is to be resisted with all one's strength. If they do sin, then there should be immediate repentance and seeking the mercy of God. Full repentance includes avoiding the circumstances that lead to sin. This might mean avoiding certain employment or places, or the company of certain people. It might even mean moving to a more Islamic environment either by moving to another city or country or by a kind of psychological withdrawal. Unless the Muslim struggles against evil in their own heart, they will have a jaundiced eye when looking at the evils of the rest of the world. That's why this inner jihad is sometimes called the 'Greater Jihad'.

However Muslims must also look outside themselves at what is happening around them. Their struggle has also to be an outward one, to establish justice on the earth [Q. 5:8, 4:135].<sup>2</sup> The Muslim is not permitted to sit back and allow evil to pollute the world but is required to 'command the good and forbid the evil' upon the earth [Q. 9:71, 3:104, 3:110].<sup>3</sup> In particular, they are required to stand firm on the principle of justice. Justice overrules all partiality; a Muslim is commanded by the Qur'an to do justice even if it goes against oneself [Q. 4:135].<sup>4</sup> This jihad is a struggle to establish

---

<sup>1</sup> Q. 29:5-7 Whoever hopes to encounter God [should know that] God's [appointed] time is indeed coming, and he is the All-hearing, the All-knowing. Whoever strives, strives only for himself. Indeed God is needless of the worlds. As for those who have faith and do righteous deeds, we will absolve them of their misdeeds and we will surely reward them for the best of what they used to do.

<sup>2</sup> Q. 5:8 O you who believe! Stand up firmly for God as witnesses to justice, and let not hatred for a people lead you to be unjust. Be just; that is nearer to God-consciousness, and be conscious of God. God is indeed well aware of what you do.

Q. 4:135 O you who believe! Stand up firmly for justice as witnesses to God, even if it should be against yourselves or parents and near relatives, and whether it be [someone] rich or poor; God has a greater entitlement than them. So do not follow [your] desires away from justice, and if you distort or disregard [things], God is indeed well aware of what you do.

<sup>3</sup> Q. 9:71 But the faithful, men and women, are friends of one another: they command what is right and forbid what is wrong and perform the prayer, give the *zakat*, and obey God and his Messenger. It is they to whom God will grant his mercy. Indeed God is All-mighty, All-wise.

<sup>4</sup> Q. 4:135 O you who believe! Stand up firmly for justice as witnesses to God, even if it should be against yourselves or parents and near relatives, and whether it be [someone] rich or poor; God has a greater entitlement than them. So do not follow [your] desires away from justice, and if you distort or disregard [things], God is indeed well aware of what you do.

justice and to root out evil and oppression [Q. 4:74-76].<sup>5</sup> As a servant, a Muslim doesn't own their own life and so the struggle for justice upon the earth might involve even giving up their own life as a martyr, if God so wills. This helps to explain why Muslims are called to fight against or resist injustice, even at the cost of their own lives.

When action is necessary, Islam does not command peace at any cost. If there is no alternative and everything else has been tried, then the Muslim may be required to fight in the cause of right. Such a military jihad is subject to strict conditions. It's only permitted to take up arms to defend the oppressed or to preserve the Islamic way of life against injustice, as this is 'defending the rights of God'. A jihad is not to be used for territorial gain, although it did happen this way on some occasions in history. It should be always a war against oppression and injustice. There must be a good chance of success and it must be a collective effort and declared by a legitimate ruler.

Strict rules for the conduct of all fighting, based on the Qur'an and Sunna, were laid down in the earliest period of Islam. These are uncompromisingly humane. For example, minimum force is to be used and this must be directed against opposing combatants. Non-combatants – which includes all women, children, the elderly, sick, and the soldier who has surrendered – must not be attacked or threatened. This rules out all forms of indiscriminate warfare or 'weapons of mass destruction'. Similarly, any warfare leading to ecological damage is forbidden.

With the development in the West of long-range artillery, bomber aircraft, and biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, many more non-combatants are killed in modern warfare than ever before. Christian and Muslim scholars have questioned whether such methods can ever meet the terms of the Christian just war theory or the Muslim rules of engagement. Both Muslim and Christian political leaders are torn between the demands of the guidance of God and their perceived need to protect their people from aggression.

Indiscriminate killing is a feature also of terrorist attacks. This has brought with it the issue of the suicide bomber. Islamic tradition has always placed a high value on martyrdom as the ultimate act of obedience to the will of God [Q. 9:38, 9:111].<sup>6</sup> It is

---

<sup>5</sup> Q. 4:74-76 Let those fight in the way of God, who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter, and whoever fights in the way of God, and then is killed or is victorious, We shall give him a great reward. What is it with you that you do not fight in the way of God and the oppressed men, women and children, who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this town whose people are wrongdoers, and appoint for us a guardian from you, and appoint for us a helper from you"? Those who have faith fight in the way of God, and those who reject faith fight in the way of tyranny [*taghut*]. So fight the friends of Satan; weak indeed is the cunning of Satan.

<sup>6</sup> Q. 9:38 O you who believe! What is it with you that when you are told, "Go forth in the way of God," you sink heavily to the ground? Are you pleased with the life of this world instead of the Hereafter? But the enjoyment of the life of this world compared with the Hereafter is but insignificant.

the complete recognition that we own nothing but that God owns all, even our very lives. By tradition, the martyr is always assured a place in Paradise. We saw the Iranian Martyr Brigades in the Iran-Iraq War, where volunteers were prepared to run through mine fields, and accept death if it came, to clear a way for the advancing army.

Some Muslims have made a case for suicide bombers as martyrs, but others have held that to kill oneself in such a way is not permitted in Islam. This argument rests precisely on the understanding that our lives are not our own and so we are not entitled to kill ourselves, so suicide has always been forbidden in Islam [Q. 4:29].<sup>7</sup> A martyr, they argue, is someone who stands for the cause of God even to the extent of not giving way if another comes to kill him or her. In the case of a martyr, death is something that is accepted at the hands of another if it cannot be avoided. In the case of a suicide bomber, the person actually takes the initiative of terminating their own life as a weapon in order to kill others. This, they argue, is quite a different order of causality, which makes such an act forbidden. Any bomb used against civil society is indiscriminate and thus a suicide bomb used against civilians is forbidden.

It is interesting to note that no matter how hard pressed the young Muslim community was in the time of the Prophet; he did not launch a suicide attack. We must remember that suicide bombers are a recent occurrence in Islamic history. Suicide attacks were used by the Japanese in the 1939-45 War and have been fairly common amongst the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka; in these cases the religious influences were Buddhist and Hindu. It is worth noting that Samson, the Biblical figure who brought about the death of his enemies by killing himself along with them, is not mentioned in the Qur'an or Sunna.

This tactic was first used by Muslims in the Lebanon in the 1980s against American forces but really only became established in the Palestinian uprisings from the 1990s onwards and has since spread to Afghanistan, Britain, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan and the USA. Those Muslim scholars who have given a justification for these acts have argued that they are a legitimate form of warfare specifically against the overwhelming military superiority of what they see as the oppressors; a strong majority amongst Sunni scholars from the Middle East has been achieved in the case of Palestinian suicide attacks on Israel. Sunni scholars from other parts of the Muslim

---

**Q. 9:111** Indeed God has bought from the believers their persons and their wealth for the Garden to be theirs: they fight in the way of God, kill, and are killed. A promise binding upon Him in the *Taurat* [Torah] and the *Injil* [Gospel] and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his promise than God? So rejoice in the transaction you have made with him, and that is the great success.

<sup>7</sup> **Q. 4:29** O you who believe! Do not eat up your wealth among yourselves through wrongdoing, but it should be trade by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves. Indeed God is merciful to you.

world have not supported this position. No leading Shi'a scholar has given a *fatwa* to justify a suicide attack.

In Islam, the use of force and violence is far too serious to be left to human initiative; therefore it must be used according to the laws of God. If it became clear that a jihad were necessary, then it could only be called by the legitimate Muslim ruler. Normally this was the Caliph but such a power was exercised by others as the Islamic Empire spread and became less united under a single leadership. This has become a problem today as there has been no Caliphate since 1924 and Muslims live in many different nation states, some of which are led by Muslims but others not. It becomes a real question in contemporary Islam to ask if a true jihad could be called in the current state of the Muslim worldwide community or *umma*. This does not stop some Muslim groups using the rhetoric of jihad but this does not justify it under Islamic law.

If a jihad were called by a legitimate authority under all these conditions, then it would be an obligation on all Muslim men, who are adult, healthy and fit, to take part if needed, unless the balance of their other responsibilities prohibits it [Q. 2:216].<sup>8</sup> When one thinks that the 'just cause' for a jihad is to counter the oppression of evil and injustice that threatens oneself or others, then one can see the weight of the obligation. If it is to protect the God-given Islamic way of life, which is the natural state of the human being, then not to resist such evil would be to give in to human degradation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Q. 2:216 Fighting is prescribed for you, although it is detestable to you. But it is possible that you detest a thing while it is good for you, and that you love a thing while it is bad for you. But God knows, and you know not.