

Forced Conversions: Islamic Narrative vs. The Barbarism of Other Civilizations

THE REVIVALIST SOCIETY

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Growing up in the Western world over the past 25 years, one of the most ubiquitous misconceptions hurled about Islam post-September 11, has been that “Islam was spread by the sword”. Whether it was CNN, ABC, or BBC, the secular imperialist political order of the West attempted to exploit the ignorance of the masses by deploying their propaganda around forced conversions supposedly being the norm in Islamic history^{i ii iii}. However, as we will explore in this concise article, the Qur’anic and Prophetic commandments along with the early purist application proves the contrary. All the while, we will also expose the barbaric perpetration of force and duress subjected by non-Muslims countless times throughout the past two millennia including under the Christian Roman Empire, the Hindu sub-continent, and within the modern hegemonic republic states that relentlessly export their customs and policies for the world to conform to or face punitive measures. The importance of countering these false narratives cannot be understated as the generational turnover of Muslims in the Western world demands an intellectual anchor by understanding the truest readings of history, such that the call to Islam emanates from a position of strength rather than the cowardly defensive stances seen from some.

Definition and Origin

The definition and concept of ‘forced conversions’ according to the majority of international conventions are mentioned as such:

- United Nations Human Rights - Article 18.2, paragraph 5: “bars coercion that would impair the right to have or adopt a religion or belief, including the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to their religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief or to convert.”^{iv}
- 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Article 18: “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”^v

- 1969 American Convention on Human Rights – Article 12: “No one shall be subject to restrictions that might impair his freedom to maintain or to change his religion or beliefs. Freedom to manifest one’s religion and beliefs may be subject only to the limitations prescribed by law that are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the rights or freedoms of others.”^{vi}

One prominent detail in the conventions of the non-Muslims regarding coerced conversions is the ambiguity surrounding its definition, technicality and application. As Peter Hardy highlights in his article “Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia” (1977), the open terminologies can and have been used in the past to associate tribal and societal adoption of new religions as being ‘forced’ while potentially disregarding other factors such as natural acceptance^{vii}.

When it comes to the attribution of forced conversions at the tip of the sword to Islamic history, it finds its origins in the near-miraculous spread of Islam in the first four decades after the migration of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to Medinah. The 10-year Medinan period followed by the caliphate of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali (may Allah be pleased with them all) saw the spread of the Islamic rule spanning from North Africa to the doorsteps of China. Such unprecedented and militarized expansionist results opened the doors for the opposers to muddle two very distinct concepts; *expansion of territorial control/borders* and *actually forcing the inhabitants to convert their religion*. This false amalgamation is not entirely unexpected as the European, African, and Asian history is riddled with savagery in the process of expansion as observed during (but not limited to) the religious Crusades, the Mongolian pillaging of towns in return for non-conformity, the Spanish imposition of the Christian faith upon its conquered colonies, and many more.

Traditional Islamic Foundation

From the textual foundations of Islam, there are clear prohibitions for one to impose their religion on another human being by coercion. First evidence is the verse in Surah al Baqarah:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

Surah al Baqarah 2:256 - There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.

Although some of the classical exegetes opined that this verse is abrogated, the majority of scholars maintained that this verse is still legally applicable^{viii}. Abdullah Ibn Abbas (may Allah ﷺ be pleased with him) from the earliest generation of the companions expounds on this verse and says “no one from among the people of the Book and the Magians should be coerced to believe in the divine Oneness of Allah after the Arabs' embrace of Islam”^{ix} as this verse came down after the “people accepted Islam and the People of the Book [willingly] paid *jizyah*”^x. Other exegetes such as Imam Ibn Kathir (may Allah ﷺ have mercy on him) further corroborated and said “do not force anyone to become Muslim, for Islam is plain and clear, and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear. Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to embrace Islam. Rather, whoever Allah directs to Islam, opens his heart for it and enlightens his mind, will embrace Islam with certainty.”^{xi xii}

Furthermore, Allah ﷻ reminds the Prophet ﷺ in the verses below:

لَسْتُ عَلَيْهِمْ بِمُصَيِّرٍ

Surah al Ghashiyah 88:22 - You are not over them a controller.

Not being a controller indicates that one is not responsible for the adoption of anyone’s Islam. Rather, the command is for us to be clear and unambiguous conveyers of the truth. To this effect, Allah ﷻ also says:

وَمَا عَلَيْنَا إِلَّا الْبَلْغُ الْمُبِينُ

Surah Yasin 36:17 - And we are not responsible except for clear conveyance."

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

Surah al Kahf 18:29 - And say, "The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve."

The acceptance of truth and falsehood are within the limited free will that has been awarded to the human being endowed with the rational and spiritual capacity to judge between foundational truth of a unitary Creator. As faith is a divinely ordained test for the human being, it remains to be in their purview and cannot be forced under duress.

فَقَاتِلُوا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَا بِالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلَا يُحَرِّمُونَ مَا حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَلَا يَدِينُونَ دِينَ الْحَقِّ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حَتَّى يُعْطُوا الْجِزْيَةَ عَنْ يَدٍ وَهُمْ صَاغِرُونَ

Surah Al Tawbah 9:29 - Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture - [fight] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled.

On one hand, the above verse in Surah al Tawbah that begins with 'fight' might indicate an implied coercive stance of the religion. However, context and the overall consolidated message yields the Islamic rules of engagement with non-Muslim combatants in the following descending order:

1. Calling them towards Islam such that they choose to accept it willingly.
2. Or allow them to adopt their own faith should they choose to, but they can continue to live under Islamic governance while paying the 'Jizyah' tax (often less than the 2.5% 'Zakat' levied on Muslims).
3. Or fight them in a state-sponsored military engagement until they give up authority over their land (while still keeping their faith).

This cascading mandate for dealing with members of different ideologies encouraged an organic co-existence of backgrounds and views within a society that was bound by an objective and just system of governance (i.e. *the shari'ah*). We can elaborate further on this point with historical examples such as the Prophetic companions who established agreements with the non-Muslims who willingly subdued themselves politically and economically, while adhering to their own religion. The second caliph, Umar

ibn al Khattab (may Allah ﷺ be pleased with him), established the famous treaty between the Christian patriarch, Sophronius in 637 CE (called *al-'Ahd al-'Umariyya*) which stipulated the protection of the people of Jerusalem to adhere to their existing religion and to maintain their own churches for them to worship in and rule between their civil matters. The relevant portion of the pact read as follows:

This is the assurance of safety which the servant of Allah, 'Umar, the Leader of the Believers, has given to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by the Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged.

They will not be forcibly converted...^{xiii}

Even prior to the opening of Jerusalem, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself demonstrated this quality as the leader marching into Makkah after a battle-less conquest of the religious center. After a prolific conflict, both armed and diplomatic, between the Quraysh and the Muslims that lasted almost 20 years, the Prophet ﷺ entered victorious into his birth city as the victor and declared the following:

مَنْ دَخَلَ دَارَ أَبِي سُفْيَانَ فَهُوَ آمِنٌ وَمَنْ أَلْقَى السِّلَاحَ فَهُوَ آمِنٌ وَمَنْ أَعْلَقَ بَابَهُ فَهُوَ آمِنٌ

Who enters the house of Abu Sufyan will be safe, who lays down arms will be safe, who locks his door will be safe [Sahih Muslim 1780]

Note, that unlike the physically coercive and oppressive treatment of the early Muslims by the leadership of Quraysh where many were forced to state the claim of disbelief with their tongue and actions, the Prophet ﷺ maintained the safety of his adversaries, as long as there was no threat to the Islamic state and the overall safety of the Muslims; a value shared by all throughout human history.

Will Durant accurately captures this reality in his book, *The Story of Civilization*, where he described the tolerant behaviour of the Muslims towards the *Dhimmi* minorities (protected people under the covenant of the Islamic state). He says “the *ahl-al-dhimmah*, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews,

and the Sabians enjoyed during the Umayyad Caliphate a degree of tolerance the like of which we cannot find in the Christian lands nowadays...^{xiv}. The emphasis on taking care of the non-Muslim minorities living under Islamic authority is of such importance to our scholars, that key figures such as Imam Al Qarafi (d. 684 AH) from the Maliki school mention the obligation of treating them well and protecting their safety under the topics of Islamic creed (under *Wala and Baraa*). Al Qarafi also relates the statement of other scholars like Ibn Hazm (d. 456 AH) as saying “whoever is under our protection (i.e. non-Muslim *ahl al-dhimmah*), and the enemy comes to our land seeking him, we must go out to fight them with cavalry and weapons, dying for that cause if necessary, in order to guard those who are under the protection of Allah and His Messenger ﷺ. Giving up *ahl al-dhimmah* to the enemy without doing that (i.e. defending them) is a violation of the *dhimmah* contract”^{xv}.

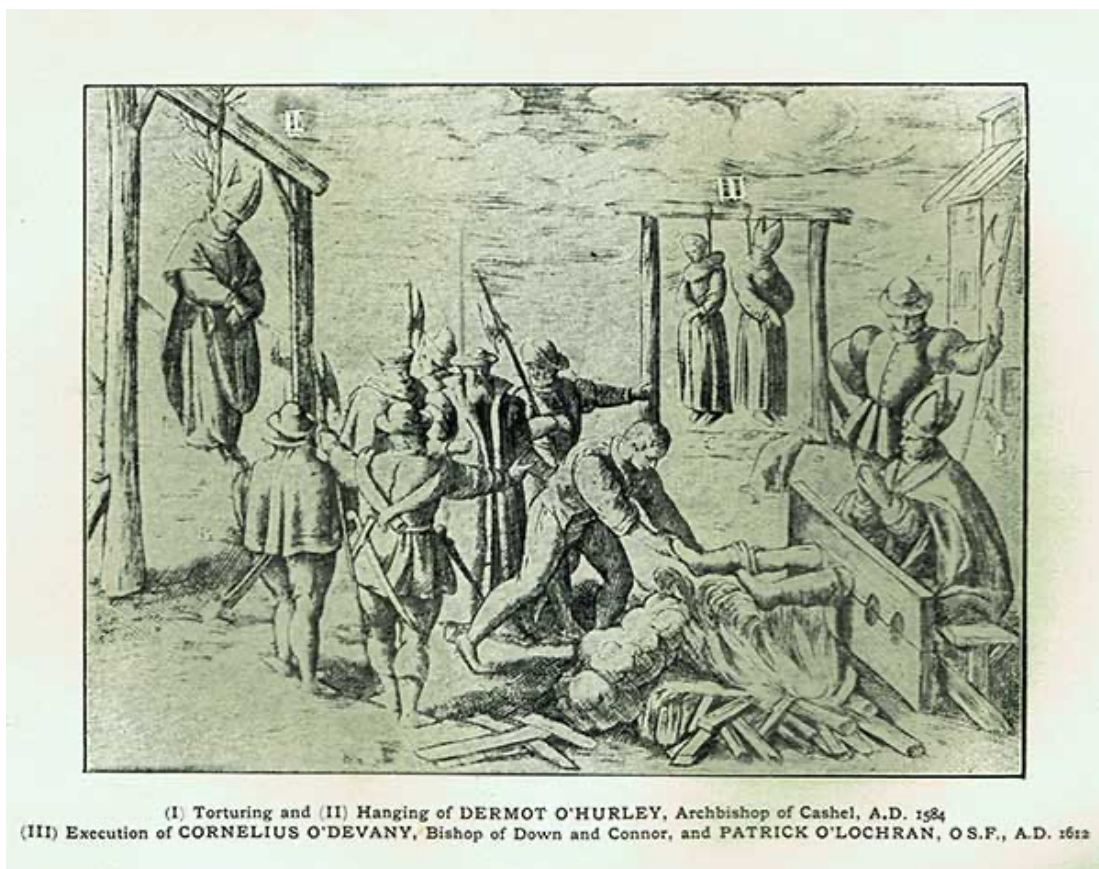
Historic Barbarism of the Non-Muslim States

Now that we have established the foundational mandate of the Islamic faith and its application, let’s examine the relative tolerance, or lack thereof, from historical contexts involving other civilizations. The first example that we will see is the policy that established the Christian roots of Europe itself. The Roman Emperor, Theodosius I, had infamously issued his declaration in 380 CE whereby the land and its people were forced to accept the religion that “Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans”. Anyone who failed to adhere to this decree was classified as “demented and insane” and that they shall be “smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of our own initiative”^{xvi}.

The second example is during the First Crusades (1096 CE) where many Jewish communities, that were under the protection of the Christian leadership in Europe, were subjected to torture tactics and murderous crimes. There was violent application of force and coercion to attempt a forced conversion of the Jewish leadership^{xvii}. It is to no one’s surprise that the consistent tension between the Jewish and Christian communities in Europe and Middle East have been a norm throughout the past two

millennia; a phenomenon that caused massive migration of the Jewish communities to seek asylum under the Islamic caliphate^{xviii}.

The third example is from the bloody history between the inter-Christian sectarian conflicts. During the early years of the Protestant Reformation, many of the bishops and priests on both sides were brutally tortured at the stake if they refused to convert and extend their conversion policies to their respective communities. The figure below depicts the torture of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cashel in Ireland, Dermot O’Hurley, who was hung after his resistance to the duress in converting to Protestantism^{xix}.



The fourth example is the brutal subjugation of the North American native population amidst the politically expansionist policies of the Catholic European settlers. After settling ashore, Christopher Columbus forced a great number of indigenous natives to convert to Christianity while forcing his own views and policies upon the locals against their will. The pretext of their forced conversions was to bring

so-called “civility” of the Europeans as a counter to the so-called “savagery” of the natives. Such ideological roots laid by the 15th century settlers still finds their branches and wretched fruits in modern-day foreign policies of Western states^{xx}.

Although there are many examples from other major world religions that systematically converted others under duress, the final example presented here is of the modern Western states using a covert imperialist agenda for world domination under a creedal mix of solipsistic individualism and forced utilitarianism. If we classify Western ideologies as creedal equivalents of organized religions, we start to make sense of the relentless expansionist policies adopted by the likes of the United States, Britain, France, and their allies, with the support of their spear-headed organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Council of Foreign Relations among others, to export the religion of secularism. The whole world is being made to conform to the subservient worldviews of the Western hegemony. Any state that resists, is relegated to the stone ages via economic sanctions, political coups, and predatory lending policies that collateralize the nations’ resources and working assets^{xxi}.

The open definition of ‘coercion’ mentioned in their own conventions are violated with such policies as implication of hunger, deprivation, and bankruptcy in the face of resistance is no different than the tip of the sword bearing down one’s neck. The former can be argued as even more torturous with the lengthy pain felt seeing your own brethren being constricted and induced into anarchy and warfare. According to a continued study by Brown University that analyzed the human cost of wars post-September 11, there are almost 400,000 civilian casualties over the past 20 years in five countries alone (as of 2021)^{xxii}. Note, that the referenced chart below only shows direct war-related deaths and ignores all the related casualties caused by the loss of access to food, water, and infrastructure damage due to those wars.

**Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars:
Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones,
Afghanistan & Pakistan (Oct. 2001 – Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003 – Aug. 2021); Syria (Sept. 2014 – May
2021); Yemen (Oct. 2002-Aug. 2021) and Other Post-9/11 War Zones¹**

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	Afghanistan ³	Pakistan	Iraq	Syria/ISIS ⁴	Yemen ⁵	Other ⁶	Total
U.S. Military ⁷	2,324 ⁸	- ⁹	4,598 ¹⁰	- ¹¹	-	130	7,052
U.S. DOD Civilian ¹²	6	-	15		-	-	21
U.S. Contractors ¹³	3,917	90	3,650	19 ¹⁴	2 ¹⁵	511 ¹⁶	8,189
National Military and Police ¹⁷	69,095 ¹⁸	9,431 ¹⁹	45,519- 48,719 ²⁰	80,600 ²¹	- ²²	N/A	204,645- 207,845
Other Allied Troops ²³	1,144	-	323	13,407 ²⁴		-	14,874
Civilians	46,319 ²⁵	24,099 ²⁶	185,831- 208,964 ²⁷	95,000 ²⁸	12,690 ²⁹	N/A ³⁰	363,939- 387,072
Opposition Fighters	52,893 ³¹	32,838 ³²	34,806- 39,881 ³³	77,000 ³⁴	99,321 ³⁵	N/A ³⁶	296,858- 301,933
Journalists/ Media Workers ³⁷	74	87	282	75	33	129 ³⁸	680
Humanitarian/NGO Workers ³⁹	446	105	63	224	46	8 ⁴⁰	892
TOTAL	176,206	66,650	275,087- 306,495	266,325	112,092	778	897,150- 928,558
TOTAL (Rounded to Nearest 1,000)	176,000	67,000	275,000- 306,000	266,000	112,000	1,000 ⁴¹	897,000- 929,000

Although the state and media rhetoric behind these wars is protection against national interests and advocacy for overall earthly protection, the message between the lines is the global expansion of atheistic, secular, and liberal values that will inevitably face resistance until one creed is victorious over the other. The facade of equality of citizens in the secular State is of little meaning when considering the ideological nature of the Church-State compromise following the renaissance, that birthed the modern State structure. Instead of divine revelation, there lies amidst us, the human-devised, collectivist religion of 'globalism' that claims divinity in legislation much like the Pharaoh claimed lordship in the millennia bygone. Allah ﷻ reminded us of the Pharaoh's egregious proclamation:

فَقَالَ أَنَا رَبُّكُمُ الْأَعْلَىٰ

Surah Al Nazi'at 79:24 - And said, "I am your most exalted lord."

In conclusion, a deceptive tactic of some non-Muslim polemicists to spew doubts is to superimpose examples of some transgressive figures within Islamic kingship in latter generations, who abused their leadership positions, into a false doctrine of coercion attributed to the core teachings of the religion. However, the examples provided in this article clearly juxtaposed those deceitful narratives. As Muslims facing intensifying intellectual battlefields, we must equip ourselves with clear expositions of falsehood and strongly advocate for objective morality to govern our affairs. At the heart of the Islamic expansion during the earliest and purist generations lied the removal of despots and their systemic injustices, leading to a natural appreciation of balance between legality and spirituality. Such was the balance that awakened the natural disposition of monotheism in its observers (*fitrah*), paving way for innovation, culture, and organization that led to the renowned Islamic 'golden age'.

May Allah ﷻ allow the light of truth to prevail and the darkness of falsehood to be extinguished,

Ameen!

ⁱ <https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2014/11/02/sam-harris-on-gps-islam-has-been-spread-by-the-sword/?utm>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/2/hi/europe/5346480.stm?utm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=2472279&page=1&utm>

^{iv} United Nations Human Rights. n.d. "International standards - Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief." *OHCHR*. Accessed Jan 20, 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#3>

^v United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18, 1966, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

^{vi} Organization of American States, *American Convention on Human Rights*, Article 12, 1969, available at: <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/mandate/Basics/3.AMERICAN%20CONVENTION.pdf>

^{vii} Source 1: Peter Hardy. "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1977);

Source 2: Richard M. Eaton. "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India". *Northern Arizona University* - <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/eatonapproachconversion.pdf>

^{viii} محمد بن علي بن محمد بن عبد الله الشوكاني - فتح القدير (٤٧٦/١) - (١٢٥٠ هـ)

^{ix} الفيروزآبادي - تنوير المقباس (ص ٥٢٢) - (٨١٧ هـ)

^x دار الفكر - بيروت - (٩١١ هـ) جلال الدين السيوطي - الدر المنثور (٢١/٢)

^{xi} دار الكتب العلمية - (٧٧٤ هـ) أبو الفداء إسماعيل بن عمر بن كثير - (٥٢١/١) تفسير القرآن العظيم

^{xii} مؤسسة الرسالة - (٣١٠ هـ) أبو جعفر الطبري - (٤١٥/٥) جامع البيان في تأويل القرآن

^{xiii} Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 91.

^{xiv} Will Durant. *The Story of Civilization* (Ch. 13, p.131)

^{xv} Al Furuq (3/14) - Shihab al-Din Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Idris al-Qarafi (d. 684 AH)

^{xvi} University of Massachusetts Lowell. n.d. "The Codex Theodosianus: On Religion, 4th Century CE." *History 302 Textbook*.

^{xvii} Simha Goldin (2014) *Apostasy and Jewish identity in High Middle Ages Northern Europe: 'Are you still my brother?'*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mvnct>.

^{xviii} Bernard Lewis. *The Jews of Islam* (Ch. 2, p. 67). Princeton University Press.

^{xix} Henry A. Jefferies (2018). *History Ireland - Conversion by coercion?* <https://www.historyireland.com/conversion-by-coercion/>.

^{xx} Bart Ehrman (2018). *Inside the Conversion Tactics of the Early Christian Church*. March 29. <https://www.history.com/news/inside-the-conversion-tactics-of-the-early-christian-church>.

^{xxi} John Perkins (2004). *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (Pg. 58/63/108). Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

^{xxii} Neta C. Crawford & Catherine Lutz (September 2021). "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars". *Watson Institute - Brown University*. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll>