

V. ISLAM & VIOLENCE

What Does Islam Teach about Violence?

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After the 9/11 attacks, the word *jihad* entered into the everyday vocabulary of Americans. The word was often translated as “holy war” and became a shorthand way for many non-Muslims to associate Islam with violence. Most Muslims, on the other hand, believe that violent extremists have hijacked the concept of jihad and have made it more difficult for ordinary Muslims to appeal to the language of jihad to articulate the way they understand and live out their faith.

The word jihad, which literally means “struggle,” is far more nuanced in Islam than non-Muslims in the West commonly assume. The Qur’an teaches Muslims to obey God. A life of obedience involves struggling against all things that stand in the way of the realization of God’s will. On a social or political scale, this can involve the struggle against social injustice, economic exploitation, and attacks against the Muslim community. On a personal level, this can involve the struggle against sinful and selfish inclinations.

To the extent that jihad involves a struggle to defend the Muslim community against an attack, Islam clearly teaches that the use of force is permitted. Several passages in the Qur’an allow for what many Muslims consider to be defensive war. The following passage, which contains references to the expulsion of Muslims from Mecca, provides justification to go to war against those who attack or wrong Muslims:

To those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight, because they are wronged – and verily, God is Most Powerful for their aid. They are those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right – for no cause except that they did say, “Our Lord is God” (Q. 22:39-40).

Another passage also justifies defensive war but indicates that there are restrictions on how war should be conducted:

Fight in the way of God those who fight you but do not transgress [the limits]. Indeed, God does not like transgressors (Q. 2:190).

What exactly are the rules or limits that Muslims should not transgress in war? According to traditional Islamic law, the rules of war include the following:

- War must not be for material gain.
- The lives and property of non-combatants must be secured.
- Women, children, the elderly, and invalids cannot be harmed.
- Houses of worship cannot be destroyed.
- Prisoners of war cannot be tortured.

Muslims are also called upon by the Qur’an to make peace if those who attack them desire it:

And if they incline toward peace, you also incline toward it, and put your trust in God. Indeed, God is the All-hearing, the All-knowing (Q. 8:61).

While the Qur’an, the hadith, and Islamic law offer plenty of support and guidance for defensive war, there have been instances in history in which Muslim rulers have appealed to jihad to legitimize expansionist wars – that

is, offensive wars that are not the result of an armed attack by enemies. In recent decades, we have seen a similar phenomenon among some Muslim thinkers who support the idea of an offensive jihad in order to dislodge oppressive regimes. Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) of Egypt and the Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) of Iran are examples of two Muslim intellectuals who insisted that jihad must incorporate any struggle to fight tyranny and cannot be understood narrowly as defensive war.

Although the media devotes lots of attention to the threat of violent jihad, it is important to point out that Muslim extremists do not commit most of the terrorist attacks carried out on U.S. soil. According to [FBI reports](#), between 1980 and 2005, only 6% of terrorist attacks in the U.S. were carried out by Muslims. These reports reveal both the exaggeration of the threat of violent jihad in the U.S. and the degree to which the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject such violence.

But we should not forget that this discussion has focused only on one facet of jihad – the use of coercive force in defense of the Muslim community. According to Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad distinguished between the “lesser jihad,” war, and the “greater jihad.” The greater jihad involves the spiritual struggle to become a better human being. It includes the struggle to live out one’s faith, to be honest, to avoid selfishness, and to do good works. We must remember that for the overwhelming majority of Muslims, the jihad they are engaged in pertains to this spiritual dimension and not to war or violence. It may take some time before the non-Muslim majority in the West acknowledges the importance of the greater jihad for Muslims, though there are organizations such as [MyJihad](#) dedicated to reclaiming Islam and jihad from Muslim extremists and promoting the greater jihad to the larger public.

Response to: What does Islam teach about violence?

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Jesus's own radical words are the first place a Christian might turn to ponder the presence and power of violence in our lives.

In Matthew 5, Jesus begins preaching a powerful sermon: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He goes on to note the blessedness of those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, those who are reviled and rejected.

Note that these are not the makings of the inside of a Hallmark card. Note that these are not insipid invocations. These are revolutionary statements, meant to turn the world upside down!

The powerless are powerful! The weak are strong! The peaceful are victorious!

But this isn't how we experience the world day to day, is it?

After all, don't we all tend to think and act as if the rich are blessed? Don't we tend to think and act as if those who are free of grief, those who are strong, those who are filled with food and drink, those who get what they want, those who can wield power and violence are those most blessed among us? Don't we tend to think that the rewards of the earth belong to such as these?

Later in that same radical sermon, Jesus goes even further. You may have heard from others, Jesus says, that we are supposed to love our neighbors and hate our enemies. We too have heard this all too often and practiced it

more than we care to admit. But Jesus points us in a different direction. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Jesus’ own radical words are the first place Christians might turn. And yet Jesus’ own radical words are also a reminder of our own shortcomings on these critical fronts. Violence perpetuated by people claiming the mantle of Christ helped fund the selling of slaves across the Atlantic, the expulsion of Native Americans from their lands, and the dehumanizing rejection of immigrants from various corners of the world. Jesus’ radical words remain unheeded by too many of us.

And so when we turn to our Muslim neighbors and think about what their faith and their histories have taught about violence, we can turn to them with the recognition that our own faith traditions are marked both by great hopes and tragic failures, by individuals and communities who risked all for peace and others that chose the path of dehumanizing violence. And if we’re honest, we will find that most of us are between those two poles, neither wholly innocent of violent acts nor irretrievably lost because of them. More than condemnation or claims to innocence, this is where a real dialogue can start.

V. Discussion Questions:

1. Christians have dealt with violence in many ways. Some are pacifists, rejecting at all times in all places the possibility of faithful warfare. Some are proponents of just war theory, deeming sometimes necessary that peoples should take up arms to protect the innocent and the weak. Some were proponents of crusades, believing their every action to be wholly sanctioned by God and their mission to be God's own mission without distinction. What were you taught about violence in your church growing up? Where do you find yourself today? What key events on the world stage have shaped your view of violence?
2. Name one way in which you now understand a bit more clearly your Muslim neighbors. How might this new insight shape how you interact with your Muslim neighbors day to day?
3. How might someone's view of violence change if she or he is the victim of violence? That is, what might we learn from, for example, refugees, the survivors of domestic violence, and wounded veterans of the military about the complexities and power of violence? What about those who encounter violence in their daily work? What might we learn about violence from, for example, police officers, social workers, and emergency room doctors? And what might you contribute to your community's understanding of violence?
4. How do you define peace? In particular, what might peace with your Muslim neighbors look like in your community?