Islam and Violence

Introduction

Religion is an ambiguous, amorphous term. For many, however, religion remains the foundation of morals, justice, peace, and everything that is good. Since peace and violence cannot be bedfellows, it would seem then that religion is the very antithesis of violence. In the wake of 9/11, however, the connection between religion and violence seemed indisputable – but then some researchers theorized that it is incorrect to see religion qua religion as the true source of violence. Several other issues, among which might be a fight against colonialism, foreign occupation, economic inequality, opposition to globalization – none of which is specifically "religious" – may be the more likely causes (Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson 2013: 2). Worse yet, it might be that "religion" is being othered, in our enlightened times, as inferior to modern secularism. As William Cavanaugh eloquently puts it,

> The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. This myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labelled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence serves to cast nonsecular social orders, especially Muslim societies, in the role of villain.
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> (Cavanaugh 2009: 4)

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Elements in Religion and Violence

Government agencies such as the FBI and CIA that use speakers who make no secret of their anti-Muslim agenda only add to the marginalization of Muslims and the singling out of Islam as more prone to violence than other religions. The effect of such demonization is clear from polls. For example, in a December 2017 Pew Research Center poll, 41% of Americans deemed Islam as more likely than other religions to promote violence among its followers (Pew Research Center 2017).

It is important to note, however, that even those who speak of the connection between religion and violence as a myth do not deny that religion can be and is used to promote violence (Cavanaugh 2009: 5). While adherents to the different faiths may claim that those who resort to violence (and here, *violence* implies physical injury) do not truly understand their religion, the problem is that – especially in Islam – the explanation is simply incorrect. The Qur'an is very clear, for example, on the aspect of fighting for God when ordered as in Qur'an 2:216: "Fighting is enjoined upon you, but you dislike it. Yet, it may be that you hate a thing while it is good for you; or that you like a thing, and it is bad for you. God knows – and you know not."

One may argue that the Qur'an's verses refer to a specific situation, and that to cite them without reference to context would merely be creating a pretext. The history of Islam, however, forces us to observe three truths. The first is that once a religion becomes state doctrine, it will necessarily lead to what Max Weber termed "bureaucratization" and "routinization" (Weber 1991: 224). Unlike Christianity, which took four centuries to become a state religion, Islam was married with political power during the lifetime of its founder. Muhammad, as prophet and statesman in Medina, promulgated rules and regulations that controlled the entire community. After his death, the formation of the caliphate and the selected reading of the Qur'an and prophetic traditions to frame a law of nations (*ahkām al-siyar*) often led to wars that saw the building of an empire.

The second truth is that once religion forms the basis of law, a theocracy exists, opening the door for totalitarian interpretations of what is right. The routinization of law may often lead to the loss of ethical assessment, especially after the death of the founder of the religion, when his charisma is no longer there; authority then comes via the viewpoints of his successors. In the case of Islam, the caliphs, and later the jurists, exercised this authority. The third truth is somewhat related to the second: if there is a weak central government, groups may exert their influence in the name of religion to discriminate against minorities. This is clearly evident in places like Pakistan where groups like Sipah Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar Jhangvi terrorize Shia Muslims, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims (Saeed, Martin, and Syed 2014).

It is necessary to provide working definitions of "Islam" qua religion and "violence" if I am going to write an entire Element on the connection between the two. Religion as a self-evident construct is essentially a post-Enlightenment Western creation (Cavanaugh 2009; Smith 1991). While some may agree with Charles Kimball's view that, even though there is no consensus on the definition of religion, we nonetheless know religion when we see it (Kimball 2002: 15), others convincingly argue that there is no neat divide between the secular and the religious. Indeed, the very term *secular* evolves out of Christian theology (Asad 1993: 207; Casanova 2011: 56; Derrida 2001: 67). For many Muslims, this is in line with the understanding of Islam qua religion since Qur'an 6:162 enjoins Muslims thus: "Say: My prayers, my rituals, my life and my death are for God, Lord of all the Worlds."

The term *Islam* is derived from the Arabic root *SaLiMa*; most definitions, however, translate that as "peace" or "submission," overlooking that the word also means "to be perfect" (see, for example, Denny 1985: 67 and al-Dawoody 2011: 47). I argue that a more accurate meaning is from the

Qur'anic version of Genesis 17:1, where God orders Abraham to seek perfection. The Hebrew imperative תָּמִים (*Tamim*) had become שְׁלִים (*Shlaim*) in the Targum, a rendition that the Arabs would have more likely known. Qur'an 2: 131–132 summarizes the event, using the Arabic cognate for the imperative of the Targum:

> The Lord said to him: Be perfect أسلم (*aslim*). He answered: I turn my face for perfection to God. And he counselled his sons, as did Jacob. "Oh, my children! Indeed, God has chosen for you a path; do not die unless you are in this state of perfection."

Islam, then, has to do with seeking perfection based on interpretations of the Qur'an and tradition, forming the connection between Muhammad's message and God's order to Abraham to form a community of believers (see Donner 2010). For the purposes of this Element, Islam is a "sacred canopy" (see Berger 1990) that gives meaning and authority to what Muslims may deem necessary to fulfill that seeking of perfection, be it in ritual, personal conduct in society, or, indeed, in all aspects of life. In today's world of nation-states, where secular manifestos are the norm, Muslim-majority states such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan exemplify that "sacred canopy" imagery, either by claiming to operate under purely religious law or by proclaiming "islamization" to rely heavily on religion in governance.

Insofar as violence goes, the general idea is to think of the shedding of blood, martyrdom, or the "jihadism" that so many see as elemental to Islam. The meaning is much wider (Juergensmeyer et al. 2013: 2), and to incorporate that broader sense, I use Craig Nessan's definition: "the attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others through any nonverbal, verbal, or physical means that inflict psychological or physical injury" (Nessan 1998: 451).

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In the context of this Element, the violence is exerted by those who act or are perceived as acting in the name of Islam, using language and symbols derived from authoritative texts and traditions to bring about physical damage or gender discrimination or to promote an "us" against "them" binary.

Islam contains so many juristic and interpretational differences that scholars generally acknowledge that there are several Islams. I choose not to detail such differences in this Element and embark on a sort of essentialism. Since the Sunnis constitute approximately 85–90% of the world's Muslim population, I refer mainly to Sunni books and interpretations. I have divided this Element into five sections: Introduction, Jihad, Islamic Law, Patriarchy, and Conclusion. For the sake of simplicity, I avoid the use of diacritics except where vital. All translations, unless I indicate otherwise, are my own.

From Jihad to War to Terrorism

After 9/11, *jihad* has become the most discussed term in debates about Islam (Bonner 2006: 1; Lawrence 1998: 1). The following examples make the reason obvious: 9/11, 7/7, and 26/11; the shoe bomber; the Brussels metro and airport; Manchester, London, Paris, and Barcelona; the Boston Marathon bombing; suicide bombers in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and Israel; al-Qaeda and ISIS. Whether the foregoing refer to horrific acts or terrorist organizations, they generally evoke the image of Muslims carrying out some form of jihad.

In seeking to enlighten us about the violent proclivity of Muslims, Sam Harris tells us:

> Subtract the Muslim belief in martyrdom and Jihad, and the
> actions of suicide bombers become completely unintelligible, as

> does the spectacle of public jubilation that invariably follows
> their deaths; insert these particular beliefs, and one can only
> marvel that suicide bombing is not more widespread.
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> (Harris 2004: 33)

While many of Harris's conclusions are questionable, he can find support in some academic writings for his claim about the warlike nature of Islam. Long before 9/11, for example, Orientalist scholar Emile Tyan (d. 1977) wrote about jihad (rendered as "djihad") in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*:

> The notion stems from the fundamental principle of the uni-
> versality of Islam: this religion, along with the temporal power
> which it implies, ought to embrace the whole universe, if
> necessary by force . . . the *Djihad* is not an end, but a means
> which, in itself, is an evil (*fasad*) but which becomes legitimate
> and necessary by reason of the objective towards which it is
> directed: to rid the world of a greater evil; it is good from the
> fact that its purpose is greater.
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> (Tyan 1960: 2:538–539)

Tyan's words seem designed to foster a particular conclusion: jihad is evil, and the God of the Qur'an is ordering Muslims to commit evil. Writers like Tyan and Harris use carefully chosen sources, deliberately obfuscating any material that might contradict or debunk their conclusions. Tyan, for example, limited himself to the post-prophetic legal writings that present jihad primarily as fighting and as a duty, not considering that such material came in a particular time and context. Sam Harris's deliberate decontextualization of verses of the Qur'an is because he wishes to denigrate rather than engage in objective analysis of a subject that is not his specialty.

Bernard Lewis admits that the literal meaning of *jihad* is "effort" or "struggle," but then somehow jumps to the conclusion that its usage in the Qur'an means "to wage war" (Lewis 1988: 72).

> The basis of the obligation of Jihad is the universality of the Muslim revelation. God's word and God's message are for all mankind; it is the duty of those who have accepted them to strive (*jahada*) unceasingly to convert or at least to subjugate those who have not. This obligation is without limit of time or space. It must continue until the whole world has either accepted the Islamic faith or submitted to the power of the Islamic state.
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> (Lewis 1988: 73)

He mentions one dissenting voice – that of Sufyan al-Thawri – and omits to mention that early Islamic discourse involved several different opinions (Mottahadeh and al-Sayyid 2001: 23–29).

Contrary to what Tyan and Lewis would have us believe, there has never been any single Islamic creed or law about jihad, since there is no singular authoritative body in Islam. All we have from Muslim writers throughout the ages are numerous legal opinions that may all be equally "normative" (Mottahadeh and Sayyid 2001: 23–29; see also Abou El-Fadl 2007: 21–22; Afsaruddin 2015: 70–81).

Many Muslims argue that to see jihad solely as war is a horrible mis-representation of the Islamic *weltanschauung*. Some even contend that the true meaning of jihad is to seek spiritual self-improvement (Kabbani and Hendricks n.d.). This position, however, is just as misleading as the one it opposes, relying on similar casuistry albeit to promote a different viewpoint. Many claim, for example, that the Prophet Muhammad himself instructed his

followers that "the greater jihad" is about spirituality, while the "lesser jihad" is about armed conflict. The problem with this tradition (*hadith*) is that hadith specialists have debunked it.[1]

Several factors have influenced the various interpretations of the polyvalent "jihad." It seems clear that the concept is still evolving, seeking to adapt to the drastic changes of a present that is so vastly different from the milieu in which the term was first used (Hashmi 1996: 146–168). Nonetheless, it is quite surprising that *jihad* should have surfaced as the singular Islamic word, in modern times, to connote war and fighting when the Qur'an has specific terms (*harb*, *qitāl*) to denote such activities. Why have these other Arabic lexes, despite their specific etymological directness, not become the primary terms? Why is it that many calls for jihad by Muslims in various conflicts have been unsuccessful, and suddenly, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, become so widely accepted? In this section, I answer these questions as well as provide a history of the evolution of the concept, from a polysemous term to a univocal "war" to modern-day interpretations that allow, in some cases, for outright terrorism.

The Arabs to whom Muhammad preached his message had long viewed tribal skirmishing as a normal activity. The paucity of resources in an area where no single state had control meant each tribe was a law unto itself, vying against others for existence, unless some pact or treaty established an alliance or détente. Raiding (*ghaʑw*) was frequent, regarded more as a simple fact of desert existence, or even as sport, although protocols were in place, governed by the concept of manliness (*muruwwa*),

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[1] Ahmad Ibn Taimiyya considered the tradition baseless (2000: 11:197), and Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Albani deemed it unreliable (2002: 5:478).

which extolled bravery, loyalty, and the dogged pursuit of vendettas, among other traits.[2]

This explains why Muhammad could survive the early years of his ministry although he faced hostile opposition. As a member of the Banu Hashim clan, he was under the protection of his uncle Abu Talib. When that uncle died, however, Muhammad and his family were ostracized and, along with his followers, endured a period of siege. His little band was powerless to fight back and it is in this light that we must understand the earliest usage of *jihad* in the Qur'an. The tripartite consonantal root *jhd* means "struggle," "striving," or "exertion" (Ibn Manzoor n.d.: 2:395–397). Words derived from this root occur forty-seven times in the Qur'an (in forty-one verses), with the lexeme "jihad" used thrice as a noun and once as an adverb. In many cases, it occurs with the conditional "*fi sabil Allah*," which would render the combined meaning as "struggling for the sake of God" (Afsaruddin 2007: 165–169).

The primary use of the term and its derivatives is to exert effort toward a commendable goal, including peaceful persuasion (Q16:125), passive resistance (Q13:22, 23:96, 41:34), oath-taking (Q5:53, 6:109, 16:38, 24:53, 35:42), and, in some cases, armed conflict (Q3:142; 4:95, 9:16, 24, 41, 44, 81, 85, 88; 61:11).[3] The overwhelming usage of *jihad*, then, does not indicate a necessary connection with armed or physical combat. As noted earlier, other words appear in the Qur'an for such activity, *harb* and *qitāl* being the prime examples. *Harb* is the functional Arabic term for "war" and occurs four times in the

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[2] Fred Donner views it more as sport, not unlike the medieval chivalry of Western Europe (Donner 1991: 31–70). For *muruwwa*, see Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Khadduri 1984: 9).

[3] For a good discussion of the various meanings in the Qur'anic usage, see Abdul Haleem, *Qur'anic Jihad*.

Qur'an: in Q5:64, 8:57, 47:4 and in Q2:279. *Qitāl* is specifically used for fighting, and occasionally refers to a form of jihad.[4] Interestingly too, the Qur'an often presents *sabr* (patience and forbearing) as an essential component of jihad (Afsaruddin 2013: 3), but does not do so when referring to *harb* and *qitāl*. This point underlines the error of seeking to equate the scriptural or classical use of *jihad* to mean holy war, or the idea of subjugating the world to Islam (see Abou El-Fadl 2007: 222).

The earliest use of the term *jihad* is in its specific lexical sense of struggling toward an objective: one revelation in Mecca instructs that: "*jāhidhum bihi Jihādan kabīrā*" (Q25:52). The general interpretation of this verse is that Muhammad is to argue against his opponents by using the Qur'an. Although no fighting took place during this period (610–622 CE), a de facto state of war already existed (al-Dawoody 2011: 18), with the Muslims practicing passive resistance. When Muhammad and his followers fled Mecca in 622 CE, their Meccan enemies confiscated their land and properties (Alsumaih 1998: 191ff.). The Muslims did not just relocate from one place to another: they left as refugees of war. The desert lifestyle meant that the Muslims were now on their own, and that unless they could defend themselves, or ally with some powerful tribe, they would be destroyed.

Medina, to where Muhammad fled, was itself a troubled city, with several groups (many of which were Jewish) in conflict with each other. Unlike in other parts of Arabia, each group here was autonomous, not working under the concept of tribal alliances (al-Dawoody 2011: 19). This explains the importance of the "Constitution of Medina" (*Sahifah al-Medina*) that Muhammad and his followers entered into with the inhabitants of Medina. The gist of the pact was an alliance among the believers in the Abrahamic faiths

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[4] *Qatala* and its derivatives occur 170 times, with the noun form, *qitāl*, used in thirteen cases.