Introduction

> Allah guides those who pursue His pleasure to the ways of peace and brings them out of the darkness and into the light.
>
> [Quran 5:16]

> The Qur'ān has forbidden violence.
>
> [Saʿīd, 1993a: 58]

> War is, in effect, an act of mass murder … the worst sort of heinous crime … The Islamic method … [by contrast is] based totally on the principle of nonviolence.
>
> [Khan 2015a: 42; Khan, 2004: 181]

> There can be no benefit from killing a man in the name of God … Islam is not war, it is not murder, it is not battles. This is not what we must engage in. Peace is Islam, patience is Islam, contentment is Islam, trust in God is Islam, the praise of God is Islam. Love is Islam.
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> [Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, 1987: 51, 70]

> Islam has from the start been a religion of the sword … The Koran and other statements of Muslim beliefs contain few prohibitions on violence, and a concept of nonviolence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice.
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> [Huntington, 1996: 263]

Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains. So runs the most celebrated line of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's seminal Enlightenment treatise *Du Contrat Social*. Its enduring popularity owes a great deal to its terse poetry, to its pregnant tension of apparent opposites. It is equally striking for the quintessentially moral distinction it draws between what is and what should be. One might charitably read a similar equivocation in the well-worn aphorism that 'Islam is a Religion of Peace'. This is a phrase

which one cannot escape when embarking upon a study of principled pacifism and nonviolence in contemporary Islam. The formula has been rehearsed word for word by world leaders from George W. Bush to Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Mahathir Muhammad, Barack Obama, David Cameron, and François Hollande. Yet all of these figures voice it in contexts defined not by their theology but by their politics. These are unfortunately often a politics of division and of criticism and conflict, of fear and terror. The statement seems intended to distinguish what is from what should be, and in each case tacitly responds to the realities of violence perpetrated in the name of Islam. Those who reject its implicit moral argument for this same reason hear in it only delusion, duplicity, or complicity in some nefarious conspiracy.

The declaration that 'Islam is a Religion of Peace' is indeed a deeply dubious one. It is disagreeable even when not employed by politicians of questionable motives and precious little knowledge of Islamicate intellectual or cultural history. Neither should one recoil from it simply because it might invidiously discriminate against Muslims in demanding standards of pacifism and degrees of quiescence from them which are not expected from adherents of other worldviews. The fact that only a small minority of Christian denomination regard nonviolence as a requirement of their faith (notably the Anabaptist Peace Churches such as the Quakers and the Amish) would startle *bien-pensant* world leaders if presented as a political problem in need of a theological solution. Pacifism among thoroughly secular figures is likewise commonly (if not always fairly) construed as embarrassingly naïve or unrealistic. It has certainly not proven to be a vote-winner in democratic elections – where it is more commonly encountered as an accusation levelled at the opponent. Nor is the assertion that 'Islam is a Religion of Peace' objectionable only because it relies so crucially upon a web of such unspoken assumptions as to render it particularly prone to being misinterpreted. Misinterpreted it certainly has been, both inadvertently and wilfully, as evidenced in its widespread ironic co-optation by those driven by anti-Muslim animus. Its problems run deeper than its rhetoric, however, and right to its logical roots.

One should regard debates over the claim that 'Islam is a Religion of Peace' with suspicion because they frame a tangled web of disparate discussions as though they are a single question. What is worse, these are presented as a single question to be answered in a neatly binary fashion. One is invited to meet it with agreement or with dissent: a yes or a no, a yay or a nay. *Is or is not Islam a Religion of Peace?* Such arresting dilemmas are perhaps suited to the floor of a student debating

society. But they are dangerously unreliable guides to the ambiguous complexity of human life. This reductive logic does not apply itself here to any straightforwardly knowable empirical quantity, such as the location of the Eiffel Tower or the boiling point of water at sea level. Rather, it addresses protean and polysemic materials which inevitably mean different things to different people. It necessarily and quite mistakenly presumes that we know and recognise two distinct objects – called 'Islam' and 'Peace' – and then invites us to identify or to distinguish them. Yet it is in fact far from self-evident that we automatically know either, let alone what sort of reply might adequately fix their relation.

PEACE AND *ISLAM*: HETEROGENEOUS AND CONTESTED

While the eternal nature of true Islam may perhaps be readily apparent to prophets and presidential speechwriters, to lesser mortals it remains more elusive. We the latter perceive less fixedly unanimous purity than a plurality of opinion, experience, and manifestation. It is for this reason that secular and Islamic scholars alike recognise the great variety of historical Islam in actually lived human experience stretching from the era of the Eastern Roman Empire to the age of the International Space Station. Islam is manifested and understood quite differently by different Muslims living in different times and in different places. The 'Islam' of a twenty-first-century professor of the Sorbonne cannot simply be assumed to be identical to that of an illiterate farmer in twelfth-century Khorasan. Nor can one presume that the one is automatically superior to the other. This even before one recognises that there are at present alone almost two billion living Muslims, to be found on all of the Earth's inhabited continents practising every conceivable lifestyle, profession, and political persuasion. This is a plain and uncontroversial empirical fact from the point of view of the social scientist, though some preachers and polemicists may balk at it. It is not moreover a fact with which traditional Islamic thought necessarily disagrees.

Quite the opposite: historical Islam consciously comprises a patchwork of competing schools, traditions, and vocations which have more often than not coexisted peaceably. Muslims have certainly found occasions to war with one another ever since the death of the Prophet, of course. Of the first four Caliphs, only Abū Bakr [d. 634] died of natural causes, after all, and sectarian diatribes have been voiced from Kharijite exclusivism to Safavid anti-Sunnism to the anti-Iranian propaganda of Saddam Hussein. Indeed 'the advent of militant piety' has been widely seen 'as a

defining feature of late ancient Christianity and Islam' [Sizgorich, 2009: 5]. It is nonetheless extraordinarily difficult to find Islamic parallels to the sectarian exterminationism of the Albigensian Crusade [1209–1229] against the Cathars of Languedoc; nor to the Thirty Years War [1618–1648] which set Europe ablaze following the Protestant Reformation and left one in three Germans dead. The only systematic attempt at forcibly imposing a single theological orthodoxy upon all Muslims was arguably the ninth-century inquisition [*miḥnah*] launched by the learned ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Maʿmūn [d. 833]. Yet this led only to the discrediting of the very Muʿatazilite theology it had hoped to standardise and the heroisation of those such as the great scholar Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal [d. 855; see e.g. Sizgorich, 2009: 236–237] who resisted it. Rather than strict and centralised orthodoxy, Muslims have instead maintained multiple mutually recognising methods of deriving and practising theology and religious law for over a thousand years. These in turn explicitly enshrine concern for context and practical reason in their jurisprudential philosophies, betokened by the maxim *inna al-fatwā tataghayyar bi-taghayyur al-zamān wa al-makān wa al-ʿurf wa al-ḥāl* ['legal opinion changes in accordance with changes in time, place, custom, and condition'].

Lacking either a core institutional hierarchy or a priestly caste which might monopolise spiritual authority, historical Islam has often relied upon the collegiality of its scholars in order to maintain a sense of unity between far-flung communities of Muslims. The widely reported 'Amman Message', launched in 2004 [*Amman Message*, 2009] and signed by hundreds of leading Islamic scholars [*'ulamā'*] and intellectuals from around the globe, bears witness to the continuity of this practice. In terms of its diplomatic purpose, the Message may indeed have been a conspicuously modern exercise in strategic 'state branding' [see Browers, 2011; Gutkowski, 2016; Warren, 2021] on the part of its Jordanian hosts. But in terms of its content – its central reassertion that the plurality of Islamic sects and schools both recognise one another as legitimate and deem declaring one another 'apostate [as] impossible and impermissible' [*Amman Message*, 2009: 16] – it would be just as at home in an earlier age. Much to the continued frustration of outsiders desirous of dialogue with a singularly authoritative 'Voice of Islam' – some Muslim pope, president, or community leader – the religion was and remains a polyphony. And yet even this is to say nothing of the transcendental, mystical, and apophatic strands of Islam which regard the divine as ultimately unspeakable: perhaps to be glimpsed in revelation and spiritual ecstasy

but never to be contained or exhausted by human words. Still less does it consider those millions for whom their Muslim identity is profoundly felt but primarily cultural, emotional, and aesthetic rather than ethical or even theocentric: not a matter of dogma but something buried deep in melodies of *qawwali* and distant *adhān*, in fragrances of rosewater perfume and apricot *qamar al-dīn*, in the warm jumble of shoes outside *tarāwīḥ*, in a sense of place, in a proud parent's *mashallāh* or deathbed *yā sīn*. When asking whether 'Islam is a Religion of Peace', then, one might reasonably ask: *whose Islam, how do we recognise it, and why not look instead at that of the next person?*

Nor is the matter of what properly characterises 'Peace' in human affairs a settled one. Quite the contrary, in fact. This should come as no surprise, as like every other ethical concept it can only have meaning within a broader ideological frame of reference. These contexts and their consequences are naturally many. This to the point that 'Peace' itself has recently, if not altogether convincingly, been argued to be an inherently 'violent idea' [Idris, 2019], given how often it is invoked to justify the use of deadly force in defence of a given order [see also Goode, 2022]; *si vis pacem, para bellum*. Every given understanding of peace rests upon other judgements concerning the nature and effects of coercion, violence, and disruption: of those things which threaten or break the peace. These are in turn mirrors of particular commitments to what sorts of states of affairs are to be regarded as natural or desirable, just as every negation logically presupposes a prior affirmation. Like Isaiah Berlin's famous treatment of 'Liberty' [Berlin, 1969: 118–172], 'Peace' carries both negative and positive connotations. It calls both for the absence of some things and for the presence of others. But what all of these things actually *are* remains debatable.

One may perfectly comprehensibly argue that one does not enjoy peace if one is subject not only to physical violence but also to its imminent possibility. This fact is reflected in most legal definitions of 'terrorism' as comprising not only force but the threat of force. One may in fact say the same of a host of cultural, structural, psychological, and spiritual factors. When Frantz Fanon bemoaned 'that peaceful violence that the world is steeped in' [Fanon, 1969: 81], his Cold War-era anti-colonialist readers recognised immediately what he meant. When thinkers following Emmanuel Levinas speak of 'the violence of theory, which reduces the other when it leads the other' [Derrida, 2001: 132], the experience of subjection they describe is one recognisable to those unversed in so-called continental philosophy. Even a child reacts with indignation when they

realise they are being controlled and manipulated, that is, and most adults would reject the promise of contentment as docile slave or unwitting dupe: 'the peace of the Cyclops' cave' [Fiala, 2018a]. This, they will maintain, is no real peace. One might on the other hand just as meaningfully say that one is not at peace without adequate food and shelter, or when lacking a faith or a family for which one cannot help but yearn. Peace may be denied not by an unwelcome presence but by a longed-for absence. Many of the protestors of police violence against African Americans who since the 1980s have chanted 'No Justice No Peace' certainly intend the phrase in a conjunctive sense: that justice, however understood, is an indispensable element of peace. If the former is unavailable, the latter is unattainable. Each of these various delineations and extensions of the twinned concepts of peace and violence are however met in turn with plausible objections – including some brought by figures discussed later in this book. The problem is less that peace as a concept is meaningless than that we do not always agree on its meaning. The solution to that problem is not to ignore the discussions it demands but to face them head-on.

'Peace' is an inherently philosophical concept, and it is subject to a good deal of philosophical debate. It is not without cause that discussion continues as to how it might be identified and practised, let alone achieved. 'Pacifism' and 'nonviolence' present the two most salient such attempts, and even these are as disputed as is their relationship to one another [see e.g. Christoyannopoulos, 2023]. There now exist extensive academic literatures exploring and critiquing the many forms each of these may take, as well as scholarly organisations dedicated to undertaking that exploration. Though the existing literature on Islamic nonviolence at its most nuanced divides absolute from contingent commitments [e.g. Leaman, 2017], moral philosophers have long worked with many more categories. They have drawn lines between not only absolute and contingent nonviolent norms [e.g. Fox 2014 and Fiala 2014] but also a host of other interrelated conceptual distinctions. These encompass those between the maximalist and minimalist or universal and particular approaches; between consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethical [e.g. Neu 2011; Trivigno, 2013] arguments in its support; between *Gewaltfreiheit* and *Gewaltlosigkeit* [e.g. Müller, 1996]; as well as identifying sceptical or prima facie [e.g. Ryan, 1983] pacifism, transformative pacifism [e.g. Fiala, 2018b] – even 'aggressive nonviolence' [e.g. Butler, 2020] or the apparent oxymoron of 'War Pacifism' [Ceadel, 1987: 142]. Rather than inevitably being a question of warfare alone, pacifist critiques

have been brought to questions including domestic violence [e.g. Hall Fitzgibbon, 2017], animal welfare [e.g. Chapple, 2017], and environmental issues [e.g. Woods, 2017]. Suffice it at this point to observe that the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*'s entry on 'Pacifism' [Fiala, 2018a] would not run to around 20,000 words and two dozen subheadings if the concept were one which enjoyed simple and universal agreement. Indeed, this multivalent polysemy was recognised from the very founding of the discipline of peace studies [e.g. Ishida, 1969] to the present day [Peterson et al., 2022: 3, 50–51]. Of those proposing the idea that 'Islam is a Religion of Peace', one is therefore compelled to ask: *what do you mean by peace, how and by whom is it practised, and how do we know when we have achieved it?*

All of these questions are difficult to answer, and all require more than a simple *yay or nay*. All of them furthermore entail puzzles which have more than one viable solution. These are essentially contested concepts not because they are incomprehensibly mysterious but precisely because they each admit a range of comparably compelling but mutually exclusive responses, each reasonable and defeasible in its own way. It is not the aim of the present study to arrogate to itself the right of final adjudication over these. It does not presume to declare this peace genuine and that false, nor this Islam pious and that hypocritical. Far from it. Our aim in this monograph is not to delineate Islam *tout court* but rather to explore specific manifestations of Islam. It is not an exercise in first philosophy or speculative theology so much as a systematic account and comparison of empirical instances of Muslim faith and action. It aims for the hermeneutical rather than the homiletic, for the descriptive and the analytical rather than the proselytising or the polemicising. It is not a work in heresiology or religious apologetic and its ultimate subject is less Islam than it is Muslims. Its concern is therefore less with nonviolence and pacifism in Islam in theoretical abstraction or *sub specie aeternitatis* than with nonviolence and pacifism as they are understood and lived by specific Muslims in all their variety, difference, and dissent. We have in other words 'to do not with religious systems basically but with religious persons' [Smith, 1959: 35] who deserve individual attention and deliberative reflection before they can be placed in relation to one another. Rather than plotting a course, we aim instead at charting a territory. Before us lies a domain of towering landmarks – not least the many celebrated figures whose ideas we will soon explore – but lacking maps of the winding ways between them. The fact that this is a landscape which has not heretofore been systematically charted has not however prevented less

diffident scholars from forging ahead on their own divergent paths. Up until recently, Western writers in particular have found their expeditions disappointingly short.

THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC NONVIOLENCE: A QUIXOTIC QUEST?

Conventional wisdom has long had it that the search for nonviolence in Islam is by definition doomed from the outset. *There is simply no such thing*: an objection explicitly raised by an early anonymous academic reviewer of this very research project. A broad Orientalist consensus up until the later twentieth century maintained that normative traditions of principled pacifism and nonviolence were either absent from or fundamentally inimical to the Islamic tradition [e.g. Martin, 1965; Ferguson, 1977]. Many today, and not only those inclined to be hostile to Islam, continue to hold the view that Muslims do not or even cannot avow principled pacifism or nonviolence. One sees this attitude expressed clearly in Samuel Huntington's ill-informed but hugely influential writing quoted in this chapter's epigraph. Some who have taken this Orientalist view have certainly been motivated by a need to imagine Muslims as natural enemies to be opposed or inferiors to be controlled: as brutes to be brutalised. But one might be mistaken in assuming that the conventional wisdom is always a result of colonial bigotry or some never-ending quest to justify burgeoning military budgets. There are certainly Muslims who themselves earnestly believe it to be the case – and not only those Muslims actively engaged in or supportive of Islamist militancy.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that none of these views – neither secular nor religious, neither Muslim nor non-Muslim – are justified on purely empirical grounds. Irrespective of variously well-informed or well-intentioned questions as to their orthodoxy, Muslim pacifists and nonviolent activists quite manifestly have existed and continue to exist. The antiquated thesis that Islam is inherently opposed to pacifism or nonviolence is only sustainable if one either ignores substantive historical evidence to the contrary or if one simply discounts such evidence. Such dismissal can itself only proceed on the grounds that the Muslims involved are either not 'real Muslims' or that they are acting for reasons wholly divorced from their faith. Both of these paths require us to discount such Muslims' own endless attestations to the contrary. Yet there exists no compelling need to take the word of a Muslim who insists that their faith mandates pacifism less seriously than that of

another who holds the converse view. The axiomatic insistence that Islam precludes nonviolence discovers only through its own circular logic that those whom it chooses to ignore are unworthy of its attention. Studies such as this one clearly evidence not only that many Muslims do promote nonviolence, but furthermore that they do so on explicitly and specifically Islamic grounds. While those grounds may indeed be defeasible, the fact that they exist is indisputable. One might certainly argue that proponents of nonviolent Islam hold the wrong religious views, that is, but one cannot plausibly deny that they hold them. As a result, the case against Islamic pacifism and nonviolence can only proceed as a theological argument and not as an historical, anthropological, or scientific one. It is necessarily prescriptive rather than descriptive and rests ultimately upon dogmatic commitments to what may or may not constitute 'Real Islam'. Such dogmas are no doubt important. But they are neither the concern nor the responsibility of the present study.

From the point of view of the secular social sciences, by contrast, the question of whether Islamic pacifism can exist has been decisively closed in the affirmative. The Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes dataset compiled by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan includes over a dozen major nonviolent political campaigns with substantial Muslim leadership and participation between 1900 and 2006 [Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011: 233–236]. These in turn occurred in countries girding the globe, belying attempts to minimise or discredit them as mere localised aberrations or parochial exceptions which prove the rule. They have arisen time and again from Europe to Africa, from the Middle East to Central Asia, South Asia, and South-East Asia.[1] Recent qualitative studies on nonviolent activism on the part of contemporary Muslims run a similarly wide geographic gamut, from Morocco [e.g. Barca and Zunes, 2009] to Iran [e.g. Mohajer, Toloui, and Beyerle, 2009] and beyond. This even before one considers the crucial role of nonviolent activism in the so-called Arab Spring uprisings which swept the Middle East and North Africa after the self-immolation of Muḥammad al-Būʿazīzī in 2011 – some indeed undertaken by contributors to the present study. 'Nonviolent civilian resistance' has after all been

[1] These include Albania (1989), Egypt (2000–2005), India (1919–1945), Indonesia (1997–1998), Iran (1977–1979), Kyrgyzstan (1989 and 2005), Lebanon (2005), Pakistan (1968–1969 and 1983), Palestine (1987–1990), Senegal (2000), and Sudan (1985) [Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011: 233–236].

described as '[t]he most significant and interesting aspect of these revolutionary movements' [Batstone, 2014: 28]. Barack Obama was not unjustified in attributing much of the success those movements enjoyed to 'the moral force of nonviolence' [Obama, quoted in Ritter, 2015: 169]. It is not without cause that some Muslim thinkers identify in the present what they call a 'Gandhian Moment' [Jahanbegloo, 2013] in which alternatives to the use of force have never seemed more attractive.

It is perhaps for this reason that recent years have seen an increase in public interest in pacifistic and nonviolent understandings of Islam, including the publication of book-length popular writing [e.g. Iftikhar, 2011]. There has likewise been growing interest in this issue among Islamicists and Islamic scholars themselves. This is evidenced for instance by the first global seminar on Islam and nonviolence convened in Bali, Indonesia [Paige, Satha-Anand, and Gilliatt, 1993] and the global symposium on 'Islam and Peace in the 21st Century' at the American University in Washington, DC [1998]. The University of Michigan has held similar conferences in 2017 and 2019. Most recently, the University of Manchester in 2022 hosted a conference on Pacifism in Islam, in which academics and members of civil society from Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and North America took part – among them Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni Muslim recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Academic scholars of Islam more broadly have issued calls for greater awareness of pacifist and nonviolent currents in the Islamic tradition, while challenging the prevalent presumption that Islam is fundamentally inimical to pacifism [e.g. Brown, 2006; Jahanbegloo, 2018; Pal, 2017]. Secular scholarly writing on Islamic pacifisms nonetheless remains relatively limited. Precisely because of the long shadow cast by the old 'conventional wisdom' that Islam was uniquely inhospitable to nonviolence, research which does not proceed from that assumption has had less time in which to grow.

But grow it has, stretching to meet the more established yet often more isolated efforts of individual Islamic scholars working within their own contexts and traditions. The published texts which comprise the resultant literatures on nonviolent Islam tend to fall into four broad categories. The first of these, which will furnish the present study with many of its primary sources for analysis, consists of writings by Muslim pacifists and nonviolent activists themselves. In it, they defend their own experience of Islam in general and its normative core of Quran and Sunnah (the Prophetic customary example) in particular. These are explicitly theological and often autobiographical in character, and are quoted