

Nonviolence in the Islamic tradition

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The controversy

There is a slogan repeated continuously by apologetic “du’āt” [propagandists] when flirting with the West: “Islam is the religion of peace;” they mean pacifism by the word peace.

They have repeated this slogan so much to the extent that some of them alleged that Islam calls to permanent peace with kufr [unbelief] and the kāfirīn [unbelievers]. How far is their claim from the truth, for Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindīq (heretic) would argue otherwise.

‘Alī [Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law] said, “Allah’s Messenger ... was sent with four swords: a sword for the mushrikīn [polytheists]a sword for Ahlul-Kitāb [People of the Scripture: Jews and Christians]a sword for the munāfiqīn [who claim to be Muslims, but are not], and a sword for the bughāt (rebellious aggressors)..... He also revealed the sword against the apostates.....

The sword will continue to be drawn, raised, and swung until ‘Īsā (Jesus) kills the Dajjāl (the Antichrist) and abolishes the jizyah [in fact: the disruption between Muslims, Christians and Jews]. Thereafter, kufr and its tyranny will be destroyed; Islam and its justice will prevail on the entire Earth.....

But until then, parties of kāfirīn [unbelievers] will continue to be struck down by the unsheathed sword of Islam.....for there will always be a party of Muslims fighting parties of kāfirīn until there is no more fitnah [dissent] and the religion is completely for Allah alone.

The text above is the opening of a main article in Dabiq, a glossy propaganda magazine, published by the Islamic State (IS). This issue (number 7) was published in January/February 2015. The article, written in a polemic style but well elaborated and built on a large number of quotations from the Qur’an, from the Hadith (the traditions from and about Muhammad) and from major scholars mostly in the first centuries of Islam, argues that violence -- “the sword” -- is an essential characteristic of Islam in the time between the revelation and the final judgment. Then, and only then, will peace reign and will swords “rest from war only to be used as sickles”.

The text may correspond with the opinions of many people in Europe or North America, when the discussion comes to the relationship between Islam and Peace. Isn't Islam in reality the religion of the sword? Our image of Islam is strongly influenced by groups and organisations like al-Qa'ida, the Taliban and more recently the Islamic State and other factions fighting in Syria. "9/11" (September 11, 2001) still is for many U.S. Americans and also Europeans the proof and the symbol for an essentially violent character of Islam.

And how do the great majority of Muslims and their leadership react to this image of their religion, an bloody image that is spread by extremist groups and distributed by the media all over the world? Do they keep silent? Do they in fact accept that the authentic and authoritative texts, quoted by IS, prove that Muslim extremists are right in their claim about the real mission of Islam? That Islam in fact is the religion of the sword?

A few months before the publication of the above article, on September 19, 2014, an open letter was published addressed to "Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi', and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared 'Islamic State'."

This unambiguous and highly representative letter, which 126 outstanding Muslim scholars and religious leaders from many countries all over the world, representing various religious tendencies, have endorsed by their signature, is an accusation, a refutation and a call to repentance for the "caliph" of the Islamic State, al-Baghdadi, and his followers. In 25 pages, divided according to 24 subjects, the letters show that the Islamic State clearly deviates from the spirit, the values and the laws of Islam.

The letter is a scholarly refutation of the claims of the Islamic State and an accusation of all their suppressive and a strong condemnation of terroristic activities and the violation of human rights. Since the letter is quoting a large number of Islamic sources and Muslim scholars, it is not easy to read for an outsider.

But the executive summary at the beginning of the text leaves no doubt about its content. Most of the topics mentioned there are introduced by: "It is forbidden in Islam". For instance: "It is forbidden in Islam to issue *fatwas* [juridical decisions] without all the necessary learning requirements. Even then fatwas must follow Islamic legal theory as defined in the Classical texts. It is also forbidden to cite a portion of a verse from the Qur'an—or part of a verse—to derive a ruling without looking at everything that the Qur'an and Hadith teach related to that matter. In other words, there are strict subjective and objective prerequisites for fatwas, and one cannot 'cherry-pick' Qur'anic verses for legal arguments without considering the entire Qur'an and Hadith."

This is a fundamental statement and a clear accusation. The main text of the letter quotes some generally accepted theologians from the past and explains this statement in more specific terms:

“Once all relevant scriptural passages have been gathered, the ‘general’ has to be distinguished from the ‘specific’, and the ‘conditional’ from the ‘unconditional’. Also, the ‘unequivocal’ passages have to be distinguished from the allegorical ones. Moreover, the reasons and circumstances for revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) for all the passages and verses, in addition to all the other hermeneutical conditions that the classical imams have specified, must be understood.”

But when you have done all this, what do you discover as the central message of the Qur’an, for instance about violence and nonviolence, about war and peace? And is there, in fact, such an indisputable message?

In the context of a symposium on “Peacemaking and the challenge of violence in world religions”, held at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit university in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, in October 2013, Irfan Omar, associate professor of Islam and World Religions, presented the topic “Jihad and nonviolence in the Islamic tradition”.

Discussing the central message of the Qur’an, he first explains that the Qur’an, like any sacred text, has been interpreted in the course of history, according to the circumstances of the time. “The problem of violence is less that of the text comprising or containing violence and more that of an interpretation of the text. More often than not religiously inspired violence is forced upon the text rather than the other way around.”

When he discusses various ways of interpreting the text, special attention is given to so-called “salafi” Muslims, a term often used in a pejorative way. In fact it means that the individual Salafi bases his beliefs, his convictions and his way of life on the “salaf”, the first generation of the believers and especially upon the sacred text of the Qur’an and the Tradition. The English term “fundamentalists” may well cover the meaning of salafis. Like in Christianity, this is not a uniform group. The great majority of salafis are pious and believing Muslims, for whom the example of the salaf constitutes a source of inspiration in their personal and community life. Others derive from it a vision and an incentive for their social and political work for a just and humane society. Only a small percentage of the salafis are attracted by an intolerant and violent interpretation of the beliefs and deeds of these first generations. Their way of reading and interpreting the Qur’an is surely not the only way and it neglects the large number of peaceful texts, narratives and regulations in the sacred book.

But sure, we read about violence in the Qur'an. It is not difficult to find this kind of texts. In her book *Fields of Blood, Religion and the History of Violence*, (London 2015) Karen Armstrong has described this aspect of the Qur'anic text against the background of Muhammad's life and the society in which he lived, in fact as she depicts violence in the sacred scriptures of all other religions. But Armstrong also shows that violence is not mandated in the Qur'an, it is permitted and only in special circumstances, as defensive and according to strict regulations. And mercy and compassion, the most used names for God in the Qur'an, should also characterize the life of his believers.

Jihad

Terrorism by Islamic groups or individuals is often referred to in the press as "jihad" or "holy war". The propagandists of the Islamic State did the same, putting jihad against crusades, the "holy war" by the Christian West. Since this term is a source of misunderstandings and since Irfan Omar calls his contribution "Jihad and Nonviolence in the Islamic Tradition", we cannot overlook the meaning and the use (and misuse) of this term.

For the leaders and theologians of the Islamic State, jihad is waging war and an essential duty for the Islamic society and even for every individual Muslim. That this idea was nearly absent in modern Muslim society was in fact a deviation from the essence of Islam. They try to explain it in the article quoted above:

"Pacifism was first propagated in the Muslim world by dajjāl īn (liars claiming prophethood) who called to a nullification of jihād. The most notorious of these dajjāl īn was Ghulām Ahmad Qādiyān ī. [1835-1908, the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement in India, considered by many Muslims to be heretic]. Their calls were supported by the British crusaders, as the British knew that jihād was a threat to the stability and expansion of their empire. These calls were later followed by modernist "reinterpretations" of jihād. The modernists called to the abandonment of violence and terrorism. They censured jihād against the apostates. They censured defensive jihād by claiming the Ummah was in the Makkī era. They distorted offensive jihād to mean "pre-emptive" defensive jihād... Some of these "reinterpretations" eventually found their way into the language of jihad claimants including Husām 'Abdur-Ra'ūf (current member of the central al-Qā'idah top leadership and author of the infamous book "If I Were in the Place of Morsi [in those days the president of Egypt and leader of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt] and Sat on the Kursī [Throne]"), as he said, "It is necessary to change the name of the [Egyptian] Department of Defence because Islam does not recognize defensive jihād alone, but rather it is sometimes necessary to attack and wage a pre-emptive war to bury transgression alive while it's still in the cradle. So let its name be the Department of War and Peace".

But what is jihad? In fact, even children in the basic school learn the distinction between the greater and the lesser jihad, the greater being a duty on every Muslim while the smaller is only the duty of the entire Muslim community in special circumstances. The meaning of the word jihad is “to strive” and especially used “against” something or someone. The greater jihad is the inner, spiritual struggle against our bad desires or habits, which is indeed the duty of any believer. The Islamic tradition knows also the lesser jihad, also called the jihad on the path of God, the only form of jihad that is fighting and war. This is not a duty for individual Muslims and is subject to strong regulations.

The letter to al-Bagdadi describes in much detail and supported by many quotations from the Qur’an, from the Tradition and early theologians, that a lesser jihad knows a large number of restrictions, both before taking the decision to wage war and during the actual fighting. A few quotations, leaving out the supporting texts:

In truth, it is clear that you and your fighters are fearless and are ready to sacrifice in your intent for jihad. No truthful person following events—friend or foe—can deny this. However, jihad without legitimate cause, legitimate goals, legitimate purpose, legitimate methodology and legitimate intention is not jihad at all, but rather, warmongering and criminality.

The reason behind jihad for Muslims is to fight those who fight them, not to fight anyone who does not fight them, nor to transgress against anyone who has not transgressed against them. Thus, jihad is tied to safety, freedom of religion, having been wronged, and eviction from one’s land..... Hence, there is no such thing as offensive, aggressive jihad just because people have different religions or opinions.

Irfan Omar has analyzed the use of the word jihad in the text of the Qur’an. In the older texts, from the period that Muhammad was preaching in Mecca, the Qur’an speaks in fact only about the greater jihad, the internal, spiritual jihad. It was a period long before real fighting took place. When in the later period, when Muhammad lived and worked in Medina, the Qur’an mentions jihad, it gives the Muslims a permission to fight, primarily to defend themselves against invasion and aggression by the people from Mecca.

His conclusion is: “The Qur’an does not see it as an option whether one should take measures to defend oneself and stand up to injustice and aggression forced by an adversary. In other words, the Qur’an is emphatic that one must strive to eradicate injustice, but is not suggesting in absolute terms that it must be through the use of weapons. The choice of means is left to the ingenuity and wisdom of the persons in charge of the task of defending.”

And: “The notion of jihad, from the quranic perspective, pertains entirely to the inner striving, in history, a part of which also included defending one’s faith and livelihood. But the “part” came to be understood as the whole and the central feature of the notion of jihad [the internal jihad] became hostage to its historical usage.”

Looking to the actual situation, he compares the notion of “jihad of the sword” with the Christian notion of the “just war” and with the Charter of the United Nations: “The Islamic notion of defensive war in today’s terms would correspond with various articles of the UN charter that deal with breach of peace, security, and possible actions for stopping aggression committed against a member state. These include the option to take military action as a matter of last resort.”

By way of conclusion: jihad is not the key concept in the Qur’an, when we try to discover its central message concerning violence and nonviolence. It indicates a moral, ethical obligation to live as a faithful and just human being, which can imply a defensive activism.

Islam, a religion of peace

When looking for a possible relationship between Islam and nonviolence, we frequently read about the etymology of the word “Islam”. It is evident that it belongs to the same “root” as the Arabic word for peace: salam, having the three root-letters s-l-m in common. This etymological connection has sometimes lead to the statement that Islam is basically a religion of peace It is not surprising that the authors of the Islamic State reject this etymological argumentation:

So how can the zanādiqah (heretics) or even those who blindly follow them – Bush, Obama, and Kerry – obstinately claim that “Islam is a religion of peace,” meaning pacifism?

One of the biggest shubuhāt [false arguments] propagated by the heretics is the linguistic root for the word Islam. They claim it comes from the word salām (peace), when in actuality it comes from words meaning submission and sincerity sharing the same consonant root.

Bush (the son) said, “The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don’t represent peace. They represent evil and war.” Obama and Kerry later mimicked Bush and stated that the Islamic State was “un-Islamic” because of its usage of violence. The origin for this isnād (chain of transmission) of falsehood is probably one of the apostate “religious advisors” who visit

the White House and claim to represent Islam and the Muslims while clapping in support of the American declarations of war against Islam.....

It is indeed too easy to argue that Islam is a religion of peace, basing oneself upon the etymology of the word Islam. In this respect, the statement by IS is correct. But do we find in the text of the Qur'an indications that can guide us in our search for the relationship between the message of Islam on the one hand and peace (and nonviolence) on the other? This question also is discussed by Irfan Omar.

During the first 10 years of Muhammad's mission (until AD 622) he is living and working in Mecca. He was confronted with the polytheistic religion and the injustice of the market society in his hometown. In his vocation as God's messenger and in the first revelations, the belief in the one God is the central topic. But very soon the reaction against the injustice, especially by the members of the higher classes in this merchant city, becomes a major theme in the revelations, which in twenty years will grow into the actual text of the Qur'an.

It was a difficult period for Muhammad and the small number of his followers. The message of belief in the one God and social justice in society did not please the leaders of the city. Nevertheless Muhammad continued his preaching, which was what we would call now: a jihad of the pen, struggle not with weapons but with words. In the text of the Qur'an Muhammad is comforted by the examples of former prophets and encouraged to continue his mission. To do so, he will need the virtue of sabr, patience. Sabr is not an attitude of passivity, of suffering without complaining. It is, in the contrary, an attitude of steadfastness and perseverance, always trying to work for the final goals. It is this virtue of sabr that may move people to an attitude of nonviolence. In chapter 13 verse 24 of the Qur'an God says: "Those who patiently persevere will truly receive a reward without measure."

For 10 years Muhammad continues his mission in Mecca, against a growing opposition, but always calling for faith and justice.

Then he is invited to the oasis of Medina, hoping to solve the local problems there. During the 10 years that he is working in Medina, the situation changes in two major respects. His community is growing fast and needs regulations and the opposition with Mecca is developing into an armed struggle. This does not influence the central message of his preaching: faith and justice. But he needs to defend his community and thus we read in the text of the Qur'an God's permission to fight. It is seen as a temporarily necessary means to realize justice. Fighting may be necessary, but it never is the preferred option. It is permitted, when other ways of persuasion, negotiations and dialogue are doomed to fail.

A tentative conclusion from the text of the Qur'an can be, that the ultimate goal always remains: faith and justice. The means may differ: the jihad an-nafs, the inward, spiritual struggle, and the jihad al-qalam, the struggle with words, are the central and continuous means to work for this future. This is nonviolence. Only in exceptional circumstances of self-defence, defence of the community or defence of the freedom of religion the use of weapons is permitted, but only according to strict regulations and only until the goal of justice is reached.

An Islamic theology of nonviolence

The discussions about nonviolence and especially the successful practice of nonviolence in other countries and cultures in the 19th and 20th centuries have also influenced Muslim thinkers and theologians. The nonviolent revolutions in India, in Poland, in South Africa and also the struggle of the African Americans for their civil rights have proven the possibility of nonviolent resistance and revolution. Also the discussions about the growing risks in the use of modern weaponry have influenced their thinking about violence and nonviolence.

Surely, the Qur'an has permitted fighting, but as mentioned above the letter to al-Bagdadi has stipulated that texts from the Qur'an must be analysed and discussed in their historical context. And, some Muslim theologians ask, is not our era so different from the time of Muhammad's life in Medina, are the weapons not so much more dreadful than in those days, that we cannot easily say that these texts give Muslims in our actual situation the right to take up weapons? Muslim theologians who advocate nonviolence are not yet numerous and mostly not known at all in the West. In Islamic countries their voice is very often drowned out by the loud and sometimes well financed voices of those who propagate violence. Also the actual political situation on a worldwide scale makes the voice of extremist Muslims much louder heard than that of moderate thinkers. The attacks by al-Qa'idah, by the Taliban in Afghanistan, Muslim extremists in the Philippines and in Nigeria and its neighbours colour the face of Islam with blood. And especially the war in Syria and the atrocities committed by IS and smaller extremist groups, which are shown and glorified in their media, portray Islam as an ideology of violence. Let's not forget that in fact these people form a very small percentage of the worldwide Muslim community. Therefore it is very important to listen to the scholars and religious leaders who have signed the letter to al-Bagdadi and who totally and with arguments reject this false image of Islam. And let us try to listen to theologians who develop a theology of nonviolence, in a really scholarly way, based upon their study of the Qur'an, the hadith and major theologian from the past.

Irfan Omar mentions some of them.

An excellent example: Shaykh Jawdat Sa'id.

Jawdat Sa'id was born in 1931 in southern Syria near the Israeli border. He got his higher education in the famous Islamic Azhar University in Egypt, specialising in Arab language studies. Back in Syria he had to fulfil his military service but refused to participate in military actions, which led to his detention. After his military service he was a teacher in several high schools. He was arrested several times because of his teachings and writings. Finally he was discharged as a teacher but continued his intellectual work in his writings.

His best known and most prominent book was published after his first arrest in 1966. Already in the title of this book, *The Doctrine of the First Son of Adam or The Problem of Violence in the Islamic Action* he shows his preoccupation with violence, which he calls "a problem". In this book he develops his nonviolent vision of Islam, that in his opinion can and should bring about real change in society. In all his works after this one he further develops his thinking, reconsidering the text of the Qur'an from the perspective of nonviolence.

In this first book he explained the story of the two sons of Adam, which is referred to in the Qur'an, in sura (chapter) 5, verses 27-29.

Both sons (their names are not mentioned in the text) presented a sacrifice (to God): it was accepted from one of them, and not accepted from the other. The latter said: "I will surely kill you." "God accepts only from the sincere and truly pious," said the former. "Yet if you stretch out your hand against me to kill me, I will not stretch out my hand against you to kill you. Surely I fear God, the Lord of the worlds. I desire indeed (to warn you) that you will bear the burden of my sin (were I to take part in fighting you) and your own sin (for seeking to kill me) and so you will be among the companions of the Fire. For that is the recompense of wrongdoers".

This symbol of nonviolence comes back also in his later works.

When he is advocating nonviolence on the basis of his reading of the Qur'an, his opponents are pointing to the duty of jihad, which is also mentioned in the text of the Qur'an. He does not deny jihad or abolish it, but he points to the fact that the internal jihad, the jihad of the word and – he adds – the jihad of the dialogue are the essential forms of jihad. The actual situation of Muslims all over the world gives no justification for an armed jihad. By saying so, he makes a distinction between the jihad in the phase of building and defending the Islamic state during Muhammad's work in Medina, and jihad after that. Mohammed prevented his followers from defending themselves while they were in Mecca; they were only permitted to fight after a larger community in Medina was established without violence, but by persuasion, When this

community is built it becomes their duty to stand by the oppressed and defend its peace. This situation is different from the position of Muslims in our centuries.

Irfan Omar resumes:

Sa'id believes we should be using the means of persuasion and not intimidation to resolve conflicts. Violence and weapons have no place in building a just and equitable society. But how to convince people that war and murder are not part of God's way? He argues that we must locate newer "substitute" ways to address conflict. When people only know the path of weapons and war to deal with injustice and to resolve conflicts, they will continue to rely on it. But once they are shown an alternate and a better way, they will most likely be convinced....

In short, Sa'id hopes that as everyone, including Muslims, realizes that there other effective ways to resolve conflict they would be eager to let go of the weaker support mechanism (violence) to sustain their faith in the cause of peace.

Yahya Alous writes in the Syrian Observer about Sa'id's position in and his influence upon the Syrian Revolution and the war that followed.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011, Jawdat Said has been optimistic, especially during the first few months when the revolution was purely peaceful. His words and statements were clearly seen in the signs of the peaceful demonstrations, and he was keen to urge the Syrian demonstrators to hold on to the peaceful movement. He affirmed their just demands when he described the activists as "God's successors on earth." He also commanded them, saying: "Do not insult or strike or run away. Hold on, and say there is no god but Allah." But what he wished for did not last long because the revolution soon turned into an armed and bloody conflict, and the words of Sheikh Jawdat Said were no longer heeded as he had hoped. The violence has reached his own house in his village of Bir Ajam. The house was completely destroyed, forcing him to flee to Turkey.

Sheikh Jawdat Said believes that the regime has moved the wheel of violence forward because it knew without a doubt that any peaceful movement would topple it. But Said believes that using the wrong means to achieve a noble goal does not work. He also believes that the victory of the armed revolution will not attain democracy. Instead, Said asserts that the victory must be unarmed, and that the regime's victory will establish more injustice and dictatorship.

Other examples

In his article Irfan Omar mentions more examples of outstanding scholars and Muslim leaders who advocate nonviolence as a truly Islamic instrument to work for a world of justice and peace.

From the Indian subcontinent he mentions Abdul Ghaffar “Badshah” Khan (born in 1890), who was a close friend of Gandhi and who died in 1988. He gathered an army of over 100.000 soldiers, called “servants of God” who despite savagery on the part of the British soldiers remained nonviolent. In the words of Badshah Khan himself, addressing his followers: “I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it.” Khan respected women and helped to unleash their power in the Muslim community. He worked with Gandhi to quell the Hindu-Muslim riots and violence. Khan said, “if you plant a slap after having been provoked by a slap, then what is the difference between the followers of the *Qur’an* and the evildoer?”¹ Further, Khan’s understanding of nonviolence resonates more with a virtue-based assessment. For instance, his “servants of God” took an oath to practice virtue. Khan elicited obedience by the right of love, i.e. by their attraction to the good and a desire to serve, rather than by fear of punishment or failing to follow the rules.² A virtue-based ethic lends one to act primarily out of attraction to the good, rather than a sense of duty or fear of punishment. Further, he says that nonviolence stirs courage in people, i.e. it is a force of character transformation.³

Also from India, in more recent times, Omar mentions Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (born in 1925), a famous scholar and publicist, well versed in the traditional Islamic disciplines. He was a specialist in Qur’an studies and translated the text into Urdu. He studied also modern Western philosophical and scientific developments and wrote about the position of Islam vis-à-vis modern Western thought. At a later age (since the early 1980s) he started speaking and writing about his belief that nonviolent action and inter-religious solidarity are key to establishing peace and justice. He is propagating dialogue between Hindus and Muslims in his country, especially during periods of tension between the communities. His works were widely accepted and translated, notwithstanding some opposition from traditionalist colleagues in the country.

Another example, this time from Indonesia, is Abdurrahman Wahid (born in 1940), an influential scholar and for many years the president of the largest religious leaders’ organization, the Nahdatul Ulama. He became president of the Republic (1999-2001) and died in 2009. In that same year he wrote:

¹ A. Khan, “Address to Muslims,” quoted in Ramu, *Badshah Khan*, 93.

² Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier*, 112, 155; A. Khan, *My Life and Struggle*, 96.

³ Eli S. McCarthy, *Becoming Nonviolent Peacemakers: A Virtue Ethic for Catholic Social Teaching and U.S. Policy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

“The original meaning of jihad is ‘to strive.’ The jihad conducted by Mohammed was a propagation effort to strive tirelessly to communicate the truth of Allah to others. It is extremely dangerous to stray from that essential meaning... Islam is not a violent religion. It places great importance on love, and the Qur’an forbids the use of force for the sake of religion.”

Omar also includes Khalid Kishtainy, author of *Towards Nonviolence* (1984) from Iraq. From him comes the term “Civilian Jihad”, indicating the struggle of ordinary citizens, which include acts of civil disobedience and other nonviolent forms of resistance.

Chaiwat Satha-Anand was born in 1955 in Thailand. He is a scholar and activist, very present in Thai society, speaking and writing about the situation in his country and in South-East Asia, promoting nonviolent methods of resolving the conflicts in the area. Concerning the use of violence he stresses the fact that modern warfare technology always will make civilian victims, which is prohibited by Islamic law, even when the use of weapons is permitted. When, remaining inside the regulations of Islamic law, violence and war thus cannot offer in our days a solution for conflict, the only possibility remaining is nonviolent activism.

Finally Omar is nearly at home, mentioning a U.S. American woman, Chaplain Rabia Terri Harris. Born in the 1960s, she studied religion and Middle Eastern Studies and qualified as an Islamic chaplain. She is the founder of the Muslim Peace Fellowship and widely invited to talk about her inspiration and her hopes for the future. For her, nonviolence is the life decision to live in harmony with the order of creation and the method of pursuing necessary social change by relying on the real long-term spiritual power of justice. Describing and quoting her words, Irfan Omar writes: “Harris places her hopes in a struggle to revive the <alternative Islamic community tradition>, which will allow Muslims to reclaim the Qur’anic principle of <no compulsion in religion [quoted from the Qur’an, sura 2, verse 256a] which the rest of the world calls nonviolence, as our own and to share it with our global community.>”

One last scholar to mention is Mohammed Abu-Nimer who has written extensively about nonviolence and peacebuilding in Islam.⁴ He explains that in Islamic nonviolence, humans are considered the most dignified of all creatures. The Qur’an says, “We have honored the sons of Adam...above a great part of Our Creation” (17:70). We are born with knowledge of God and are God’s vicegerent on earth. As God’s vicegerent on earth, we are called to protect human life because it is sacred. For instance, the Qur’an says that to save one life is like saving the life of the whole people (5.32). In Islamic tradition, he argues that injustice should be resisted through

⁴ Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003).

activism, third-party intervention, and divine intervention. The advantage of nonviolent strategies is their ability to “dissolve structural violence embedded in social conflicts, thus going beyond temporary solutions, which may defuse tensions while preserving an unjust system.”⁵

These various names show that the Islamic movement for nonviolence and the development of an Islamic theology of nonviolence may be young and not yet widely spread but are not restricted to a certain country and – Omar stresses – all these scholars had their influence and have followers who elaborate their ideas.

Conclusion

When Omar reaches his conclusions, he summarizes:

From the foregoing, we can see that Muslim scholars and/or activists have been engaged at many fronts in an effort to address the challenge of violence committed in the name of Islam. Numerous resources both theoretical and practical are available and circulating even as the rise in violence continues. One of the main tasks of our time is to reclaim and reframe the notion of jihad as nonviolent struggle for justice, which may be regarded as the greatest form of jihad in Islam...

Muslim thinkers and concerned citizens from both religious and secular perspectives have called for a rethinking of the notion of jihad in the light of our contemporary age. Working across religious, cultural and ethnic lines provides the optimism that nonviolence as a religious imperative can be established. Such interfaith collaboration may be our best hope to curtail the spread of the culture of violence that surrounds us today.

⁵ Abu-Nimer, 52-55.