

Peace and Violence in Islam: Philosophical Issues

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Abstract: Although there is a good deal of discussion of issues to do with peace and war in Islam, very little of that discussion looks at it from the general point of view of the philosophy of ethics. Yet using this perspective can be useful in seeking to establish greater clarity on the nature of the major issues in the Islamic debate on these issues.

There are roughly two perspectives here, one being absolutist and one consequentialist. The absolutists tend to concentrate on particular *ayat* in the Qur'an and their accompanying hadith and use them to defend wide ethical principles that forbid, or permit, certain kinds of peaceful or violent behavior. This approach tends to defend the status quo, since it often rules out violence in the ways it is often used to bring about regime or radical change. The ethical principle involved here is that whatever the consequences there are certain things that must never be done, and that obviously restricts the aggressive actions from a moral point of view.

On the other side are the consequentialists, who argue that Islam justifies radical steps in order to bring about the correct sort of objectives, those which are of course themselves justified by religion.

Those *ayat* which the absolutists appeal to are of course respected by the consequentialists, but they are put within a context which restricts their scope and does not interfere with a consequentialist ethics.

Both ethical positions are based on longstanding differences in moral philosophy, but trying to ground them in the Qur'an raises some intriguing issues of how to link a philosophical with a religious argument. It will be argued that looking at the internal Islamic debates in terms of moral philosophy does bring out usefully some of the logical parameters of the controversy.

1. *Justifying violence and Islam*

There is a very well developed legal discussion about the nature of peace and conflict in Islam, and it will be touched on here. But the main focus will be trying to create a framework for such discussions that take account of the basic philosophical issues that arise. There tends to be a basic division among writers on the topics of war and peace between those who see the Qur'an as advocating basic and irrevocable standards of behaviour, and those who understand the rules as being more malleable. This reflects a basic ethical contrast between philosophers who are in favour of assessing action in terms of its consequences, often called consequentialists, and those who insist on absolute principles that are never to be violated. Most people think that peace is a desirable state of affairs, but clearly there are situations where it needs to be put aside and conflict permitted. This could be when the community is attacked and needs to defend itself, but then of course what counts as attack is quite variable. It could be that violence is justified when some group of people are prevented from finding out about the divine message in the Qur'an by their leaders, and those rulers and their supporters need to be defeated in order that the truth is more widely broadcast. It might be that a group is dangerous and could represent a future threat, and need to be challenged now when it is in the interests of the Muslim forces to strike early and without waiting for an initial act of direct physical aggression. What is interesting about these sorts of cases is not only the differing views on their legality, but how they work ethically. Often in political life rulers have to deceive, lie, make agreements they have no intention of keeping, dissimulate and so on, and these are all in themselves immoral actions. One of the characteristics of warfare is that whatever the intentions of the parties, innocent people are often killed or injured, and this is also in itself immoral. Yet war is impossible without such risk, especially modern warfare, but there is nothing modern about this debate. If two people are fighting each other and one throws a spear at the other, who knows where that spear will land? These sorts of issues arise all the time in conflict, and it is no justification of harming an innocent person to say truthfully that one did not intend to do so. It is a relevant excuse and may legally result in a lesser penalty, but morally speaking we know that violence often leads to consequences for innocent people, and we need to find some justification for such behavior if we wish to retain our status as moral beings.

Another way in which the contrast between these two positions arises is by treating violence as a category of punishment, and here again we have two general theories of how we are entitled to act. One position suggests that only the guilty may be punished, and innocent people should not ever be punished. On the other hand, some argue that punishment as a deterrent is more effective if the target of punishment is broadened to include more than just the guilty. After all, innocent people are inevitably harmed as a side-effect of punishment, and if people are likely to be deterred from immoral behavior by contemplating the punishment of those held to be guilty, this is to the general good. To take an example, in warfare armies tend to target those who are threatening them, but if it will dissuade the enemy from acting by punishing innocent civilians, and all civilians count as innocent in warfare, then that may result in fewer death overall than otherwise. Similarly, if an army can induce the enemy to destroy a civilian group of people and buildings, that is often helpful from the point of view of publicity, and so may hasten the end of the conflict, as a result minimizing loss of life and damage to property. In these examples it is the consequences that are important, and they may result in our doing something that otherwise would not be acceptable, but given the consequences they are. To take an example from recent history, in 1979 the most important mosque in the world, the *masjid al-haram* in Mecca, was captured by a violent group who were led by someone claiming to be the *mahdi*. Could violence be used to defeat and expel them? The judicial authorities first of all suggested that unarmed troops be sent in to retrieve the building, and the result was that they were promptly killed by the insurgents. Then, quoting 2: 191, the authorities permitted violence to defeat the interlopers and this obviously caused a lot of damage to the building as well no doubt as killing many innocent bystanders who had been caught up in the encounter. The consequences justified it as the verse from the Qur'an suggests, so does this mean that in matters of violence it is the consequences that are the crucial factor?

2. *The rules of war*

In many ways this seems generally to be the position of radical movements seeking to challenge the status quo. They argue that the Qur'an it-

self points to the importance of frightening the enemy¹ and the *sira* of the Prophet refers to many instances of violence that were apparently sanctioned by him and his followers, such as beheading and making fun of the dead body of an enemy. What is often called terrorism by its opponents is action that kills innocent people but for a purpose that is religiously valid. So for example the recent attack in Tunisia on foreign tourists is designed to retaliate against those fighting radical forces in other parts of the Middle East by hurting and killing their civilians. It may help motivate those countries to change their policies. Normally it would not be thought to be right to attack innocent civilians, but if the consequences suggest it might be effective in bringing about a greater good, then it is on the table as a legitimate action. The Shi'ite thinker Mutahhari in his account of acceptable uses of violence argues that 2: 251: 'and if God had not repelled some men by others, the earth would have been corrupted', can be taken with 22: 40: 'for had it not been for God's repelling some men by means of others, cloisters and churches and oratories would have been pulled down'. Mainly concerned with the rules of initiating *jihad*, discussion of the rules of war tend to point to the major moral motives as helping the oppressed, whether or not such intervention is requested. According to Mutahhari this was the nature of most of the early Islamic wars, and another legitimate cause is the removal of political obstacles to the propagation and spread of Islam or in other words, fighting in favour of the people that are otherwise condemned to isolation from the call of truth and against regimes that suppress freedom of speech. Defensive wars like the defence of life, wealth, property, and land, of independence and of principles are all legitimate. However, the defence of human rights Mutahhari places above the defense of individuals. The last of Mutahhari's legitimate causes of war goes beyond any notion of defense; he supports a policy of moral expansionism. That is, when dealing with corrupt societies, whether democratic or otherwise, the Islamic state should seek to challenge the false ideas that persist there and it may be necessary to invade them or at the very least confront them militarily in order to convey the proper principles as to how they are to live².

The response of the status quo is often that this policy contravenes such verses as those which compare killing someone to killing everyone. That

1 Choudary, Anjem. Evening Standard. 15.08.2014.

2 Mutahhari, Murtaza. 'Jihad'. Holy War of Islam and its legitimacy in the Qur'an. M. Tawhidi (Trans.). Tehran 1989.

means that there are absolute principles such as the proscribing of murder that can never be contravened, whatever the consequences. Shaykh Allam recently produced this verse as an argument against ISIS and its supporters³. He starts by using 49:13 to suggest that God created different communities, and so it is pointless to try to make everyone believe in the same things. The Grand mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam, uses this passage to criticize those radical groups that kill others of a different religious background, quoting also 5: 32: ‘If anyone kills a person it is as if he kills all humanity, and if anyone saves a life it is as if he saves the life of all humanity’. Yet he surely did not mean that Islam condemns all killing or even all saving of life, since there are many other passages which certainly seem to go in a very different direction. Surely he also would not think it a bad thing if everyone became a Muslim. Certainly there is nothing in the Qur’an which suggests killing people just because they are not Muslims. On the other hand, that is not what radical groups tend to do, they find some reason for killing people and try to legitimate that reason in religious terms by finding appropriate and different authoritative sources. They may well be wrong and certainly casuistic in their approach to texts, but refuting them requires more than just referring to the way in which God created different communities in the world. Many Muslims believe that the diversity of faith should be seen as a temporary stage of humanity, until everyone comes to accept Islam. Whatever the verse suggesting that killing one person is like destroying all of humanity means, it cannot mean that killing is completely ruled out. It would be very difficult to give the Qur’an a pacifist interpretation. When we look at more sources of authority in Islam like the hadith and the *sira* of the Prophet, and for the Shi’a the sayings of the imams, we get yet more material advocating killing, in certain circumstances. Surely that is in principle right, there are always circumstances which look like exceptions to the rule and it then looks overly rigid to stick to the rule.

3 Allam, Shawki. Terrorists and their Qur’anic Delusions, In: Wall Street Journal, 2015.

3. *The importance of considering the consequences*

This suggests that really we have to consider the consequences as the crucial determining factor in morality. There is much to support this position in Islamic thought. In a recent and very interesting article Joseph Alagha shows how two very different groups of Muslims, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt use the principle of considering the consequences to countenance dancing if it is directed to the appropriate political ends ⁴. They recognize that while in itself dancing might be regarded as objectionable on religious grounds, specifically because of its implications for modesty, it can be provided with a positive role in promoting the message of resistance and encouraging solidarity among those in the movements concerned. Similarly, when it comes to violence the principle of *darura* or necessity is often regarded as significant, the idea being that in particular circumstances necessity demands that things are done which normally would not be acceptable, which again is in line with the principle that what is important morally are the consequences. How this works is quite clear. In a violent confrontation one has the ultimate aim of overcoming the enemy, and there are things one is allowed to do to achieve this end. It may be, though, that in the particular circumstances it is necessary to put aside these principles if victory is to be likely, and in that case such a suspension of the principles is permitted. This could mean treating the civilian population in a particularly harsh way, or it could even affect how one behaves oneself. There is evidence, for example, that those engaging on surreptitious violent missions are instructed to blend in by shaving off their beards, drinking alcohol, going to clubs and so on, all activities which they would avoid otherwise, but in the circumstances might find effective in realizing their goals. Observers would assume they were 'normal' and so not dangerous, and this could provide effective cover for the mission.

In support of this view, which looks like being in support of the ethical stance of those often called Islamists or extremists, is what we know of the political flexibility of the Prophet Muhammad and also the phenomenon of abrogation. The idea that later verses can overrule and replace earlier ones is also evidence of a commitment in the religion to consider the role

4 Joseph Alagha, G. Banna, and A. Fadlallah's Views on Dancing. In: *Sociology of Islam*, 2014, 2, pp. 60-85

that changing circumstances have for what is required of Muslims. The whole process of *asbab al-nuzul*, of considering the context of revelation, is clearly important here, since it helps us know which verses precede which others, and in any case once we know the situation that led to a verse we are often in a position to understand it better. Also, the whole process of using the *hadith* to help work out what Muslims are to do is an exercise in flexibility, since there are so many *hadith*, and different opinions on their strengths and weaknesses as genuine reports of what was said in the past, that coming to a judgment necessarily involves a fine adjudication between a range of sources, as is the case in all major religions that are based on documents. So it looks very much as though in decisions about how to act in conflict and peace, it is not sufficient to rest on certain principles that remain inviolable throughout. One has to employ a variety of material, take account of the particular circumstances of the case and be very aware of the nature of the consequences of acting in particular ways.

4. Different kinds of jihad

A significant problem with this approach is that it seems to conflate divine with secular law. The latter certainly varies from context to context, and also varies over time. But the Qur'an is taken to be the last message of God to His creatures, and it does not vary at all. God knew throughout the various revelations to prophets and messengers how we are supposed to act, and this could not vary over time. Our understanding of what God wants us to do could vary, but it should not, since the Qur'an is in its own view a straightforward and clear text. Saying that we do not understand it is an implicit criticism of its clarity. There is a passage which refers to the ambiguity of some verses (3:7) but it does not seem to be implied that many verses are ambiguous, and there are many references to *jihad* where it is equated with *qital* that are very clear in how people ought to behave. One of the things worth noting here is that earlier we suggested that supporters of absolute principles that could not be altered were likely to be members of the status quo, since they want no change to take place in how things are done. Yet we have presented evidence that these are often precisely the same people who ask for exceptions to be made in those absolute principles in order to modernize Islam or to better reflect the original intentions of God in His revelation and how it was interpreted by His Prophet.

A good example of this is the popularity nowadays for distinguishing between the greater and the lesser *jihad*, where the former is the spiritual struggle over the negative aspects of the self, while the latter is physical struggle. This serves to emphasize the defensive nature of *jihad* and tries to dissociate Islam from those aspects of the account of *jihad* in the Qur'an which really go in a different and rather more aggressive direction. A significant problem of representing this *hadith* as a crucial aspect of understanding *jihad* and peace is that it is often used in a very vague manner, as a corrective to the negative image of Islam as a violent religion. The *hadith* certainly does not do justice to the practice of Muslims at war, or even their disinclination to go to war, and this is not to criticize it, but it is to question how widely it was accepted and used as a basis to behaviour. In any case, to say war is the lesser *jihad* does not mean it is not important nor that the rules for pursuing it are not important. It suggests that there is more to conflict than just physical struggle and that is worth emphasizing. There is an English saying that sticks and stones may hurt my bones but words can never harm me, but the reverse is often the case. The damage due to sticks and stones may only be temporary, yet the hurt that words can cause may last a lifetime, and even lead to death. This is certainly true of cultures that are based on tribalism and shame, which according to al-Jabri is most Arab societies since the Ummayyads. He refers to the phrase: Those who listen to their Lord, in Qur'an 42:38. He used this verse to define a political period in early Islam of *shura* or consultation, since it goes on to mention 'consult each other in their affairs'. In the time of the Prophet the state was based on the Islamic creed or '*aqida*. Muhammad's Medinese community was a real political community and can be defined as an 'Islamic state'. This was not to last long, the Ummayyads distinguishing in the person of their ruler the function of religious scholar ('*alim*) and leader of the state. Mu'awiya's *mulk* or kingdom was continued by his successors, replacing '*aqida* with *qabila* or tribalism, and an authoritarian government resulted, since one tribe had to dominate the rest if stability was to be preserved⁵. The subsequent domineering regimes were based on tribalism, and its noxious heritage, in his view, continues to this day. It also encourages the growth of a form of authoritarianism in the family, a patriarchy based on the analogy with the ruler and the ruled, and levels of physical and psychological violence to maintain those levels of authority.

5 al-Jabri, Mohammad. *al-'Aql al-siyasi al-'arabi*. 1990.

In 2: 190 we read: ‘And with those who fight to kill you, fight in the way of God.’ Many early Sufi thinkers adopted esoteric interpretations of the Qur’anic verses treating conflict. The real challenge and test comes from within. The reasons why the Prophet stressed that the greater *jihad* must be against the carnal soul (*nafs*) is that physical wars against infidels are occasional but the battle against the self is frequent, indeed constant. There are ways to avoid the visible weapons of the military foe, but less chance to escape the invisible weapons of the temptations of the soul; and although we can achieve martyrdom in war with the enemy, there are no rewards if one is defeated by our inner enemy⁶. On the contrary, that defeat is the normal condition of human beings. But before we come to the conclusion that physical warfare is not that important we need to see the next verse, 2:191: ‘And kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and *fitnah* is worse than killing. And do not fight them at al-Masjid al-Haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.’ This is a robust account of how Muslims ought to act in conflict, even in Mecca itself. 9: 14 suggests: ‘Fight them, God will torment them with your hands, humiliate them, empower you over them, and heal the hearts of the believers.’ The Qur’an advises believers to deal harshly with the enemies of Islam.

To understand the significance of this verse, as with the rest of the verses in the Book, it is very helpful to look at the *sira* and *hadith* of the Prophet. As with a variety of religions, there are plenty of bloodthirsty accounts of the past that can be used to legitimate acting in similarly direct ways in the present and future. For example, there is the death of ‘Amr bin Hisham, a pagan Arab chieftain originally known as ‘Abu Hakim’ (Father of Wisdom) until Muhammad renamed him ‘Abu Jahl’ (Father of Stupidity) for his determined opposition to Islam. After ‘Amr was mortally wounded by a new convert to Islam during the Battle of Badr, it is reported that ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud, a close companion of Muhammad, saw the chieftain collapsed on the ground. So he went to him and started abusing him. Among other things, ‘Abdullah grabbed and pulled ‘Amr’s beard and stood gloating on the dying man’s chest. This has led to a good deal of similar actions among some groups of Muslims when dealing with their enemies by cutting off their heads and humiliating their bodies, perhaps as

6 Leaman, Oliver. *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction*. Oxford, 2009, pp. 133-7.

a means to healing the hearts of the victors. Although this may be distasteful to some, if this is the most efficient way of bringing about an end worth achieving, are there really any significant ethical objections to it? At 8: 16 we are told: 'And whoever turns his back on them, except as a strategy or to join another group, will certainly attract the wrath of God, his abode will be fire, And what a wretched destination that is.' The previous verse refers to fighting the unbelievers. This quotation from a London newspaper is a response to the practice of cutting heads off in Syria by ISIS: 'Look, I'm not into holding people's heads and things like that, but in the battlefield people kill each other and things are done to terrify the enemy. So it may be used as a war ploy or a tactic - as it is said in the Qur'an, chapter eight, verse 16, to terrorize your enemies so that the war can be finished quickly and your enemies run away' ⁷. He is right in thinking that there are plenty of verses which talk of the advantages of violence, but of course there are just as many and perhaps more that talk of the significance of peace and the importance of not prolonging conflict any longer than strictly necessary.

5. *Back to absolute principles*

It looks as though it is very difficult to perceive the overriding absolute principles that ultimately govern action, since all sorts of otherwise objectionable actions are apparently contemplated in the right circumstances. We have to be very careful in how we deal with those principles. Pious books defending Islam on this topic see no problem at all, Islam is based on peace, even the name of the religion can be taken to refer to peace, and the rules of war are fair, largely defensive and appropriate ⁸. Those hostile to Islam represent the references to peace and war to be based on some generally aggressive principles ⁹, and it is not difficult to find verses that can be expanded into universal principles which accord with such a view. History brings out the ruthlessness and brutality of people who do not seem to have reflected on how their religion might have expected them to behave. Not of course that there is anything specifically Islamic about this,

7 Choudary. 2014.

8 bin Muhammad, Ghazi/ Kalin, I./ Kamali, M. (Eds.). War and Peace in Islam: The uses and abuses of jihad. London, 2013.

9 Holland, Tom. In the Shadow of the Sword. London, 2013.

the phrase ‘the rules of war’ is generally oxymoronic, but it does serve to remind us that the rhetoric we often hear of how comparatively gentle, or vicious, the forces of Islam tend to have been in the past miss the point. They were just like anyone else. Does that not suggest that the idea that there are absolute principles that have to be obeyed in all circumstances is merely rhetorical. This is not a point about practice but about theory as well. The principles do not seem to enter into the process of ethical decision-making. We know that the Prophet is supposed to have been very flexible in his political management of the nascent *umma*, but surely this pragmatism was based on principles, principles embodied in the Qur’an and derived from God. That is why one of his wives, ‘A’isha, referred to his character as based on the Qur’an and his practice is taken as exemplary by Muslims.

We need to make some remarks on the connection between principles in ethics and the ways in which we actually work out how to Islam, as in other religions and ethical systems, there are not just general principles that help one decide how to act. There are additional and diverse sources of authority, ranging in Islam from the *hadith*, the *sira* of the Prophet, the judgements of whatever school of law one adheres to, the sayings of the Imams for the Shi‘a, the use of reason at some level, and so on. Some of these consist of stories, stories which talk about what happened, what it meant, how people reacted and so on, and these are very helpful in teaching people how to apply theory to practice. Good teachers do not just instruct their students in the subject they are teaching but give examples, show them how to apply the theory and in this way it becomes more concrete and applicable to their everyday lives, and this is how religions work also. Such examples not only help us apply theory but they also enable us to stand back from the immediacy of the situation in which we find ourselves, so pressing in the case of conflict, and calmly consider how to act. This is a point that Kant made when outlining the concepts we use both epistemologically and morally, suggesting we need some way of actually applying them to the world we experience. He argued this involved what he calls schematism, which is a way in which the concepts are translated into a more concrete form so that they can be used to deal with the world of space and time, and human behaviour. He does not actually think that we can find a clear schema of the moral law, but something rather similar to it will have to serve. We do not have to enter into the detail of the critical philosophy here, but we should take up his main point, which is that the way in which the schematism works involves the imagination.

It is the imagination that uses and manipulates the stories that are so important to us in operating in the everyday world, and the stories that feature in the *hadith* are precisely that. They help us work out a variety of ways of adapting the principles of religion to the practice of everyday life. In Islamic philosophy imagination has traditionally been seen as the intermediary between heaven and earth, between the realm of the celestial and entirely abstract and the world of generation and corruption which we inhabit. As a source of knowledge it is suspect, but as a way of allowing us to discover how to combine experience with general ideas it is essential. This Kantian point has a long history in Islamic thought, and it comes very much into the ethical discussion here, since it helps us understand how it is possible for us to use moral principles in a way that makes sense both practically and yet also in a way that acknowledges the significance of those principles. Imagination is clearly involved here. The sorts of people who just follow principles without thinking about their implications or putting themselves in the shoes of the participants surely fail to act appropriately, however close their actions are to some verses in the Qur'an. They go awry since there are of course other verses as well, plus a wide range of interpretative material that obliges the believer to consider carefully how he should behave in a situation of conflict and not just follow a formula that represents a partial understanding of the divine will.

6. Principles and how to apply them

The idea of balance in religion is worth mentioning here also. It is linked with the concept of justice, as in 2:143 where the followers of the Prophet are described as *wasat*. Sometimes the term is identified with being the best (68: 28; 1: 6-7), in the last verse contrasting sharply with the approach to religion taken by the Jews and the Christians. Indeed, Islam often sees itself as standing between those who believe in anything at all and those who deny everything they cannot personally vouch for. It is a middle point between those who see the universe as the only important place and those who regard it as an illusion. In Islamic law we find a system which seeks to balance crimes and penalties, and rules such as those of inheritance are designed to preserve equity. Now, when we get to the detail of such laws we may find much in them which is difficult to accept, but the principle here is entirely acceptable, that an attempt is made to be fair to all parties, to allocate people their deserts and preserves a sense of bal-

ance. The identification of virtue with moderation is not difficult to understand since the universe itself was created in a balanced and presumably good way: 'And the earth We have spread out, and set on it mountains firm and immovable; and created in it all kinds of things in appropriate balance' (15: 19).

Applying a rule always calls for discretion, and the virtue of moderation is that the rule is applied sensitively to a particular situation or within a certain context. That is where Iblis went wrong, when he applied the rule, one of his rules, that fire is superior to earth, in a way that failed to take into account God's purpose in elevating humanity over *jinn*. Iblis was not prepared to consider whether there was a point to what was happening, he could not moderate his sense of superiority over this creature that God was elevating over others, and the result is well known (17:61-62). As Reinhold Niebuhr points out, virtues taken to an extreme easily become vices¹⁰. But why do they? Surely we do not run into the danger of being too good, or too accurate in our judgements? If Iblis is correct in what he says about fire and earth, what is wrong with his insisting on it? Perhaps it is his disregard for *suras* such as 'O you who believe! Do not make unlawful the good things which God has made lawful for you, but do no excess, for God does not love those given to excess' (5: 87). In criticizing the status of humanity Iblis acted excessively, rather than waiting patiently to see how this new creation would work out. This straight path is mentioned in all the daily prayers, and it is not difficult to argue that the straight path is equivalent to acquiring a moderate disposition to our behaviour. The whole structure of Islam can be seen as contributing to this aim.

God knows what sorts of creatures we are, since he created us, and so he knows how we ought to live. He provides us with this information through his messengers and prophets, through the Qur'an and other authoritative works, through the *hadith* and the *sunnah* of the Prophet, and for some Muslims through the imams or other significant figures. A contrast was made earlier between two approaches to moderation, one based on strict adherence to the law where moderation is damaging to the point of the divine legislation, and where it is something we are advised to pursue throughout our lives with respect to our personal and communal behaviour. This contrast may itself be moderated, and we might say that the

10 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. New York, 1985.

strict view of the law represents one side of it, the fact that it comes from God and cannot be altered. Yet however divine the law may be, it has to be used and interpreted in everyday life, and it is here that moderation is significant. Moderation can be linked with the idea of considering the consequences of what might happen since it involves considering a wide range of examples that might be relevant in deciding what to do in a particular case. It is opposed to the idea of just sticking to a formula and following it.

We started by contrasting two ways of decision making in ethics, one which relied on absolute principles and one which is dependent on the consequences of action. It was argued that both are involved and that Islam suggests this by its emphasis on moderation and through the whole hermeneutic process of considering a wide range of sources of authority. Nowhere is this more important than in issues to do with conflict, since here the passions of the participants are often raised to such a level that their capacity for calmly and properly assessing the situation before them is diminished. Religions are very good at helping participants think in a sophisticated manner about the issues and coming to a conclusion based on a rounded view of both the facts and the ethical possibilities of action. To grasp this we need to understand more clearly what scope there is for moral reasoning in religion. This essay has been an attempt at starting on this task and applying it to the debate over violence and Islam. The argument has been rather like those in Islamic philosophy advocating describing God in terms of what He is not like, as opposed to His positive attributes. It has been argued here that whatever the rules of war in Islam might be, and how violence should be used, they are not going to be resolved by either consideration of the consequences or through relying on some general principles that can never be contradicted. It is going to be by some combination of these ethical sources of information. There is nothing novel in this suggestion. On the contrary, it represents the practice of those involved in the debate over many centuries. It is designed to serve as a corrective to those today who seek to resolve these complicated ethical issues by relying on a simple formula to work out how to behave.

Further Reading

Leaman, Oliver. *Controversies in Contemporary Islam*, London, 2014.

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