

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.
>
> [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.
>
> [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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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].

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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

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extensively throughout this book. While they sometimes seek to predict and counter likely criticism of their own views, their approach tends decidedly and understandably to the mono-vocal. They are arguing a positive case rather than surveying a range of potential positions. The second body of literature of immediate concern to us consists of secondary sources on Muslim thinkers, leaders, and activists who are widely seen as advocates of nonviolence. These range from the relatively dispassionate [e.g. Johansen, 1997; Woerner-Powell, 2017; Sanneh, 2016] to the comparatively hagiographic [e.g. Easwaran, 1984; Kimball, 2019]. All describe the lives and ideas of specific Muslims and, like the primary sources upon which they draw, do not tend to include a systematic comparative dimension. The third category of writing on Muslim nonviolence is currently the fastest growing, and comprises social science reflections in the field of peace and conflict studies. These broadly sociological texts are concerned less with the philosophical or theological interpretation of Islamic traditions than with the practical organisation and efficacy of concrete efforts in peace-making and peace-building undertaken by or with Muslims [e.g. Crow, Grant, Ibrahim, eds., 1990; Abu-Nimer, 1996; Salem, ed., 1997; Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008; Funk and Said, 2009; Huda, 2024]. These authors often draw upon deep experience with (typically but not exclusively American) governmental and non-governmental organisations in peace-building and counter-extremism initiatives, and very naturally respond to the exigencies of that work.

The smallest and youngest is the fourth and final approach. This applies social-scientific analyses to the more theological or ideological element of peace-building in search of themes and structures [e.g. Brown, 2006; Abu-Nimer, 2003: chapters 1 and 2]. Though this nascent literature has not to date engaged deeply either with individual Muslim thinkers in their own contexts or with the recent philosophical writing on pacifism and nonviolence, it is nonetheless a significant precursor of the present study. Like them, this monograph hopes to draw philosophically informed general conclusions as well as isolated observations, and it is precisely their omitting to do so which it seeks to address. Our goal in what follows is to combine substantive examinations of individual Muslim advocates for nonviolence – in all their historical, cultural, and theological specificity – with an overarching concern for systematic comparison among and reflection upon them. Though secular writing in moral philosophy concerning pacifism and nonviolence has all but ignored Islamic ideas (in stark contradistinction to its many fruitful

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dialogues with Christian and Hindu ethics in particular), it will play a key role here. Not only does this study begin the task of bringing together individual cases and systematic critical analysis, it seeks also to open the door to dialogue between Islamicists and secular moral philosophers from which both sides of that disciplinary divide stand to benefit. What this promises to the more general reader is a not only awareness of the existence of Islamic nonviolence but a sensitivity to its variety, complexity, and dynamism. It offers these through extended explorations of individual Muslim thinkers and activists who have made particularly salient marks on recent history, and also through dialogue with Muslims working to promote nonviolence in the present day. It will not begin with any general theory, model, or ideal type but rather from the individual realities embodied by Muslims themselves. To do otherwise may suit the speculative theologian or the polemicist but would from a more disinterested perspective represent an exercise in putting the cart before the horse. This methodological necessity does not, however, prevent us either from later drawing generalising conclusions nor from recognising that our subjects are themselves often committed to doing so.

VIOLENCE AND LOGOCENTRISM IN ISLAMIC STUDIES

Many of the thinkers and activists described and analysed in this study can only be properly understood as making absolute – even metaphysical, cosmic, or supernatural – claims to truth regarding divine will, human nature, and morality. But this underscores rather than obviates the present author's obligation to cultivate the virtue of humility. The same diffidence which prevents it from making such claims for itself also requires it to understand and report those of others with care and attention. It likewise obliges it on the other hand to be conscientious and critical in identifying their inevitable shortcomings, elisions, and entanglements. The comparative element of this work moreover requires that this be the case. Bringing disparate thinkers on Islamic pacifism and nonviolence into dialogue with one another is only possible if we recognise that some positions which they each defend are indeed contradictory, incompatible, defeasible, and open to challenge. They do not speak in perfect unison, nor is it our intention to artificially force a semblance of uniformity upon them. Still less is it our intention to impose it upon Muslims more broadly.

To study advocates of nonviolent Islam is not to deny the reality of violence carried out by other Muslims in the name of their faith. Indeed

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several of the figures whom we discuss and to whom we speak were themselves victims of extreme violence at the hands of their co-religionists. The fact that religiously articulated violence as a common feature of human religio-political life [see for instance Armstrong 2000 and 2015; Juergensmeyer, 2000] is well represented among Muslims is simply not in question, for all that one might question its attribution to 'religion alone' [e.g. Cavanaugh, 2009]. It is indisputable that the scriptures, symbols, and ideals of the Islamic tradition have been invoked to motivate and to justify acts of violence ranging from the precisely limited to the grossly indiscriminate. An extensive literature exists to analyse Islamic ethics of violence in general and warfare in particular [e.g. al-Dawoody, 2011; Kelsay and Johnson, 1991; Gleave and Kristó-Nagy eds., 2018], to say nothing of the conceptions of moral accountability which underlie them [e.g. Cook, 2000]. To be absolutely clear: the present study does not propose either to revise or to rehearse these or other juridical and sociological analyses of religiously inflected violence by Muslims. They simply are not the topic at hand. Comparisons with that literature may occasionally take place and are certainly often apposite. Yet a thoroughgoing comparison between the acts and substantive claims made by figures discussed here and those many who differ from them falls well beyond our ambit and would call for several additional volumes to do any justice. What is more, the assumption that pro-violence ethics must always be addressed when exploring nonviolent perspectives is itself a problematic presumption. This not least because it risks reinscribing those former as a naturalised default position. While arguments might be made for such a (re)inscription, such a move is neither philosophically nor theologically compelling. Still less is it necessitated by any dearth of studies on Islamic violence. It is not to cast any aspersions upon the undoubted virtues of the many extant studies on Muslim justifications for violence to observe that theirs is not the focus of the present work. Readers with a desire to explore violent counterpoints to those advanced by our present subjects will, however, find themselves extremely well served by that voluminous literature. Indeed, there has to date been an incomparably greater scholarly interest in Muslim arguments in favour of religiously sanctioned violence then against it.

While the reasons for this palpable imbalance are many, their chief cause is a simple one. There exists a long and detailed discourse in traditional Islamic jurisprudence [*fiqh*] which not only elaborates on licit forms of violence but presents them clearly and explicitly. Issues such as corporal punishment or the military laws of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*

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are easily to be found in innumerable juridical texts' sections on *ḥudūd*, *qitāl*, and *fiqh al-jihād*. These in turn find apparent scriptural support for holy violence ranging from the so-called Sword Verse [Quran 9:5]; to the exemplary Prophet's own pitched battles of Badr, Uhud, and The Trench; to eschatological predictions of blood-soaked Armageddon [*al-malḥamah al-kubrah*]. Yet neither such texts nor their (much-debated) interpretation are all there is to Islam. Indeed they are often marginal or irrelevant to the majority of Muslims who are after all neither theologians nor jurists. To be clear: the common presumption among professional Islamicists (and indeed many Muslims themselves) that Islam is paradigmatically to be understood in terms of the writing of elite scholars at a stroke renders the vast preponderance of Muslims mute and irrelevant. It particularly silences women, the poor, and the subaltern. This is itself a fact bemoaned by several of the subjects of this study.

The common logocentrism of Islamic studies is not of course intended to silence that overwhelming majority of actually existing Muslims. While some effects of a preoccupation with (almost invariably male) scholarly elites are indeed as patriarchal has been argued by Islamic feminists such as the late Fatema Mernissi [e.g. 2011: 15, 27–28, 42–43], its intents need hardly be so. It is likewise true that Edward Said was far from unjustified in condemning the Orientalist 'dogma … that abstractions about the [Muslim] Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a "classical" Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities' [Said, 2003: 300]. Yet it is also unsurprising that one's study of a tradition might take special notice of those most famous within it: with 'notables', as some would have it. Such selectivity reflects preoccupations not only of Orientalists but also within Muslim cultures which are justifiably proud of great shaykhs, *mujtahids*, and imams. Many of the same 'classic texts' scrutinised at Cambridge and Columbia are after all also pored over at Qom and al-Qarawiyyin. But beyond all this, 'the exclusive focus of the current literature on the legal and juristic aspects of peace and violence in Islam' [Kalin, 2005: 329] is in no small part the result of simple propinquity: of ready access and of comforting familiarity. Bookish types are drawn to books and may find the wood-panelled reading rooms of the Bodleian Library more congenial than protracted, uncomfortable, and even dangerous ethnographic fieldwork. It is furthermore considerably easier to canvas answers from those trained in giving them than to infer and uncover them among those who are not (for all that '[t]he proper study of mankind is by inference' [Smith, 1959: 35]). In the case of Islam it is the scholars [*'ulamā'*] who have

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tended both to have such training and to jealously protect their perceived role as custodians of the tradition [e.g. Juynboll, 1969]. The juristic is moreover often the idiom in which they do precisely this. All of this remains true even if one is justifiably inclined to be suspicious of work which, while stopping short of outright hostility to Muslims, seeks to focus the faith through the disciplining lens of national or international security. It likewise remains the case irrespective of whether one sees recent phenomena such as 9/11, the 2016 Nice Bastille Day attack, or the genocide of Yazidis at the hands of so-called Islamic State as a result of the 'radicalisation of Islam' or as the 'Islamisation of radicalism' [Roy, 2017: 6].

UNSPECTACULAR PEACE AND ESCAPING IMAGINARIES

This exploration of principled pacifism and nonviolence in contemporary Islam is neither a creed nor a manifesto. It does not presume to bestow authority upon pacifist or nonviolent understandings of Islam, nor thereby to differentiate between authentic Muslims and inauthentic ones. Still less does it adopt the politically motivated agenda of dividing 'Good Muslims' from 'Bad Muslims' famously diagnosed by Mahmood Mamdani [Mamdani, 2004]. It is this same restraint which concomitantly restricts us from presuming those interpretations of Islam which justify violence to be definitive. Neither are we qualified to judge them so on a theological level, nor do we regard the philosophical grounds for such a move to be compelling. Recognising that pacifism is not the unbroken rule does not require us to eternalise the equally contingent phenomena of conflict and division. If every peace has a history, so also does every war. We are not obliged to follow the Social Darwinism of a Thomas Huxley or the National Socialism of a Carl Schmitt in insisting otherwise by making violent competition the existential ground of human experience through an equally *a priori* inversion of Rousseau's myth of the noble savage. Without such prior ideological commitments, there is no pressing reason to presume history to exist in a natural state of war interrupted only occasionally by some fleeting truce [*pace* Idris, 2019]. One finds both trouble and tranquillity in this life, and no less of the latter than of the former. Yet even for those of us who are not knowingly under the spell of an empirically questionable belief in the Hobbesian 'state of nature', with its endless struggle of every man for himself, it can be difficult to step outside of what has become a common theme in our social imaginary.

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It has recently been observed that '[h]istorians find violence easily, peace less so' [Smolenski, 2022: 825]. Historians are not alone in this difficulty. As inhabitants of the twenty-first century, we have a good deal of accumulated bias to contend with in this respect, and not all of it obviously connected to visions of Islam. Though our lives are on the whole neither nasty nor brutish nor short, our imaginations are filled with such Hobbesian nightmares. The stories we tell ourselves – from edifying education to frivolous entertainment – exhibit a cultural fascination with violence even when this does not directly produce a violent culture. 'In comparison to the exciting and transformative nature of warfare, so the argument goes, peace appears static and boring' [Peterson et al., 2022: 14]. It may even be that the aesthetic appeal of violence depends crucially not upon its ubiquity but its rarity: *dulce bellum inexpertis*, war is sweetest to those who have not lived through it, as Pindar [d. ca. 438 BC] and Erasmus [d. 1536] alike remind us [Erasmus, 1664].

Our fascination is not only, nor even primarily, with violence as it is actually experienced by its victims and by its perpetrators. Rather, it casts violence as a sublimely idealised form of pure action. It is more ideological or aesthetic than it is historical or forensic. It was common after the First World War to remark that armed conflict in the main consists of months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror. Yet our cultural reflections of combat – most saliently in cinema and digital media – typically tell a different story, one where violence is habitual and usually redemptive. Here, it is less the despairing leader's 'iron dice' or the teenage conscript's panicked scramble in the dark than a precise tool wielded dextrously by the confident hero or the coolly calculating statesman. It is clear why a novelist, cinematographer, or game designer might be drawn to such fantasies. Conflagration provides spectacular set pieces, while killing off a protagonist very conclusively closes their narrative arc. It is not merely – or even mainly – bloodlust which fills contemporary media from drama to natural history documentaries with 'action scenes' of death and destruction, of pursuit and predation out of all proportion with their prevalence in reality. These are undeniably useful and attractive narrative devices. Likewise, when the writing of history concentrates on the succession of elites – as it has until comparatively recently tended to do – then it is similarly convenient to foreground the violent struggles for power which all too often mark those transitions. Yet both tendencies, the aesthetic and the historiographic, prejudice our understanding and cast an umbra in our imagination – hiding other possibilities from view. Those overshadowed possibilities are no less important for going unremarked.

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Appreciative audiences do not attend a staging of *Macbeth* solely to witness the titular thane duelling with Macduff in Act Five. The playwright's only stage direction in that climactic moment is a terse '*Exeunt, fighting. Alarums*': Shakespeare seems little concerned with the choreography of combat. Instead, the audience are captivated by everything which precedes the clash, and which alone invests it with any meaning. Despite this being among the great Elizabethan's shortest and goriest plays, it consists by and large of a great deal of talking. It is through his prodigious dialogue rather than his contrived plotting that the Bard of Avon stands out. Lacking its final scene, the Scottish Play would be inconclusive. Lacking all else, it would be senseless. Its explorations of ambition and corruption, of loss, guilt, and despair, the poetry of its pentameter: these are the heart of the matter. Murders may punctuate the performance from its inciting incident to its denouement, but it is not in the final analysis a play about murder any more than it is politic flattery of Banquo's royal issue in the House of Stuart. Yet the temptation persists to identify *Macbeth* in terms of regicide and of death. Our imaginations are drawn to the spectacular, even when we appreciate it to be the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, it is spectacular precisely because it is exceptional.

Part of the exaggerated anxiety which some non-Muslims feel about Islam and its purported violence certainly derives from such of habits of the imagination. Marking time through battles, conquests, and armed revolutions appeals to this predisposition. When coupled with humanity's tendency to tribalism, 'to identify and hence to exclude' [Gellner 1964, 149], this gives the impression not only that one's own people are ennobled by 'our martial valour' but also that other communities are marred by 'their militarism'. Our conviction is principled while theirs is fanatical, and our victories are glorious while theirs are lamentable. This may be a quite general pattern in human affairs, but it is today seen to take a particularly potent form in what the late Edward Said called 'Orientalism' [Said, 2003]. That is, the confected European imaginary of 'The East' (and particularly the Muslim East) symbiotically entangled with the power structures of modern colonialism and imperial competition. 'Orientalist practices in European historiography ... positioned Muslims as a problem for imperial domination and as inherently fanatical and violent' [Cole, 2022: 373]. This is a myth which both justifies oppression and is justified by it. At no time is it more tempting to think of one's neighbours as brutes who understand only the language of force than when one is in the process of invading their homes and subjecting them to the yoke of one's sternest tutelage.

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No illusion can be more comforting to an abusive husband than that his wife is by her feminine nature incapable of understanding the realities to which he would have her conform. Such beliefs allow us to excuse the inexcusable and transmute marks of shame into badges of honour. It transforms the brutality and rapine we regard as unspeakably criminal at home into the embodiment of moral duty abroad.

This supposedly ennobling violence has a longer history than the ostensibly humanitarian interventions which have sown chaos among Muslims communities of the twenty-first-century Middle East and Central Asia. The celebrated imperial slogans of Rudyard Kipling's [d. 1936] ostentatiously selfless *White Man's Burden* and Jules Ferry's [d. 1893] militantly progressive *Mission Civilisatrice*, with its 'duty to civilise the inferior races' [Ferry, 1897: 211], spoke directly to the context of their countries' colonisation of Muslim populations in Africa and South Asia. Each are merely moments in a wider and longer process of demonisation and domination of Europe's neighbours – the nearest of whom happen in the main to be Muslims. Partly as a result, a phantasmagoric 'Islam' has been conjured up as a 'bloody bordered' phenomenon [Huntington, 1996: 254–258], to be understood in the first instance as bellicose and belligerent. It is envisioned as a fundamentally warlike foe defined and ultimately to be overcome by force of arms. It is a spectre whose conjuring relies crucially upon its not only being understood as different from one's own community but also *to be understood differently* – by another set of means and measures entirely:

> No one would say, 'with Clive's victory in the Battle of Plassey [in 1757], Christianity controlled all of India.' Yet it is commonplace to say that 'after the battle of Yarmouk [in 636], Islam was victorious throughout the Middle East.' [Richard] Bulliet and many others have shown, of course, that it was not 'Islam' that was victorious but the Arab armies; and centuries were to pass before 'Islam' was the dominant religion of the Middle East or anywhere else besides Arabia. Similarly, the difference in usage and implication is obvious between, on the one hand, 'the decline of Christianity in Europe' or 'the decline of Judaism in Cochin,' and, on the other, 'the decline of Islam in the eighteenth century'. The former clearly suggest a loss of allegiance or a decline in population, while the latter implies a loss of military or political power. [Reinhart, 2014]

Rather than any such misleadingly sweeping generalisations, our starting point will always be with precisely identifiably persons, with the thoughts they expressed and the actions which they undertook. This seeks to foreground a descriptive and contextual approach over *a priori* presumptions and grand narratives. The main body of this study thus

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comprises detailed explorations of the lives and nonviolent philosophies of major historical figures of the late nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries. The selection of such exemplars has been guided in the first instance by their existing notoriety in their own lands. They range from Amadou Bamba in Senegambia [Chapter 1]; to Bacha Khan in Pakistan and Afghanistan [Chapter 2]; to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Sri Lanka and the United States [Chapter 3]; to Ali Shariati in pre-Revolutionary Iran [Chapter 4]; to Wahiduddin Khan in India [Chapter 5]; to Jawdat Said in Syria [Chapter 6]. A further chapter [Chapter 7] is devoted to a series of in-depth interviews carried out with currently active advocates for Islamic nonviolence in Europe, the Middle East, North America, South Asia, and South-East Asia. Many of these final figures are themselves past students of the earlier generation.

Though this geographical spread is considerable, this text makes no claim to encyclopaedic exhaustiveness. Precisely because there are so many Muslim pacifists, such an undertaking would be impossible to complete. Were this the aim of the study, it could only be counted as a failure. It is furthermore notable that in spite of their heterogeneity in many other respects, the historical examples explored (as importantly distinct from those living figures directly interviewed) are exclusively male. This is an unfortunate but unavoidable reflection of the gendered aspect of historical notoriety which persists in spite of the fact that the movements they led often included significant contributions by women (most notably in the case of Bacha Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar organisation and the activist students of Ali Shariati and Jawdat Said). One might similarly observe that less studied Muslim populations, such as those of the People's Republic of China and the former Soviet Union, are likewise less represented than one might prefer – though again the causes of such lacunae should be apparent. All of these do indicate potentially important avenues for future exploration. The task at hand is to lay a firmer foundation for such efforts rather than to predict or prejudge their outcomes. The same concern motivates the ordering of this book.

THEMES, HARMONIES, AND LEITMOTIFS

While a synchronic comparative dimension plays an important role throughout all of the above and culminates in our concluding chapter, it should be noted at the outset that a broadly chronological approach is taken to their ordering in the text. The present study is furthermore influenced by the developing school of Peace History [see Howlett et al.,

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2022] – a fact reflected in its special concern for detailed description and historical contextualisation. We encounter our guides and subjects in order of the years during which they were most active – though some have uncertain dates of birth, are near contemporaries, or lived lives of very different durations from the brief to the exceptionally long. This editorial choice is not taken so as to illustrate or fabricate a direct lineage among them. On the contrary, it is far from clear that such a continuity exists. Rather, a chronological ordering is adopted precisely because of its relatively arbitrary nature. A thematic structuring would by contrast run the risk of imposing unities of meaning and significance where none are present – or of failing to recognise those which do exist.

That being said, this study does not limit itself to a purely descriptive exercise. This is not only because pure description is itself an implausible aspiration: even the reporting of indisputable facts necessarily encourages certain narratives and normative judgements through its unavoidable choices of structure and presentation, of omission and inclusion. On the contrary, though this text's primary concern is to illustrate not the unity but the variety of Islamic nonviolences, it also recognises salient commonalities or what Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* famously called 'family resemblances' among them. These are identified throughout but explored most thoroughly in the Conclusion. Many Muslim proponents of nonviolence – for all their other differences – do for instance share particular concern with specific Quranic passages and episodes in the life of the Prophet. Among these are the distinctly Quranic version of the Biblical narrative of Cain and Abel [Chapters 4, 6, and 7]; the Prophetic community's forbearance (or *ṣabr*) in the face of persecution in Mecca [Chapters 1, 2, and 3]; and the Prophet's later Medinan Truce of Hudaybiyyah with his polytheistic opponents [see esp. Chapter 5]. Several thinkers likewise appeal explicitly to ideas of cosmic order [Chapters 3, 5, and 7] or to sociological laws of history [Chapters 4 and 6] to justify their pacifism. While this study includes figures indifferent to or even critical of Sufism [Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 7], moreover, it is remarkable how frequently characteristically Sufi language and social organisation plays a salient role [Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 7]. Yet none of these features are universal, and they represent neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for Islamic nonviolence. More common than these are three further factors.

The first concerns the socio-political positioning of the Muslim nonviolentists surveyed here as fundamentally *dissident*. All of our subjects aim to reform the imperfect societies in which they find themselves – some

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radically and others more tentatively. While some find themselves resisting French and British imperial domination [particularly Chapters 1 and 2], others see their main task as challenging the violence and injustice which they detect in their own Muslim societies [Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7]. The relative prevalence of the former in earlier chapters is a natural result of their chronological ordering, with their subjects living through the dying decades of European empire. But these forms of resistance should not necessarily be understood as either sharply distinct nor as mutually exclusive. Neither do we advocate for the Eurocentric notion that the actions of the colonised are merely reactionary to those of the coloniser, nor should we ignore the fact that later thinkers explicitly criticise what they see as empire's continuation in the form of Cold War and later American imperialism [see esp. Chapters 4 and 6]. On the contrary, both figures most associated with their anti-colonial projects are also highly critical of the religious and political establishments within their more local communities. All share a marked discontent with the way things are, whatever the reason for it.

It is after all far from self-evident that a critique of power-domination need be seen as radically different if its targets are foreign or domestic. Indeed, at least one of our subjects argues explicitly that they are identical [Chapter 4]. The same *ḥadīth* [*Musnad* Aḥmad no. 18449] defining *jihād* as 'a word of truth before a tyrannical ruler' is moreover invoked by many of our subjects in both instances: local and global, domestic and imperial [e.g. Chapter 2 and Appendix]. A parallel observation may be made concerning the more explicitly anti-racist discourses of our subjects who spoke from an ethnically subaltern position (Amadou Bamba as a 'black' man denigrated by 'white' Frenchmen and Mauritanians and Bacha Khan as emblem of the Pashtun people so disobligingly caricatured by both British colonialists and by other South Asians). Each of our subjects face the historical realities in which they arise and respond to these same. Yet this need not compel us to adopt the strongly historicist view that their philosophies are meaningful only to those contexts. It is furthermore notable that the dissident dimension of these figures' projects exists in tension with their simultaneous concern to maintain communion with the wider Muslim population. While arguably 'utopian' (as Juan Cole describes the subject of Chapter 2 [Cole, 2022: 373]), and even revolutionary [see esp. Chapter 4], they markedly do not tend to be separatist or schismatic in inclination. They overwhelmingly aim to change their societies rather than to withdraw from them.

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The second and most frequent leitmotif to be detected throughout the coming discussions is one which our final chapter will elaborate upon in particular. This shared factor among this book's past and present subjects is one which at once distinguishes their approach from secular pacifisms and ties them directly to the mainsprings of Islamic thought (notably *Ṣaḥīḥ* Bukhārī no. 1). This is the concern for *moral self-improvement and the intentional disposition* [*niyyah*] which sustains it – not only as a good in itself but also *as an ineliminable element of moral action and its evaluation*. Without it, nonviolence is generally understood by our subjects as either impossible or unthinkable. While the forms taken by such a salutary process are seen to vary quite considerably – indeed to conflict – the theme remains constant.

The third and final commonality shared by almost all thinkers and activists discussed is in large part a consequence of the second, though it relates also to the first. It is a preoccupation *less with governance than with pedagogy*. Of the figures encountered, the vast preponderance regard themselves in the first instance as educators. This is reflected also in their respective professions – be it within traditionally Sufi organisations [Chapters 1 and 3] or through more secular primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions [Chapters 2, 5, and 7]. The goals they set themselves concomitantly concern the moral guidance, improvement, and transformation of their societies 'from within' rather than the imposition of a specific set of institutional frameworks or policy initiatives. Their pedagogical inclination is variously expressed as the 'educative method' [Khan, 2004: 100] 'which triumphs over a person's conscience rather than over their body' [Said 2009b].

It is the contention of this text that this *ethical and pedagogical concern with intentional orientation* [*niyyah*] is not merely the rhetorical result of the moralising tenor of religious discourse in general – for all that our subjects are naturally all religious. Rather, it is argued that it reflects a long-standing and characteristically Islamic approach to ethical evaluation. This is one in which the moral status, disposition, and intentionality [*niyyah*] of the actor is not a circumstantial but a constitutive element of the act itself. In this, the gamut of approaches to Islamic nonviolence analysed here cohere with one another and with their wider religious culture. So embedded in Islamic scriptural and ethical tradition is this approach, in fact, as to connect these proponents of nonviolence not only to one another but even with classical justifications *for* killing in war [*qitāl*]. The same shared moral philosophy at the same time also differentiates their projects from the mainstreams of secular writing on pacifism

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and nonviolence following Johan Galtung's seminal account of nonviolence as 'peace by peaceful means'. Rather than the celebrated 'harmony of means and ends' to be found in the genre of peace studies, that is, we find throughout this work an insistence on a concert of *means, ends, and intentional dispositions*. The sometimes surprising or apparently contradictory consequences of this distinction are evident throughout the text and re-examined in the Conclusion. It has been rightly observed that 'Muslim pacifists and exponents of nonviolent civil resistance have been a significant feature of modern history, but Islamic peace studies has seldom problematized them as a distinct phenomenon' [Cole, 2022: 387]. Through its reflections on the structures of moral reasoning, the present study offers precisely such a problematisation.

The subjects of this study are multifarious in terms of background and education – from professors to illiterates on continents spanning the globe. Their circumstances differ widely, as do the ideas and initiatives they develop in response to them. Yet they share a conviction that their Islamic faith obliges them to work for the avoidance of violence while striving for what they each understand to be the good of humanity and the will of God. It now remains for us to begin the task of tracing the paths they take to that goal.

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