

Excerpt from Chapter Two

“Violence: Justifying Brutality in the Name of Faith”

(“Violence in Islam” by Jamal Rahman pages 70-74)

in book titled Religion Gone Astray: What We Found at the Heart of Interfaith

Commentary on Violence

First, let us consider the “sword verse” of the Qur’an (9:5), which has been so tragically misrepresented by Islamic extremists and misunderstood by fearful Westerners. First, the verse is seriously limited and defined by its historical context. This seventh-century revelation came at a time when the Islamic community in Arabia was a tiny embryonic group in Medina under constant attack by the Quraish tribe and their allies in Mecca, who were overwhelmingly superior in arms and numbers. Second, the verse is even more seriously qualified by its textual context. The sword verse also appears in chapter 2, where it is hedged by two Qur’anic commandments. The verse immediately preceding the sword verse in chapter 2 says, “Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors” (2:190), while the verses immediately following it say, “but if they cease, God is Oft-forgiving, most Merciful.... let there be no hostility.... and know that God is with those who restrain themselves” (2:192–194). Thus the verses that surround the sword verse soften its sharp edges and establish a clear context: The verse refers to defensive fighting, and if the attacker is inclined to peace, the Muslim must cease fighting.

A general principle of Qur’anic interpretation is that if a verse does not seem to support the overall message of the Qur’an or reflect God’s divine attributes, we have to dig deeper to reach a more enlightened understanding. So in addition to establishing the contextual limits on this particular revelation—allowing one to kill only in self-defense—it is critical to emphasize that this verse is not about divine permission to kill nonbelievers simply because of their nonbelief or to gain power or control. Such an interpretation would place the verse in direct conflict with the spirit and content of the universal verses in the Qur’an. In an abundance of verses celebrating pluralism and diversity, the Qur’an explains that God could easily have made all of humanity “one single people,” but instead created us in beautiful diversity so that we might “vie, then, with one another other in doing good works!” (5:48) and “come to know one another” (49:13). The Holy Book asks rhetorically, “Wilt thou then compel humankind against their will, to believe?” and emphasizes that no matter how much one disapproves of the other’s religion, the Muslim is commanded to live and let live: “To you be your Way, and to me mine” (109:6). The Qur’an clearly states that entrance to heaven depends not on religious affiliation but on doing “righteous deeds” (4:124 and 5:69). Except when in mortal danger at the hands of an enemy, Muslims are commanded to repel evil with something better, so that an enemy becomes a bosom friend (41:34).

MAKING PEACE WITH THE SWORD VERSE

Now, how can we make peace with the sword verse? Even if we know that it refers only to self-defense, it is extremely uncomfortable and confusing to read words like, “kill the unbeliever,” as a divine revelation. Why would the All-Merciful and All-Powerful God, who has infused every human with divine breath and holds every human heart between divine fingers, instruct anyone to kill? Why would the “Light of the Heavens and Earth” advise a Muslim engaged in battle against his attackers to “smite at their necks” (47:4)? Some of my co-religionists may call me naïve, but when presented with such a puzzlement, I take refuge in Rumi’s utterance, “Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment.” What else can one do with a verse like this?

In a continuing attempt to advance my understanding of this difficult verse, I have discussed it with both scholars and students. Some of the scholars, Hindus who are fully conversant with the Qur’an, believe the revelation in question is about God’s exhortation to humanity to be courageous and take action in the face of attack by others. Indeed, this line of thought is consistent with another revelation in the Qur’an: “For if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in which God’s name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed” (22:40).

Reinforcing the need for courage when under attack, the scholars cite an epic conversation in the Bhagavad-Gita between Krishna, a Divine Being, and the mortal Prince Arjuna on the eve of engaging in the battle of Kurukshetra. Viewing the multitude of soldiers on the opposing side, the prince laments to Krishna about spilling the blood of “cousins.” Krishna berates the prince for using false piety to cover up his fear and lack of courage. Without action, Krishna says, the cosmos would fall out of order.

My students, high school Muslims, suggested that the verse should be interpreted metaphorically. After all, they argued, the Qur’an clearly states that some verses are literal and some are metaphorical (3:7), but it doesn’t say which ones are which! To these young, creative minds, the sword verse is about slaying the idols of arrogance and ignorance within ourselves.

Finally, the thirteenth-century sage Rumi claims that any interpretation depends on our level of consciousness and our intention on what we hope to learn. “A bee and wasp drink from the same flower,” says Rumi. “One produces nectar and the other, a sting.” When I’m troubled by the way the sword verse could be interpreted, I remember that the way of Islam is to produce nectar.

UNDERSTANDING JIHAD

Now, about that terrifying word jihad: Thanks to misinformation in the media and misrepresentation by Islamic extremists, many Westerners associate the word jihad with “holy war” and suicide bombing. To set the record straight, jihad literally means “effort” and refers primarily to the spiritual effort to evolve into the fullness of one’s being, to improve relationships with family and neighbors, and to work for justice. The more militant concept of jihad that so threatens the Western mind refers only to self-defense when under attack. The idea of jihad as “holy war” simply does not exist in the Qur’an, even though this is the prevailing notion not only in the media but also, unfortunately, among some Islamic militants.

What is often overlooked is that for a thousand years after Islam’s inception in the seventh century, there was a tradition of vigorous and lively debate among scholars and jurists on contentious issues, including war. The classical jurists’ notion of dividing the world into the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War has been hotly contested and refuted by other Islamic jurists. In the fourteenth century, the conservative jurist Ibn Tamiyya argued definitively that such a concept violated the basic Qur’anic principle forbidding “compulsion in religion” (2:256). Even in the twentieth century, when ideological debate among peers and scholars was comparatively lame, the inflammatory views of Sayyid al Qutb were opposed by many of his colleagues and upon his death he was declared a heretic by the scholars of Al-Azhar University, one of the premier universities in the Muslim world.

In recent times, however, the classical doctrine of jihad as holy war has seen a resurgence among militants who chafe against the Muslim experience of colonialism, wars, and occupation. What underlies the resurgence of militancy is not religion but politics. An exhaustive six-year Gallup poll in thirty-five Muslim countries concluded that 7 percent of Muslims are “radicals,” and that Islamic militancy is based not on Islamic principles but on political radicalization. In every suicide bombing attack from 1980 to 2004, the primary motive was to overthrow foreign occupation, not to further religious views. Robert Pape, a leading expert on suicide terrorism from the University of Chicago, reports that the vast majority of Islamic suicide bombers come from middle-class backgrounds with a significant level of education. He asserts that the “taproot of suicide terrorism is nationalism.” According to Islamic sages, if we focus on religion as the primary cause, we are searching in the branches for what really appears in the roots.

As is so often the case, the remedy for misunderstanding and fear lies in the same texts and traditions that give rise to the problem in the first place. Muhammad proclaimed that the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr, and the word ilm (knowledge) is the second-most-repeated word in the Qur’an. It is the sacred task of Muslims and non-Muslims alike to humbly and mindfully examine the scriptural sources of religious violence and allow for a knowledge of the heart to understand and interpret the sacred texts.

The historic “Arab Spring” began in early 2011, when nonviolent, grassroots movements in Tunisia and Egypt astonishingly overthrew autocratic and repressive regimes in a short span of time. This stunning turn of events is reminiscent of how the Prophet Muhammad finally achieved victory in the face of overwhelming odds.

~ Excerpt [pages 70-74] from “**Religion Gone Astray: What We Found at the Heart of Interfaith**” by **Pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon, and Imam Jamal Rahman**. Published by **Skylight Paths**, Woodstock, Vermont, 2011.

