

Religion, violence and “holy wars”

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Abstract

The author analyzes the impact of religion in current conflicts throughout the world. The main focus lies on the monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which have recently been reproached for potentially fostering the temptation to resort to violence. The article focuses on this accusation and departs from an analysis of the concept of “holy war” in the three religions. The article concludes with setting out a pragmatism of peaceableness highlighting that wars in the twenty-first century can neither be regarded as just, nor holy, nor clean and that absolute pacifism will not only be politically impossible but might as a political principle even be irresponsible.

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Armed conflicts in which religion, often accompanied by ethnic differences, plays a part have proliferated in recent decades in various parts of the world: Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria... So it is not Islamic terrorism alone which has again raised the question as to whether religion tends to encourage violence rather than help overcome it and whether religion is not the source of, rather than the solution to, the problem of violence. In this article, therefore, I would like in particular to consider the following question: where

* The present article draws on the author's book on Islam (*Der Islam. Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, Piper Verlag GmbH, München 2004, in particular pp. 688-719). Together with *Judaism*, SCM Press London, 1992 and *Christianity, Its Essence and History*, SCM Press London, 1995. This book forms part of the trilogy on monotheistic religions. It will be published by Oneworld, Oxford.

do the three “prophetic” religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — stand with regard to repressive violence (as opposed to legitimate, political violence) and war? Today, all three are accused, as “monotheistic religions”, of being more inclined to use force than “polytheistic” religions or “non-theistic” religions (such as Buddhism).

Are monotheistic religions in particular prepared to use force?

Could it be that aspects of violence are inherent in every religion as such, and that monotheistic religions, because they are bound to a single god, are particularly intolerant, non-peaceful and ready to use force? Some Christian theologians ascribe a fervently anti-monotheistic attitude to certain secular intellectuals. Are not such theologians underestimating the extent to which anti-religious feeling is being incited by representatives of the church who, in the name of God, self-righteously place high moral demands on society without solving the problems in their own back yards? Incredible anti-monotheistic feeling is also sometimes displayed by Christian dogmatists who seek to prop up their trinitarian speculations by polemic arguments against the belief of Jews, Christians and Muslims in the one God, supposedly responsible for so much intolerance and discord. Were not the Crusades launched precisely in the name of Christ, and were not witches, heretics and Jews burned at the stake precisely in the name of the “Most Holy Trinity”?

Let us approach the problem of religion and war¹ with the sober acknowledgement that ever since man came into being, there have been religions, and for as long as man has existed, there has also been violence. In the human world, which has evolved from the animal kingdom, there has never been a paradisiacal society in which violence plays no part. The image of the pure, peace-loving “noble savage” was long ago exposed as a myth created by the optimistic Enlightenment, to which even such a well-known cultural anthropologist as Margaret Mead fell victim when studying the supposedly entirely peaceful inhabitants of Samoa.

Today, even Christian moral philosophers recognize that specific ethical norms, values and attitudes have developed in a highly complex socio-dynamic process. Wherever human necessities and priorities existed, regulations governing human behaviour have had to be imposed. And therein lies the origin of human culture. For generations, human beings have had to try out these ethical standards to see whether they prove their merit, including respect for the life of others and refraining from killing other human beings with base intent — thus not to commit murder. Yet wars have existed from time immemorial, above all to acquire the power (mana) and renown they were believed to endow, and to restore the allegedly disturbed divine order of things.

1 The article by P. Gerlitz, “Krieg I (Religionsgeschichtlich)”, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 20, 1990, de Gruyter, Berlin, gives an overview of the vast number of comparative theological studies on the subject of war.

“Holy” wars are understood to be wars of aggression waged with a claimed missionizing purpose at the command of a given divinity. It is of secondary importance whether they are fought in the name of one god or many. However, it would be wrong to attribute all the wars fought by “Christians” in recent centuries to religious motives. Blame for the killing of innumerable Indians and Aborigines in Latin and North America and Australia by white colonialists, the murder of tens of thousands of Hereros in Namibia by German colonial rulers, the gunning-down of huge numbers of protesters in India by British soldiers, the killing of hundreds of civilians in Lebanon or Palestine by Israeli soldiers, or the murder of hundreds of thousands of Armenians by Turkish troops, verily cannot be laid at the door of those who believe in a single god. But let us take a closer look to see which religiously motivated wars have their roots in the three prophetic religions.

Yahweh’s holy war?

A new stage of cultural development was reached when ethical standards, already found, for example, in the Code of Hammurabi dating back to Ancient Babylon of the eighteenth/seventeenth centuries BC, were placed under the authority of the one god and pronounced the law of God, as in the Decalogue (Greek *deka logoi*, “ten words”) or Ten Commandments.² Old Testament scholars largely agree that polytheism was still widespread in Israel at the time of the Kings and that at first there was only monolatry: of the large number of existing gods, in Israel only Yahweh was worshipped as the one God, although the existence of other gods by other peoples was not denied. Strict monotheism, which altogether denies the existence of other gods, has existed only since the Babylonian Exile, in the later chapters of Deuteronomy and Isaiah (Deutero-Isaiah), i.e. in the days of theocracy, when all accounts were written from start to finish in the spirit of a strictly exclusive monotheism.³

With regard to the question of religion and violence this means that the world was full of violence long before the relatively late advent of monotheism, and no evidence that the propensity to violence increased with its arrival can be found. At that time of changing polytheistic foreign domination Israel was in any case more the victim than the perpetrator of violence.

The Hebrew Bible is nevertheless characterized by the conviction that the violence of nature, like that of man, is the mark of earthly reality, and that the power of evil can only ever be temporarily held in check. It therefore gives unvarnished reports of acts of violence, whereas in other ancient cultures — Rene Girard has elaborated on this⁴ — violence was veiled in silence, referred to only indirectly, glossed over, or glorified in myths and legends. The books of the

2 See Ex 20:1-17; Deut 5: 6-21. The biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, WM. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., New York, Glasgow and Toronto.

3 See H. Küng, *Judaism*, Ch. 1-A II, 5: “The establishment of monotheism.”

4 R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Paris 1972 (in German: *Das Heilige und die Gewalt*, Zurich, 1987), and *Le bouc émissaire*, Paris, 1982 (in German *Der Sündenbock*, Zurich, 1988).

Bible repeatedly turn to the subject of violence and confront human beings with their violent nature, ranging from Cain’s murder of his brother Abel out of pure rivalry⁵ to the anti-war preaching of the prophets and finally to a vision of peace established between nations by Yahweh Himself, according to the prophets Micah and Isaiah,⁶ a violence-free end of time in which swords will be beaten into ploughshares — a manifesto for the peace movement of today, including the peace movement in Israel.

Accounts of earlier acts of violence were often written only hundreds of years later and are almost impossible to verify historically, although this has prevented such texts from being misused for political ends to this very day (conflict in the Middle East). The war of Yahweh⁷ — which is recounted in connection with the settlement of Israel and Judaea and was probably a slow infiltration or internal restructuring of Palestine rather than a military conquest⁸ — is a historical construction put together some five hundred years later, presumably as counter-propaganda to the threat of terror from Assyria. Testimony to the destruction of a town’s entire population as a sacrificial offering to God is found in the epigraph of a Moabite king of the ninth century BC, but it relates to the Moabites, not the Israelites, and the Old Testament does not contain a single text from which reliable information about an Israelite sacrificial act in any period of Israel’s history can be derived.⁹ The possibility that Israel might have engaged in such a sacrificial act obviously cannot be ruled out, but it is certainly not an act specific to Israel from which a greater tendency of monotheism towards violence could be inferred.¹⁰ The extent to which the heroic tales — likewise set down in writing only hundreds of years later — of the legendary prophet Elijah, who as the ruthless champion of the religion of Yahweh is said to have slain all the prophets of Baal and Aschera,¹¹ are historically true can likewise no longer be established. In any case this, too, is no argument against Israelite monotheism, for all the prophets of Israel other than Elijah had previously been killed in the name of the god Baal and his pantheon.

The narratives of wars and acts of violence have to be seen in the overall context of the Hebrew Bible. In telling of the creation of humankind, the intention of biblical prehistory is not to offer an idyllic account of the first person in the Garden of Paradise, but to describe the condition of man as such: according to the Hebrew Bible, Adam was not the first Jew, nor was he the first Christian, and of course not the first Muslim (at least, if Muslim is not equated with monotheist for purposes of simplification). The term *ādām* simply means person:

5 Gen. 4.

6 Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:1-3.

7 Deut. 1-3 and the Book of Joshua.

8 For an overview of the various attempts at reconstruction, see H. Küng, *Das Judentum*, Ch. 1-C I, 1: “Die Landnahme.”

9 See N. Lohfink, Art. **eraa* (Vernichtungsweihe), in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Vol. III, Stuttgart, 1982, Col. 192-213; Cit. col. 206.

10 See J. A. Soggin, “Krieg II (Altes Testament)”, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 20, 1990, de Gruyter, Berlin.

11 1 Kings 18-19.

a person created in God's own image.¹² According to the admonitory story of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, the climax of prehistory is the story of the Flood which, unlike any other account of it in the area around Israel, centres on the problem of violence: humanity [the earth] was "corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence" and was therefore doomed to destruction.¹³ The only righteous man, Noah, and his family were spared, enabling mankind to make a new beginning under the sign of the rainbow which spanned the entire earth, symbolizing God's covenant with all mankind and indeed with the whole of creation.

God henceforth protected human life with sanctions against acts of violence, "for God made man in his own image."¹⁴ A code of ethics is intended to match God's covenant with man — a minimum code of conduct based on the principle of respect for life (the theologian and doctor Albert Schweitzer took this as the very basis of ethics in general), i.e. not to commit murder and not to eat the flesh of living animals. From this code of ethics Rabbinic Judaism subsequently derived the seven Noahide Laws, or Laws of Noah which, in addition to murder and cruelty to animals, prohibited robbery, adultery, idolatry and blasphemy; they also included a positive command that justice be administered (courts established).¹⁵ These constitute a universal code of conduct that is valid from the start not only for Jews, but for all human beings.¹⁶

Is "anti-monotheistic feeling" therefore justified? No, for the belief of the Jews, Christians and Muslims in a single God is contrary to every quasi- or pseudo-religion which sets up relative values as being absolute. To this very day it signifies a radical denial of any deification of the forces of nature, but also of all earthly values that virtually become objects of veneration to which people sacrifice everything and which they are expected to place their hopes in and fear more than anything else in the world — be it profit, sex, power, sport or science, the nation, church, party, leader or pope that modern man worships as his "god". The attempt by "supermen" such as Stalin and Hitler, avid for power, to replace belief in one God with belief in the Socialist society or the German race and ultimately to achieve their own deification has cost millions of human lives. Martin Luther put it very succinctly: "...the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. ...That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god."¹⁷

The belief in one God gives Jews, Christians and Muslims the greatest possible freedom from all spiritual constrictions: the covenant with the one truly Absolute frees human beings from all that is relative, which can then no

12 Gen. 1: 26-28.

13 Gen. 6:11-13.

14 Gen. 9:6.

15 See A. Lichtenstein, *The Seven Laws of Noah*, New York 1995.

16 On the importance of the Noahide Laws for a universal code of ethical conduct, see also K.-J. Kuschel, *Streit um Abraham*, Düsseldorf, 2002, pp. 224 f.

17 M. Luther, *The Large Catechism*, The First Commandment, 1st para. Translated from the German, *Großer Katechismus*, by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau.

longer become an idol for them. There is consequently no need today, in the transition to the post-modern period, for a mythologically garnished return to gods. What *is* needed, rather than the creation of artificial myths, is a return to the one true God, who, as the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, will not tolerate any false gods beside Him. Therein lies the foundation for tolerance amongst people: because God is the one God for all people, each and every person — even non-Jews, non-Christians and non-Muslims — is created in His image and as such merits respect for his or her dignity. But what is the position of Christianity with regard to violence and war?

Violence under the sign of the cross

After Christianity was elevated to a State religion at the time of the old Roman Empire it was an almost inevitable development, both for the Greek area covering the provinces of East Rome and the Byzantine Empire and for the Latin area covering West Rome and the Holy Roman Empire which came into being with Charlemagne, that the State and church should use their respective powers to protect, support and promote each other, despite the rivalry that soon developed between them. As the domains of the sacred and the profane became intermeshed, the secular rulers saw themselves as protectors of the church, and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy legitimized and inspired the secular authorities on many occasions. An expansion of secular domination always led to an expansion of the church, just as missionary work on the part of the church led to an expansion of secular domination. National law and canon law supplemented each other, ecclesiastical standards governed civil life and civil authorities punished violations of the moral and religious precepts. In this way “the secular arm and the spiritual arm” gave mutual assistance to each other. But the secular acts of violence inevitably cast a long shadow over Christianity, for the church often took an active part in violent activities and campaigns totally incompatible with the peaceful, anti-violent spirit of its founder. What misdeeds were not only tolerated but even approved in the name of Christ?

It was by no means inevitable, however, that the cross of the Nazarene (who were put to death by the Romans, and to whom the cool but superstitious power politician Constantine ascribed the decisive victory over his rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312), was increasingly used as an insignia in battle, setting a Christian “seal of approval” on even the bloodiest and most horrific acts of cruelty. Even in the early days of that Christian empire, enemies both outside and within fought violently with each other: the war waged for some thirty years by the first Christian Frankish Emperor, Charlemagne, against the heathen Saxons was accompanied by thousands of executions and deportations. It became quite usual to see heretics and people of different creeds, then later Jews and witches, executed in the church of the martyrs.

In the High Middle Ages, one militant church waged “holy war.” Although the Orthodox churches of the East were also involved in the mostly

politico-military conflicts of secular power and often conferred theological legitimacy on wars or even inspired them, it was only in the Latin Christianity of the west that the (Augustinian) theory of the legitimate use of force to achieve spiritual ends applied and ultimately also permitted the use of force to spread Christianity. Contrary to all tradition of the early church, wars were waged to convert the heathen, spread the Gospel and combat heresy, while the Crusades took place as a complete reversal of the true meaning of the cross.

It was indeed Christianity's supreme representatives, Pope Urban II, and then the powerful preacher, mystic and founder of a religious order, Bernard de Clairvaux, who waged war in the name of Jesus Christ in order to wrest the "Holy Land" from the "infidels", the Muslims. The Crusades were considered as a matter for (western) Christianity as a whole. They were supposedly approved by Christ Himself, since the Pope, as the spokesman of Christ, was said to have personally called people to arms. Finally Innocent III, who had launched the Fourth Crusade (with the fateful conquest, massacre and pillage of Constantinople in order to assert the primacy of Rome), was the first to announce a mighty Crusade in the West against fellow Christians, leading to the implacable Albigensian Wars which lasted for two hundred years in southern France, with bestial horrors inflicted by both sides and entire sections of the population exterminated.

Even at that time many people wondered whether the Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount and preached non-violence, love of one's enemy and renunciation of retribution would ever have allowed such militant campaigns, and whether the meaning of the Nazarene cross was not being totally distorted when, instead of inspiring Christians to bear their cross daily in the true sense of those words, it was emblazoned on the crusaders' attire to legitimize their bloody wars. In mediaeval Christianity the "Peace of God", a measure to limit violence, was only of local and temporary scope, as was the offering of asylum to the persecuted. In Protestantism, at least the Mennonites, the Brethren and above all the Quakers (the "historic peace church") established a Free Church alternative to the traditional legitimization of violence in the national and people's churches.

Holy wars of the Muslims?

Christians, too, should meanwhile have gradually come to know that the Arabic word *jihād* (*jiḥād*) does not correspond to the two words "holy war"¹⁸ but covers a whole host of meanings. First of all, it just means "effort" and is understood

18 On holy war/*jihād*, see A. Noth, *Heiliger Krieg und heiliger Kampf im Islam und Christentum*, Bonn, 1966; R. Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History*, The Hague, 1980; W. M. Watt, A. T. Welch, *Der Islam I: Mohammed und die Frühzeit — Islamisches Recht — Religiöses Leben*, Stuttgart, 1980, esp. p. 150 ff.; J. C. Bürgel, *Allmacht und Mächtigkeit: Religion und Welt im Islam*, Munich, 1991, esp. p. 80 f.; W. Ende, U. Steinbach (eds.), *Der Islam in der Gegenwart: Entwicklung und Ausbreitung — Staat, Politik und Recht — Kultur und Religion*, Munich, 1996, pp. 279-282.

in many passages in the Koran as a moral “struggle with oneself” on the way to finding God: “Fight for the cause of God with the devotion due to Him. He has chosen you.”¹⁹ The combination of the words “holy” and “war” does not appear in the Koran; according to Islamic understanding, a war can never be “holy”.

In other passages, however, the word *jihad* is understood as a powerful “struggle” or “battle”, in the sense of a warlike dispute: “Have faith in God and His apostle, and fight for God’s cause with your wealth and your persons.”²⁰ There the verb *yāhadā*, “to commit oneself”, with one’s own wealth and in person means to fight, “wage war”, the promised immediate reward being entry into Paradise. “He will ... admit you to gardens watered by running streams; He will lodge you in pleasant mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph.”²¹ There are more such verses in the Koran: “Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate.”²²

One thing is clear from the start: the followers of Christ are committed to non-violence in accordance with the teachings, the conduct and the fate of their Messiah, whereas the followers of the Prophet Muhammad are obliged from the outset to engage, if necessary, in militant dispute which does not stop short at violence. War as a political means is accepted, ventured and — in most cases — won. It can therefore hardly be denied that, from its very beginnings, Islam is militant in nature, even if the call to battle initially related to the polytheistic Meccans and Arab tribes hostile to Muslims and thus to a very particular historical situation in which the new Muslim community itself was threatened.

It should nonetheless be stressed that the Prophet — for example, in the peace treaty with the Meccans or with Christian communities and the remaining Jews — evidenced not only a willingness to fight but also a willingness to make peace, and that the *Āimm* status of those to be protected always allowed for far greater tolerance than that customary in Christian realms. The Koran stipulates that during the sacred months there shall be no fighting,²³ and in principle never within the precincts of the Holy Mosque. Fight none except the evil-doers.²⁴

When considered in relation to the Hadith, which could be defined as the biography of the Prophet, the following explanation given by contemporary Muslim authors²⁵ is understandable: in the suras of Mecca *jihad* was primarily not meant in the sense of “war”, but of “effort” when putting forward arguments, and an armed battle, which then was in any case hopeless, was not allowed.

19 Sura 22:78. The Koran, translated by N.J. Dawood, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, London, 1990.

20 Sura 61:11.

21 Sura 61:12.

22 Sura 9:73.

23 Sura 9:5.

24 Sura 2:190-193.

25 For instance A. el Kalim Ragab (lecturing in Bamberg and Cairo), “Die Lehre vom ‘jihād’ im Islam: Eine kritische Diskussion der Quellen und aktueller Entwicklungen”, in A. Renz, S. Leimgruber (eds.), *Lernprozeß Christen Muslime*, Münster, 2002, pp. 57-88.

In the Medina suras, however, Muhammad received the first revelations giving permission to wage armed war against the idolatrous Meccans, and *jihad* thus became the duty to defend oneself. In other revelations, *jihad* is spelt out even more clearly as an armed battle of faith against unbelievers.

Yet the argument often put forward by Muslims by way of apology that the armed *jihad* relates only to defensive wars cannot be upheld, as shown already by the Islamic chroniclers' testimony confirming the great political and military importance of *jihad*. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more effective motivation for a war than a struggle/battle (often expressed by the unmistakable term *qital* = armed "fight") against the "unbelievers" for the cause of God Himself. A most worthy battle, which is declared to be a duty in the Koran itself. This duty was an incentive mainly for the committed tribal warriors and the leaders fighting with them in and around the Arabian Peninsula in the first wars of expansion, but was less so at the time of the Umayyad caliphate, when imperial wars were strategically planned for faraway places and fought with the help of many non-Arab troops and their leaders. Under the Abbasids, the Arabs increasingly left the waging of war to Turkish troops with the result that after the decline of the caliphate, the Turks (with the Moguls in India) inherited the Islamic Empire and in turn used *jihad* as the legitimate motive for their campaigns to conquer the Balkans and India.

Early on, Muhammad's war against the heathen Meccans and the first wars of conquest had prompted discussion about the concept of "war" in Islam. This discussion subsequently gave rise to the classical *jihad* doctrine, taking the Koran and sunna into consideration. In the Shar'ia the *jihad*, with all its attendant terms and conditions, occupies many chapters.²⁶ How should this be assessed today, and what are the prospects for the future?

The region of Islam — the region of war

Put thus, the cliché that Islam is spread by "fire and the sword" is not correct. The primary purpose of the early conquests was to expand the territory of the Islamic State, not to convert people to the Islamic faith. The schematic concept of a world divided into two parts, the "region (house) of Islam" (*dâr al-Islâm*) and the "region (house) of war" (*dâr al-^aarb*) came later, with the further development of Islamic law. This division of the world into a territory in which a Muslim ruler ensures that the rules of faith and law are observed and a second territory which surrounds the Islamic region and gives cause for looting and conquest was hardly conducive to peace, for it gave the impression that the goal of any pious Muslim must be to convert the non-Islamic world to Islam, the inevitable consequence of which would be an endless war of religion.

However, since it proved impossible to maintain a permanent state of

²⁶ See R. Peters, *Jihad in Medieval and Modern Islam*, Leiden, 1977, and his article "Jihâd", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 2, 1995, pp. 369-373.

war, it was considered sufficient if the ruler carried out or at least planned an annual expedition to go pillaging or hunting for slaves. The population against whom the *jihad* was directed was enjoined to adopt Islam. If it surrendered, its people could assume the status of “protected persons”, otherwise their conquest could in certain circumstances lead to slavery and their possessions could fall into the conquerors’ hands as booty. The Islamic world became a multiracial State, not only through conquests but also as a result of the slaves bought or seized from many foreign lands.²⁷ Might not the constant threat of war and the treatment meted out to the conquered Christian peoples — apart from other reasons — explain why so few members of the Christian population remained in those parts of the Middle East and North Africa where Christianity came into being?

During the large-scale Islamic conquests, the *jihad* doctrine almost became a sixth pillar of Islam. Other than in Christianity, it was possible in Islam to become a “witness” (Greek *martyrs*) — a concept also found in Arabic with the sense of martyr (*sah/d*, plural *suhadâ*) — not only passively by suffering for the faith, but also actively by fighting. Any persons who sacrifice their lives in this way go immediately to Paradise: “When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads (...). As for those who are slain in the cause of God, He will not allow their works to perish He will vouchsafe them guidance and ennoble their state; He will admit them to the Paradise he has made known to them.”²⁸

In modern times, however, the *jihad* was increasingly relinquished under pressure from European colonialism. Although the last Ottoman Sultan Mehmed V called on his people as recently as 23 November 1914 to wage a *jihad* against the Entente powers, and although a *jihad* is proclaimed even today on some occasion or other, many moderate representatives of a modern Islam have returned to the original meaning of *jihad* as an effort in terms of moral striving. As early as the late eighth century a distinction was made in the Sufi border struggles between “small-scale intervention” in the form of armed struggles against external enemies and “large-scale intervention”, which consisted of overcoming the inner self and putting higher values into practice. But what form will the *jihad* of the future take?

A more radical concept of *jihad*?

In the twentieth century new political interpretations were given to the concept

27 On this whole development, see J. C. Bürgel, “Der Islam und die Menschenrechte”, in R. Kley, S. Möckli (eds.), *Geisteswissenschaftliche Dimensionen der Politik: Festschrift für Alois Riklin zum 65. Geburtstag*, Bern, 2000, pp. 31-60, in which he refers to the work of Hans Müller, *Die Kunst des Sklavenkaufs nach arabischen, persischen und türkischen Ratgebern vom 10. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg/Br., 1980. In his book *Allmacht und Mächtigkeit* (see note 18 above) Bürgel explains various phenomena and processes of Islamic cultural history by placing them in the context of religion’s claim to power and the conflict between it and the profane counterforces to be subjugated.

28 Sura 47:4-6.

of *jihad*. Modern fundamentalists were able to draw not only on the law books, but also on the writings of conservative theologians, in particular the Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyah, who thus gained the status of spiritual father to the radical Islamists. In his *fatwas* (legal reports based on religious law), Ibn Taymiyah had examined the situation of Muslims under the Mongol rulers; he considered the latter to be unbelievers and held that they should be treated as such, since they called themselves Muslims but did not obey the Shar'ia. It was thus easier for the ideologists of radical Islam in the twentieth century no longer to confine *jihad* to the external fight for freedom from colonialism, but also to wage it internally against their own westernized autocratic rulers who allegedly had ceased to practise Islam. Moreover, the term *jihad* could easily be used for political ends: like the military term "campaign" it can be variously reinterpreted, as necessary, to mean the fight against underdevelopment, the fight against tourism, the fight against economic reform or even the murder of liberal politicians, writers and journalists.

Since the 1970s, a radicalization of the concept of *jihad* ("*jihad* Islam") has been noticeable amongst extremist groups which, though limited in number, are highly committed. Under the influence of the Egyptian Umar Abd ar-Rahman and of the Palestinian Abdallah Azzam, ideologist of the Hamas movement (which was initially supported by Israel against Yasser Arafat), certain groups resolved to declare *jihad* as an armed struggle in response to the widening occupation of Palestine and the inaction of many Arab regimes. One terrorist group under that very designation was responsible in 1981 for the murder of the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, following his peace initiative in Jerusalem; another group of like-named terrorists has claimed joint responsibility with Hamas for the suicide bombings in Israel. The deeply disquieting fact in all this is that these radical groups are steadily gaining new followers out of despair for the catastrophic situation of the Palestinian people, the poverty and distress of the Arab masses and the insensitivity and oppressive systems of the elite in so many Muslim countries, but also and not least because of the social services provided by those groups for the poorer sections of the population.

Since 11 September 2001, however, the disastrously ambivalent part played by Saudi Arabia, America's greatest ally in the Arab Middle East, has become increasingly clear (business links between the Bush and Bin Laden families), not only in terms of oil exports but also in the export of terrorism. The hard core of al Qaida (Arabic *al-qā'ida* = foundation, base), centred around Osama bin Laden, consists of Saudis rebelling against a royal family which tolerates the continued presence of American troops (30,000 soldiers), whilst financing rigorous Wahhabi groups in the neighbouring Arab countries and beyond. The fact that Wahhabism encourages intolerance and xenophobia, both in Saudi Arabia itself and in the Islamic world as a whole, can no longer be overlooked.

To remedy the internal causes of the Islamic "disease" of fundamentalism, as manifested in particular in Wahhabism, the Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb suggests taking action at three levels: tradition, law and education. First, the numerous controversies and debates in the Islamic tradition should be

recalled in order to create, with critical awareness, the freedom of a pluralistic discourse within Islam today. Secondly, when norms appear inhuman, defects should be sought in past tradition (principle of *talq/f*) in an effort to render the law more humane and adapt it to the present time. Thirdly, anything that is fundamentalist should be purged from school curricula: “Wahhabism, which is diffuse by nature, contaminates consciousness via the teaching in our schools, backed up by television.”²⁹

But Americans, Israelis and Europeans too should have noticed, at the latest since the war in Iraq, that terrorism cannot be stopped by military retaliation, especially since suicide bombers and the comparatively harmless stone-throwers are obviously not deterred by any amount of military hardware. Instead, the evil that is terrorism must be plucked out by the roots, and the astronomical sums of money hitherto spent on weapons both in the West and in the Arab countries must be invested in social reforms, mindful not only of the violent excesses of Islamic extremists but also and above all of the potential for peace which is central to Islam.

A religious interpretation in the spirit of peace

At a time when, unlike Antiquity and the Middle Ages, mankind has the new technical means to destroy itself, all religions and especially the three often so aggressive prophetic religions should be doing their utmost to avoid wars and promote peace. For this, a rereading, a nuanced reinterpretation by each one of its own religious traditions is indispensable. The importance of a contemporary understanding of the Koran becomes evident here: statements about war should not be accepted uncritically as dogmatic doctrines or rigid legal rules, but must be critically understood in their historical context and transposed from then to now. To achieve a religious interpretation in the spirit of peace, a dual approach must be adopted.

First, the militant sayings and events in each individual tradition should be interpreted in their own historical context of that time, but without any glossing over. This applies to all three religions:

- the cruel “wars of Yahweh” and the relentless psalms of vengeance in the Hebrew Bible should be understood in the context of land seizure and subsequent self-defence against more powerful enemies;
- the Christian missionizing wars and the Crusades originated in the ecclesiastical ideology of the Early and High Middle Ages;
- the Koran’s calls to war reflect the specific situation of the Prophet in the Medina period and the particular nature of the Medina suras. Precisely those calls to fight against the polytheistic Meccans cannot be used today as a principle justifying the use of force.

29 A. Meddeb, *La Maladie de l’Islam*, Paris, 2002 (in German: *Die Krankheit des Islam*, Heidelberg, 2002, p. 247).

Secondly, the peace-promoting words and deeds in one's own tradition should, however, be taken seriously as an inspiration for the present era. This should be easiest for the Christians, since they do not trace their origin back to warrior prophets and heroes such as Moses and Elijah or an aggressive king such as David, but to a preacher of non-violence and an early church which, at least initially in the old Roman Empire, expanded not through violence but through a message of justice, love and eternal life. In the beginning Christians were forbidden not only to do military service, but also to work as a butcher. A Muslim who advocates violence and war will possibly invoke the Koran and the words and deeds of the Prophet. A Christian who has recourse to violence and wages war cannot cite Christ as his justification.

However, the dangerous threats to world peace unquestionably pose challenging practical questions that are not easy to answer. Beside the need for a religious reinterpretation in the spirit of peace, peaceful conduct must also be taught and practised.

Peace education

Many Christians are hardly aware that relatively few verses of the Koran are concerned with war and violence, and that the words "mercy" and "peace" occur far more frequently than "*jihad*". According to the Koran, God is not the lord of war (that is no name for God!); on the contrary, as in the first words (cited by Muslims at the beginning of any prayer or speech) of the opening sura, He is "the Compassionate, the Merciful." Among His 99 names, there are such peaceful titles as "the Gentle", "the Forbearing", the "Loving One", "the Forgiver."

Moreover, the "*islam*" (surrender, submission) which man should show to God is etymologically derived from the same stem as "peace" (*salam*); hence the Muslim greeting "Peace be with you" (*Salâm Ūalaikum/Ūalaika!*). God is forgiving, and those who forgive are following God's example.³⁰ The Koran even contains a sort of golden rule: "Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend."³¹ Peace should be made above all between warring parties of the believers. But peace should also be made with enemies: "If they incline to peace, make peace with them."³²

Today, instruction in the principles of peace is required, individually and collectively, for children and parents, for the ulama and the politicians, bearing in mind that:

- increased self-esteem among Muslims is to be welcomed, provided it does not (as it did for many Jews and Christians in the past) turn into a feeling of

30 Sura 64:14.

31 Sura 41:33-35.

32 Sura 8:61.

- self-righteousness and xenophobia that can lead to bomb attacks and terrorism;
- striving to overcome the inner self as a great *jihad* is to be welcomed, provided it does not lead to self-destruction for political ends, which is unacceptable to Muslim tradition, since only God may determine life and death;
- intensive measures to combat terrorism are necessary, provided they do not degenerate into hysteria-driven security measures suppressing the fundamental democratic rights of prisoners of war and even those of a country’s own citizens. Terrorist networks cannot be overcome by military means, but by eliminating the conditions — social deprivation and the oppression of large sections of the population — in which they thrive, by isolating extremists from their supporting environment and by backing non-violent reform movements.³³

Islam possesses a significant potential for peace which, in view of recent experiences and not least the events of 11 September 2001, should be activated. But calls for peace alone are not enough. The need is not only for a new interpretation and instruction in the spirit and principles of peace, but also for practical measures to implement peace.

Peace in practice

For a policy to be successful, it must have a “mode of action.” Ideological military policies without any ethical principles, representing only the economic and political elite’s interest in power and justifying all means for political ends — including lies, deception, political assassination, war and torture — must be rejected outright, as must ideological peace policies relying solely on the purity of intentions and giving no thought to the balance of power, actual feasibility and possible negative consequences.

The art of formulating a responsible peace policy is shown in its combination of the admittedly inevitable political calculations with ethical judgement. Which ethical principles, then, must be applied when addressing the question of war and peace with a view to establishing a new and better world order?³⁴

- In the twenty-first century, too, wars are neither “holy”, “just” nor “clean.” Even modern “wars of Yahweh” (Sharon), “crusades” (Bush) and *jihad* (al Qaeda), with their toll of countless human lives, their large-scale destruction of the infrastructure and cultural heritage and the damage they do to the

33 See V. Rittberger, A. Hasenclever, “Religionen in Konflikten”, in H. Küng, K.-J. Kuschel (eds.), *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, Munich, 2001, pp. 161-200; A. Hasenclever, “Geteilte Werte — Gemeinsamer Frieden? Überlegungen zur zivilisierenden Kraft von Religionen und Glaubensgemeinschaften”, in: H. Küng, D. Senghaas (eds.), *Friedenspolitik: Ethische Grundlagen internationaler Beziehungen*, Munich, 2003, pp. 288-318; G. Gebhardt, *Zum Frieden bewegen: Die friedenserzieherische Tätigkeit religiöser Friedensbewegungen*, Hamburg, 1994.

34 For a detailed exposé, see H. Küng, *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft*, München 1997, Ch. A V: “Weltfrieden — Herausforderung für die Weltreligionen.”

- environment, are utterly irresponsible.
- Wars are not inevitable from the start: better-coordinated diplomacy, backed up by efficient arms control, could have prevented both the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the two Gulf wars.
 - Non-ethical policies in pursuit of national interests — such as oil reserves, or hegemony in the Middle East — are also implicated in wars. An examination of conscience after the 1991 Gulf War could have shown that it was not merely a matter of rogue States and innocent democracies, good and evil, God and Satan. The demonizing of the opponent often serves only to salve one's own conscience. Saddam Hussein, for example, was equipped above all by the West with arms, money, technology and advisors as a bulwark against an islamized Iran, and was supported by the USA (represented by Rumsfeld, the subsequent Secretary of State for Defense).
 - Absolute pacifism, which regards peace as the *summum bonum* to which everything must be sacrificed, is hardly attainable politically and, as a political principle, may even be irresponsible.
 - The right to self-defence, which is expressly approved of in Article 51 of the UN Charter is repeatedly emphasized in the Muslim tradition: "God will ward off evil from true believers. (...) Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who have been attacked, because they have been wronged."³⁵ At the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993 it was important precisely for the Muslim participants that the "Declaration toward a Global Ethic" drew attention to the right to self-defence in Section III.1 on non-violence. Thus peace at any price, for instance when the threat of a new Holocaust looms, is irresponsible. Megalomaniac dictators and mass murderers such as Stalin, Hitler and Saddam must be opposed. Perpetrators of crimes against humanity should appear before the International Criminal Tribunal which, hopefully, the Administration following that of George W. Bush will also support at last in the finest American tradition.

Unfortunately, however many messages of peace and calls for peace are made by secular and religious quarters, however many preventive measures and bans are introduced, they will not be able to prevent wars completely and eliminate them once and for all. Thus when wars — which always signal an abject failure of human civilization — do occur, there is only one thing to do: even in that extreme situation, the minimum basic rules of humane conduct must be respected. International humanitarian law has established invaluable barriers against barbarism and bestiality, such as those laid down in the Geneva Conventions and vigilantly monitored by the Red Cross. Any weakening of that law, by anyone at all, should therefore be resolutely countered by the international community, in accordance with the rhetorical question

35 See Sura 22:38 f.

raised by Henry Dunant: “... in an age when we hear so much of progress and civilization, is it not a matter of urgency, since unhappily we cannot always avoid wars, to press forward in a human and truly civilized spirit the attempt to prevent, or at least to alleviate, the horrors of war?”³⁶

36 Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, English version by, and reprinted by courtesy of, the American Red Cross, ICRC, Geneva, 1986, p. 127.