

# The Concept of Violence and the Concept of Just War in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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## I. The Concept of Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

### 1. The Concept of Violence in Judaism

(Professor Reuven Firestone, Ph.D.)

The violent aspects of the Hebrew Bible are not practiced fully in any form of contemporary Judaism, and are moreover sometimes used by Christians to discredit Judaism. However, they are also impossible to discount for both Christians and Jews. Due to the historical experience of violence, Jewish thinkers have long seen history through the lens of victimhood and regarded other nations as prone to violence, a view of others which goes back to the Hebrew Bible. This leads simultaneously to a dislike of violence and a longing for violence as a form of protection or revenge. The Flood is taken as a consequence of the world's corruption with violence. There is, however, no clear term for our concept of "violence" in Biblical Hebrew (in Modern Hebrew, there is *alimūt*), though the term *ḥāmās* comes close. The relationship between the concept of violence and that of sin should also be explored, as "sin" (*ḥaṭṭa'ah*) is also used to mean an urge towards violence, such as in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.

In the Rabbinic tradition, inclinations towards good and evil are assumed to compete within each human being, though in some rabbinic texts, the human evil inclination is equated with Satan or the angel of death. According to *Breshit Rabbah*, on the other hand, the evil inclination also has its purpose, as it is the motivation for self-preserving actions such as building homes or supporting one's family. Another complex question is how the concept of violence relates to power and authority (both political and religious).

## 2. The Concept of Violence in Christianity

(Professor Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, Ph.D.)

While it is a common misconception that the pre-Constantinian church was entirely pacifist and only compromised by its rise to political power after 313, it is true that after World War II all major Christian denominations have embraced non-violent positions, even though historically many atrocities have been committed in the name of Christianity. In recent times, the issue of interreligious co-operation has been raised to the forefront by globalization and migration, along with the rise of authoritarian trends in the West, which exacerbates interreligious and inter-denominational conflict.

While in the Old Testament God not only condones, but actively uses violence, in the New Testament there is a tension between the portrayal of Jesus as absolutely non-violent, and of Jesus as a revolutionary who does not hesitate to use force – such as during the scourging of the temple – and confrontational rhetoric. Latin American theology therefore places a strong emphasis on support for the powerless and oppressed. Violent imagery is also found in Biblical eschatological visions. A similar tension is found in, for example, the prohibition of suicide vs the positive view of martyrdom. Generally the idea of God as the “God of life and God of death” creates an inherent tension.

## 3. The Concept of Violence in Islam

(Professor Patrice Brodeur, Ph.D.)

There are a number of different approaches to the study of violence in Islam. Both the structuralist and the processual approach focus more on individual paths to radicalization than larger contexts, unlike the ethnographic and political approaches. Three main criteria can be considered in describing the nature of violence: its legitimacy, the aspect of domination (violence as expression of dominance or as response to powerlessness), and the question of normality (whether violence is normal or pathological). Another much-discussed question is how Islam relates to radicalization and violence, whether religion is seen as a problem or as a potential for solutions; the intersection of political with religious factors is also discussed in this context. In addition, recent developments have led to changes in approaches to violence committed in the name of Islam, such as condemnation of violence by Muslim leaders in response to the atrocities of the Islamic State. However, these statements rarely address

explicitly the definition of the term violence (*'unf*), which is rather used generically or with regard to the context of a reaction to terrorism.

Historically, there are at least five distinct approaches to key concepts regarding violence within the Islamic tradition: 1. The legitimizing discourse about violence in the early stages of Islam (regarding the conquests), 2. the juridical tradition, which for example includes discussion of violent treatment of heretics and apostates, 3. the tension between the non-violent ethics of Meccan preaching and the military context of Medina, a distinction which opens up the possibility of different emphases even today, 4. the frequent rejection of violence in Sufi contexts (though there are exceptions, such as resistance against colonialism in certain movements), 5. the deconstruction of the idea of violence as a central part of Islam from various different angles (feminist, post-colonial, historical-critical ...) in the contemporary context.

## II. The Concept of Just War in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

### 1. The Concept of Just War in Judaism

(Rabbi Daniel Polish, Ph.D.)

While there is no Hebrew phrase that could be translated as “just war” in Jewish foundational texts and no “just war theory” in the modern sense, there is discussion of wars, their reasons and justification, and rules of conduct within them in both the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinical tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, the occurrence of war is presented as a natural part of the human condition, God is depicted as warlike on occasion and the patriarchs are successful in the military sense. However, limitations are imposed on taking plunder and on the treatment of enemies. Deuteronomy 20, for example, specifies exemptions from fighting for soldiers for a number of reasons and stipulates that a city must be given the opportunity to negotiate for peace before it is attacked.

As for the rabbinic tradition, it must be kept in mind that these texts mostly originated at a time when Jews had no political agency, so that their writings about war ethics at the time were largely a theoretical exercise, not a question of current practicalities. Though some general principles can be extrapolated from the texts, such as from discussion about the distinction between unavoidable and discretionary wars and their respective acceptability, there is no system of norms for war in rabbinic writing. Modern Jewish writings on the question of just war, on the other hand, are mostly not placed in a religious context.

### 2. The Concept of Just War in Christianity

(Professor Dr. Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven)

The beginnings of a Christian Just War theory are found in Augustine, warfare not having been a central topic in early Christian thought. Augustine did not formulate a systematic theory of just war, but treated different aspects of the subject in various writings. The first systematic collection on the topic of just war was by Gratian of Bologna (d. 1160) and was used by Thomas Aquinas in his reception of Augustine. In his *De bello*, which is a part of the *Summa theologiae* but is treated almost as an independent treatise, Aquinas formulated a systematic theory of just war, which treated the *res publica* as a political unity of all Christians and therefore saw

external attacks not as wars between states but attacks on the Church, which was used to justify, for example, the Crusades.

Just War theory also played a critical role in missionary contexts, for instance in the debate about the Spanish colonization in the Americas. Francesco Vittoria, for instance, argued that because some indigenous people had become Christians, they had the same capacity of belief and were just as human as Europeans, and could therefore not justifiably be attacked without provocation. During World War I, Pope Benedict XV. attempted (unsuccessfully) to broker peace while Catholics on both sides claimed to be fighting a just war. Taking this further, Pius XII. abandoned the idea of Just War in 1944, rather calling on Catholics to oppose war as a political instrument altogether. Nonetheless, the concept of Just War is still invoked in more recent years in Christian contexts, for example by American politicians, to justify the wars of recent decades; and it must be kept in mind that there are significant differences between both Western and Eastern churches with regard to the concept of just war.

### 3. The Concept of Just War in Islam

(Professor Suleiman Mourad, Ph.D.)

While the concept of “Just War” as such is strongly shaped by its Christian background, one can investigate how related concepts and questions are treated in Islamic writings, such as “Under what circumstances may a war be started?”, “What actions are appropriate in war?”, or “what does it mean to fight in the way of God?” (in the latter case, one can differentiate between the Arabic terms *qitāl*, *ḡazw*, and *jihād*, where the last one is the most specifically religious concept). The Qur’ān does not necessarily constitute the starting point or final authority in Muslim thinking about war ethics, at least in the early Islamic centuries. The founder of the Ḥanafī legal school Abū Yūsuf (d. 798), for example, did not consider the position of the Qur’ān in his statements about war, and acknowledged that the prophetic practice regarding war was inconsistent and no clear rule could be derived from it. Similarly, Ibn Rušd (d. 1198) stated that Qur’ānic and prophetic statements about war ethics were at variance both internally and with each other, making it impossible to formulate a clear position. The Qur’ān itself is indeed inconsistent on the question of war, with conflicting statements about the required treatment of “unbelievers” while fighting them and when they are defeated.

In modern times, there is likewise a certain diversity in Islamic attitudes to war. Abū al-A'īlā al-Mawdūdī (d. 1979), for example described Islam as a “revolutionary ideology” and *jihād* as part of a revolutionary struggle to transform the world’s social order. In a similar vein, Sayyid Quṭb and Hasan al-Bannā argued that it is the task of jihad to spread Islam in order to guarantee freedom and peace for everyone. On the other hand, there are thinkers like Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963), who held that warfare was only acceptable for defense and to protect Muslims’ freedom to practice Islam. Other modern thinkers such as Mahmud Taha explained away more pro-war stances in the Qur’ān by positing that early Muslims were not yet ready for the truly intended message, so that the Medinan sūrahs only had historical importance.