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**Jesus And The Nonviolent *Jihad* For Love And Justice:  
A Reflection For Christians And Muslims To Consider.**

(Based an excerpt from *The Jihad Of Jesus* published by Wipf & Stock)

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We are caught up in a cycle of so-called “holy wars”. Though this inter-communal conflict is endemic, it is not inevitable. Depending on our understanding, our religions can be either a source of escalating conflict, or a resource for overcoming inter-communal conflict; and for our religions to be a resource for overcoming conflict, we need to understand the heart of all true religion as open-hearted compassionate spirituality. In the light of an open-hearted compassionate spirituality, we can reclaim *jihad* from extremists who have (mis)appropriated it as call to “holy war”, and reframe it, in truly *Qur’anic* terms, as a “sacred nonviolent struggle for justice”; and we can reconsider Jesus, as he is in the Gospels, not as a poster boy for Christians fighting crusades against Muslims, but as “a strong-but-gentle Messianic figure” who can bring Christians and Muslims together in a “nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice”.

**The Jihad Of Jesus**

Over the last few years I’ve been involved in meaningful Christian-Muslim dialogue: about there being one God, not many; that God being the God of Abraham; the God of Abraham being a God of compassion; and Jesus—or *Isa* as Muslims call him—being the one who embodies that Spirit of compassion best.

My approach to talking about Jesus has been based on Jesus’ own approach to calling people to be with him, without imposing any theological prerequisites, creating a safe space for dialogue and debate about his identity as a prophet, trusting that the Spirit would lead them into all truth.

Many conversations between Christians and Muslims about Jesus deteriorate from dialogue into dispute, generating more heat than light. Often this occurs because both sides want to impose their own particular view of Jesus on the other and are unable and/or unwilling to respect the other person’s particular point of view.

To avoid such unproductive disputations, I have conducted my conversations with Muslims—and written the following reflections—based on those views of Jesus that both the *Qur'an* and the *Injil* or the Gospel (in the Gospels) have in common.

While I acknowledge the significant differences Christians and Muslims have about Jesus, I have intentionally tried to focus on those beliefs about Jesus that Christians and Muslims have in common as the place for us to start our conversations, treating “common ground” not as suspect compromise, but as “sacred ground” on which we can stand and speak to one another.

Given the significance of *jihad* as a focus of conflict between Christians and Muslims, my friends suggested I write a book about Jesus and *jihad* and what Jesus' approach to *jihad* might be. They suggested I call it *The Jihad of Jesus*. It was hoped the title would get a lot of attention, and we could introduce Christians and Muslims to a deconstruction of the extremist's concept of *jihad* as a ‘holy war’ and a reconstruction of the *Qur'anic* concept of *jihad* as a sacred nonviolent struggle for justice in the light of the radical practical peaceful example of Jesus.

## **Jihad as a Nonviolent Struggle**

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan says, “God is Peace”. He says “the very word *Islam* means peace.” So, “according to the Prophet, peace is a prerequisite of Islam”. He says “*a Muslim is one from whose hands people are safe*”.<sup>1</sup> And this could be true, for all Muslims and Christians and Jews, if all Muslims and Christians and Jews would only allow ourselves to be born again in the spirit of the *Bismillah*.

The *Bismillah* stands for the Arabic phrase *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*, commonly translated, “In the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate”. According to Ibn Qayyum, *rahman* describes the quality of limitless grace with which God embraces the whole of the world and all of those who dwell in it, while *rahim* describes the general embracing grace of God as it interacts with us in the particular circumstances of our lives, always proactive, always prevenient, always responsive.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of the *Bismillah*, Abdul Ghaffar Khan says, we need to remember that if we do have conflict with one another, the “weapon of the Prophet” we should use is *sabr* or “patience”. ‘If you exercise patience, victory will be

yours. No power on earth can stand against it.’ He says we need to be mindful that the Qur’an says, “there is no compulsion in religion; “forgive and be indulgent”; “render not vain your almsgiving by injury”; “whosoever kills one—for other than manslaughter—it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind”.<sup>3</sup>

This is completely contrary to the extremist’s idea that for Muslims to be “true” Muslims they need to conduct a *jihad* as a “resolute, offensive, violent struggle”<sup>4</sup> by “suicide bombing”<sup>5</sup> to eliminate everything non-Muslim from society.<sup>6</sup>

In his classic book *Reconstructing Jihad Amid Competing International Norms*, Halim Rane argues we need to wrest the concept of *jihad* from the control of the extremists and deconstruct and reconstruct our interpretation of *jihad* in the light of the *Qur’an*. Rane says if we are to interpret the *Qur’an* correctly, we need to interpret the text in terms of the meaning it had for the people at the time it was written, and the meaning it has for people reading it in today’s world, in the light of the *Bismillah*, in the context of the *maqasid* or “general objective” of *Islam*.<sup>7</sup>

Kamali says the general objective of *Islam* is based “in textual injunctions of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*”, which are focused on “wisdom, mercy, justice and equity and directed to “the benefit of mankind”.<sup>8</sup>

One verse which needs to be carefully (re)interpreted in terms of the meaning it had for the people at the time it was written, and the meaning it has for people reading it in today’s world, in the light of the *Bismillah*, in the context of the general objective of “wisdom, mercy, justice and equity” of *Islam*, is the “sword verse” which instructs Muslims to “slay” Christians: “*to slay those who ascribe divinity to aught but God, wherever you may come upon them*”.(9:5)<sup>9</sup>

Rane says “this verse has been quoted throughout Muslim history to justify aggression and aggressive wars against non-Muslims because of their ‘unbelief’”. Rane says “these verses are among those most commonly quoted by *al Qaeda* leaders and published on the Internet for recruitment”.<sup>10</sup>

Rane says “this verse should be read in conjunction with those that precede it. (In 9:5 it says ‘As for those who have honoured the treaty you made with them, and have not supported anyone against you: fulfill your agreement with

them to the end of their term.’ God loves those who are righteous.’)” Of central importance is that these verses were revealed in the context of “warfare already in progress with people who (had) become guilty of a breach of treaty obligation and of aggression”. That non-Muslims are to be fought because of their unbelief rather than their act of aggression is doubtful given that (verse 9:5 continues “if they repent, and take to prayer regularly and pay alms, then let them go their way. God is forgiving and merciful” and) “verse 9:6 commands the Muslims to give protection and security to those among the enemy who seek it. If their unbelief was the basis of fighting against them, this provision would be nonsensical”.<sup>11</sup>

Rane says “in the context of conflict, the pursuit of peace is paramount to the extent that the *Qur’an* instructs Muslims; ‘Do not allow your oaths in the name of God to become an obstacle to virtue and God-consciousness and the promotion of peace between people’ (2: 224). Peace should not be rejected, even from a non-Muslim encountered in war.” (4:94)<sup>12</sup>

Rane insists “peace” not “war” is the purpose of *Islam*, and *jihad* is the path to peace. Rane asserts that in the *Qur’an* the word for “war” is not *jihad* but *qital*, and *jihad* means “struggle” not “war”. He says there 6,000 verses in the *Qur’an*, and out of those 6,000 verses, only 35 verses refer to *jihad*; and out of those 35 verses, 20 times *jihad* is used ambiguously, 11 times *jihad* is used unambiguously in terms of peace, and 4 times *jihad* is used unambiguously in terms of war.<sup>13</sup>

Where the word *jihad* is used ambiguously or unambiguously in the context of war, Rane says, the *Qur’an* imposes strict rules of engagement to temper the use of violence with “wisdom, mercy, justice and equity” in the hope of minimizing force, suffering, ignominy and enmity and maximizing “welfare, freedom, dignity and fraternity”. Rane says that according to the *Qur’an*, the conduct of *jihad* in war would need to take eight rules for engagement into account. One, killing—except in self-defense—is considered a grievous sin.<sup>14</sup> Two, war is only permitted for self-defense and self-determination.<sup>15</sup> Three, all wars of aggression are forbidden.<sup>16</sup> Four, if you are not specifically attacked by enemies you should not to attack them, even if they are your enemies.<sup>17</sup> Five, Muslims should never ever use difference of religion with non-Muslims as an excuse for a war of aggression.<sup>18</sup> Six, in war, Muslims should protect all places of worship, not only mosques, but also churches and synagogues.<sup>19</sup> Seven, in war, Muslims should protect “helpless men, women

and children”,<sup>20</sup> ‘even the accidental harm of the innocent is a ‘grievous wrong’ for which those responsible are ‘guilty’”.<sup>21</sup> Eight, if peace is offered by your attacker, it should not be rejected, even if the sincerity of the offer is dubious, as God always wants his people to give peace a chance.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, in Christianity, Ambrose and Augustine developed a set of criteria to call those in power who make war to temper the use of violence with “wisdom, mercy, justice and equity”. They argued in order for a war to be conducted according to the principles of justice it would need to meet eight specific conditions. One, it would need to be motivated by a “just” cause—and the only cause considered to be “just” was to stop the killing of large numbers of people. Two, it would need to be administered by a “just” authority—duly constituted authorities had to proceed carefully according to due process before taking action. Three, it would always need to be a last resort—after all means of negotiation, mediation, arbitration and nonviolent sanctions had been exhausted. Four, it would need to be for a “just” purpose—to secure the welfare, safety and security of all parties in the dispute, including the enemy.

Five, it would need to be a reasonable risk—not a futile gesture, but a realistic venture, with a reasonable hope of success. Six, it would need to be cost effective—the outcomes of victory would outweigh the human costs of battle. Seven, that any government intending to go to war should announce their intentions—articulating the conditions that would need to be met to avert it—in order to avoid going to war if at all possible. Eight, that, if the war were to go ahead, not only the ends, but also the means would need to be “just”—noncombatants must be protected; once combatants surrender, they must be protected from slaughter; and all prisoners must be protected from torture.

According to these criteria, no current wars are “just wars”, they are just “wars”.

If we are to struggle for justice with integrity, dignity and grace we need to reject all calls to a violent *jihad* of “Not-So-Holy” So-Called “Holy Wars” and embrace the nonviolent *jihad* of the “Nonviolent Struggle For Love And Justice”.

Qader Muheideen says “the purpose of *jihad* ultimately is to put an end to ‘structural violence’”,<sup>23</sup> and we must choose means consistent with that end.

Muheideen says for *jihadists* to end violence we have to choose nonviolent means.<sup>24</sup> He says there are eight reasons to reframe *jihad* as a nonviolent struggle:

1. The problem of violence is an integral part of the Islamic moral sphere.
2. Any violence must be governed by rules of engagement in the *Qur'an*.
3. If violence used in warfare and/or terror campaigns cannot discriminate between combatants and noncombatants, it is quite unacceptable to Islam.
4. Modern technologies of destruction, used in modern warfare and terror campaigns, like drones and bombs, render discrimination impossible.
5. So, in the modern world, Muslims cannot resort to violence in their fights.
6. Muslims need to fight for justice against injustice in the light of the truth that human lives are sacred and taking human lives is a grievous sin.
7. To be true to Islam, Muslims must use nonviolent strategies and tactics in the struggle, like submission to the will of Allah and civil disobedience.
8. Islam is a strong resource for a nonviolent struggle because of its personal discipline, social responsibility, robust perseverance and self-sacrifice.<sup>25</sup>

Added to these philosophical/theological reasons are two practical/historical reasons:

9. Nonviolent means are more likely to bring about nonviolent ends, like a democracy with accountable administration and unarmed opposition.<sup>26</sup>
10. Nonviolent means and ends are more likely to get the support and approval of the international community “amid competing international norms”.<sup>27</sup>

## **Jesus As The Supreme Example**

Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know as Jesus the *Masih*, Messiah or the Christ, demonstrates a life of radical non-violent sacrificial compassion as the only way of life that can save us from destroying ourselves and our societies.

As Ahmad Shawqi says: “kindness, chivalry and humility were born the day Jesus was born. Like the light of the dawn flowing through the universe, so did the sign of Jesus flow. He filled the world with light, making the earthshine with its brightness. No threat, no tyranny, no revenge, no sword, no raids, no bloodshed did he use to call to the new faith.”<sup>28</sup>

Many Christians, Muslims and Jews use the retaliation advocated in the Hebrew Bible to justify their reactive violence. After all Moses himself said, “if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for

tooth.” (Exod. 21:23–4). But as Mahatma Gandhi has been reported to have said: “An eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless”.

Jesus argued for a different approach to that taken in the Mosaic law. Jesus explicitly contradicted the Mosaic law that legitimated retaliation. He said: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist (or retaliate against) an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”. (Matt. 5:38–9). Jesus told his disciples you should be ready to die for your faith, but never kill for your faith. (Matt.16: 24).

When I asked my dear friend, Jewish Rabbi, Zalman Kastel, what he found most confronting in the teaching of Jesus, he quickly replied, it was his commitment to unflinching nonviolence in the face of violence, which was based on his commitment to love everyone—friend and foe alike—with no exceptions.

Jesus said, “But to you who are listening I say, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-use you. To him who strikes you on one cheek offer the other cheek also. If anyone takes away your cloak, do not stop him taking your tunic, too. Give to everyone who asks you; if anyone takes away your belongings, do not demand them back again. As you would like men to act towards you, so do you act towards them. If you love those who love you, what special grace is there in that? Even sinners love those who love them. If you are kind to those who are kind to you, what special grace is there in that? Even sinners love those who love them. If you are kind to those who are kind to you, what special grace is there in that? Even sinners do that. But you must love your enemies; and do good to them. Your reward will be great and you will be the sons of the Most High, because he is kind both to the thankless and to the wicked. Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful”. (Luke 6:27-38)

John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the “Lamb of God”. (John 1:29). We know the word “Lamb” is not to be taken literally. However, the word “Lamb” is used to describe the kind of Man he was. He was a “Lamb” of a Man—pure and peaceable—not duplicitous and dangerous, like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Jesus, the “Lamb of God”, sought to develop grassroots communities of “flocks of sheep”. (John 10:11–16). “Sheep” was a seemingly innocuous, but essentially counter-cultural term, Jesus used to describe people who lived with “wolves” but, refused to become wolves themselves—even if it meant the wolves might rip them to pieces because of their refusal to prey on others.

Jesus said, “Be shrewd. But be harmless” (Matt. 10:16). “Treat other people as you would like them to treat you”. (Matt. 7:12). “Do good to those who do evil to you. Love those who hate you and bless those who curse you”. (Matt. 5:44). “Don’t be afraid of those who can kill the body, but can’t kill your soul”. (Matt. 10:28).

Jesus, “the Lamb of God”, practised what he preached. He may have been “the light of the world”. But the people “loved the darkness rather than the light”.<sup>29</sup> So the people decided to “scapegoat” him. They “seized” him, and led him away, like a “sacrificial lamb” to “slaughter” him.<sup>30</sup>

Gale Webbe, in *The Night and Nothing*,<sub>2</sub> said, “There are many ways to deal with evil. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living, human being. When it is absorbed there, like a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further”.<sup>31</sup> As Scott Peck says in *The People Of The Lie*, “The healing of evil can only be accomplished by love. A willing sacrifice is required. The healer must sacrificially absorb the evil”.<sup>32</sup> On the cross Jesus absorbed the evil. He took into his heart as the spear was thrust into his side. And, it went no further. He cried out “Father. Forgive them. For they know not what they do”. (Luke 23:24) There was no reaction, no retaliation. Only grace. So the cycle of violence stopped there.

According to Khalid Muhammad Khalid, Jesus was the supreme example. He said Jesus “was his message. He was the supreme example he left. He was the love which knows no hatred, the peace which knows no restlessness, the salvation which knows no perishing”.<sup>33</sup>

## **A Strong-But-Gentle Struggle for Love and Justice**

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus visited the synagogue in Nazareth, and when asked to read, turned to a part in Isaiah, where it says:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18)

In so doing, Jesus announced that he wanted to make this radical struggle, for God’s love and justice, his manifesto, his mission in life.

Jesus grew up with a passionate concern for the welfare of his people, particularly those that no one else was particularly concerned for. He was passionately concerned about the plight of the poor, the victims of the imperial system. He was passionately concerned about the predicament of the prisoners, the disabled and disadvantaged, excluded from all meaningful participation in society. He was passionately concerned about the condition of the lepers, not only because of their ulcers, but also because of their untouchability. And he was passionately concerned about the situation of ordinary people whose hope had been destroyed by soul-destroying circumstances, and who were consigned despair.

For Jesus, a passionate concern *for* people meant nothing less than a passionate commitment *to* people. He became forgetful of himself, living in remembrance of those around him who were forgotten. He wanted them to feel fully alive again, to revel in the joy of being loved, and being able to love. He worked to set them free from all that might debilitate them, breaking the bonds of exclusivity, poverty, misery and guilt. He welcomed the outcast, helped the weak, healed the sick, and forgave the sinner, giving them another chance at a new beginning. He challenged everyone to tear up their prejudices, trash their stereotypes, and come together—the ‘in’ crowd with the ‘outcast’; the strong with the weak; the rich with the poor; the saint with the sinner—in a common quest for their shared humanity.

Jesus was painfully aware of the captivity of the political economy in which he lived. He recognized this captivity was perpetuated by preoccupation with power at the expense of people’s lives. His critique was universal, but Jesus chose to confront this captivity at a national, rather than an international level.

Jesus was concerned more with the mechanisms of control perpetuated by his own people, than with the mechanisms of control perpetuated by others, lest foreign yoke be overthrown, and the captivity continue. Jesus confronted the people in his own country with their responsibility for their own captivity, and for their own liberation. “Don’t judge others”, Jesus said. “Judge yourself”. (see Matt. 7:1–3).

In the first phase of his nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice, Jesus followed on from John the Baptist, denouncing exploitation of the poor by the rich. John told the armed forces: “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay”. He told the tax collectors: “Don't collect more than you are required to”. He said: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same”. (Luke 3:11–14). Jesus confronted an infamous tax collector about his extortion. As a result, Zacchaeus promised Jesus to give “half of my possessions to the poor”, and “if I have cheated anybody, I will pay back four times the amount”. (Luke 19:8).

In the second phase of his nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice, Jesus not only denounced the oppression of the powerless by the powerful, he also advocated liberation of disempowered groups of people through the empowerment of the Spirit. Jesus attacked key religious leaders of the day, who maintained a façade of sanctity, by saying long prayers in public, but “devour(ed) widows’ houses”. (Luke 16:14–15). When he saw a widow “put all she had to live on” into a collection box, Jesus condemned the temple for extorting the last coin from the kind of person it was meant to protect (Mark 12:38–44). Jesus broke the monopoly on forgiveness the temple exercised by baptizing people in the Spirit and giving them the authority to forgive sins. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” and ‘if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven”. (John 20:22–23).

In the third phase of his nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice, Jesus advocated communities with leadership that would serve the people rather than oppress them. In his countercultural communities, Jesus encouraged people to liberate themselves from captivity to the political economy, by developing compassion for people that transcended the preoccupation with power that characterised society. “God is compassionate”, Jesus said. “Be as compassionate as God”. (Luke 6:35–36). All oppressive forms of politics were denounced. Charismatic leadership, based on experience, was to be

exercised within a decision-making framework that functioned according to group consensus. “We all know how the pagans order people round” said Jesus. “But that is not the way we are going to operate. Whoever wants to be the leader of a group, should be the servant of the group”. (Matt. 20:25–26). All exploitative forms of economics were renounced. Generosity was to be exercised, and wealth freely shared by the rich with the poor, in an quest for equality. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed”, Jesus said (Luke 12:15); “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (Matt. 5:42).

In the fourth phase of his nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice, Jesus created communities that were committed to doing justice to the marginalized and disadvantaged. The dominant value of much of Jewish society at the time was “purity”—but the dominant value of Jesus was “inclusivity”. While many Jews despised Gentiles, Jesus declared “my house shall be called a house for all nations” (Mark 11:17). While many Pharisees ostracized sinners, Jesus invited outcasts to his parties (Mark 2:16). In his countercultural communities, Jesus encouraged people to consider “other” people to be of enormous importance. The people who were usually considered least important, and pushed to the side, were treated as most important and given a place of respect. Jesus said: “When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends, (or your rich neighbors). But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed”. (Luke 14:12–14).

The counter-cultural communities Jesus developed never smashed the political economy to which their society was captive. They never completely reconstructed the political economy in terms of the total liberation that they prayed for. Yet, they did break some of the mechanisms of control to which they were captive. They managed to reconstruct such a degree of liberated political and economic reality, that their experience has served as an example of true love and true justice ever since. They met together, eating together with glad and jubilant hearts. They had everything in common, selling their possessions and giving support to anyone who asked for help. There wasn’t a single person with an unmet need among them, and all the people spoke well of them (see Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35).

In the fifth phase of his nonviolent *jihad* for love and justice, Jesus demonstrated radical nonviolence that could free people from cycles of

violence and counter violence. He said: “I am the good shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves. The thief comes only to steal and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”. (John 10:8–18). “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Under his guidance the Jesus movement became a radical peace movement.<sup>34</sup> For three centuries, Christianity was more or less a pacifist movement. The Apostles taught Christians the pacifist principle: “Love does no harm to its neighbor”. (Rom. 13:10). Paul said to: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge”. On the contrary: “If your enem(ies).are hungry, feed (them).; if (they). are thirsty, give (them). something to drink”. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14–21).

### **The Choice: A Clash Of Civilizations or a Nonviolent *Jihad***

Christians and Muslims have a choice: will we continue to commit to a “clash of civilizations”—or join “Jesus And The Nonviolent *Jihad* For Love And Justice”.

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