

Violence in Faith

A friend recently explained to me that of all her Christmas traditions, attending midnight mass is by far her favourite. She said that while she doesn't regularly attend church, she finds in the Christmas service a deep sense of peace and clarity, a calmness that comes with being fully in harmony with one's faith.

Such peaceful moments of accord are perhaps so precious because they are so rare. Most of the time, faith is tumultuous. Faith is full of dichotomies: accepting others while affirming the Truth, embracing change while maintaining continuity and tradition, and asserting peace while invoking violence.

What is perhaps most disruptive of that sense of peace in faith is the fact that violence, in several senses of the term, is a part of faith. Hent de Vries claims that there is “no violence without (some) religion, [and] no religion without (some) violence”¹. The declaration of a belief as the Truth is a powerful, confrontational act. Violence is deeply rooted in all the Abrahamic faiths—Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The Christian tradition is riddled with violence: the crusades provide an obvious example of Christian violence in the name of faith. From 1096 to 1272 (that's 176 years) a series of nine campaigns kept Europe engaged in almost constant warfare in the name of faith. Similarly, early Arab conquests of the middle ages managed to conquer the “Sassanid Empire and wrested several provinces from Byzantium in the course of one generation”². It is easy to view the proliferation of Muslim suicide bombers and doctrine-fuelled terrorist attacks as the acts of a foreign other: Muslims perpetrate most of today's terror, so most terror must be motivated by Islam. In my own experience, I have found that contemporary martyrdom and the concept of jihad have led some people to view Islam as a religion of violence. My intention is not to embark on a comparative study of Christianity and Islam—that is a dangerous path to travel—rather, what I want to highlight is that violence is (unfortunately) a part of faith, both Christian and Muslim, despite genuine desire for and proclamations of peace.

I don't believe—and again, this is my own opinion on the matter—that this disparity between action and intention is necessarily totally incongruous. In some ways, peace and violence define themselves by the others absence. Johan Galtung identifies this as “negative peace”,

¹Vries, Hent de, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

² Jandora, J. W. Developments in Islamic Warfare: The Early Conquests. *Studia Islamica*, No. 64 (1986), pp. 101-113.

the absence of violence. I am not condoning the enactment of violence as a way of recognizing peace. But I am suggesting that violence and peace are both imbedded in faith, and that perhaps the biggest challenge that the faithful may face is to develop a balance between violence and peace, both internally and in our relationships with others. So it is important to recognize the violence not only within our own traditions but within ourselves if we are to fully understand our faiths.

Faith challenges us to uphold our moral principles and our truths against the *other*, to fight for what we believe is right and just. In fact, God chooses and commands us to fight in his name:

In Jeremiah 50:20-22 (NLT) the Bible quotes:

“You are my battle-axe and sword,” says the Lord. “With you I will shatter nations and destroy many kingdoms. With you I will shatter armies—destroying the horse and rider, the chariot and charioteer. With you I will shatter man and women, old people and children, young man and maidens.”

The Qur’an offers a similar call to arms:

Sura 4.74. says:

“Let those fight in the cause of Allah Who sell the life of this world for the hereafter. To him who fighteth in the cause of Allah,- whether he is slain or gets victory - Soon shall We give him a reward of great (value)”.

and Sura 2.190. says:

“Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors”.

Does faith then tell us that we must go out and wage war in the name of God against anyone who does not subscribe to our traditions? I personally don’t feel that I am the battle-axe and sword of God. So how do I recognize and accept scriptural passages that condone violence as part of my faith? I could focus on the historical relevance of these violent passages. The birth of a faith is a violent process and that violence is reflected in scripture. I could read such passages as justification for fighting for my beliefs and values. Or, I could read violent passages metaphorically, as an expression of internal struggle.

The 13th century poet and theologian Rumi points to the challenge of this constant struggle:

“The lion who breaks the enemy's ranks is a minor hero compared to the lion who overcomes himself”.

Certainly it is easier to lash out against the enemy than it is to recognize the enemy within ourselves. The internal, personal struggle with ourselves and our faiths and the external struggle against others in violence are connected. Faith is challenged and fought over inside ourselves with the same ferocity and honesty that it is fought for in Holy Wars.

Violence in faith, then, isn't just the external act of violence against others, in defense of or in the name of faith. Violence in faith is also the internal violence of struggle within ourselves. We may struggle with our faith, with our traditions, with our beliefs. We may struggle to reconcile our faiths with tragedy and inequality. Faith, the act of not just believing but embodying that belief, is a constant, sometimes violent struggle.

Jihad

When discussing violence in faith, the discourse often turns to the Islamic concept of jihad. It is a logical progression: jihad is often cited as the justification for and battlecry of suicide bombers, religious militants and zealots. The concept of jihad evokes notions of Holy War, of violence in the name of faith. There is some truth to this understanding of jihad, but only to a degree. Like many theological concepts, jihad is multi-dimensional. In reality, the term has a much more universal meaning. Although jihad can denote active warfare in the name of faith, the stronger implication is one of internal struggle. Upon returning from an early battle defending the burgeoning faith of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad differentiated between the greater and the lesser *jihad*, explaining that the greater battle is that which is fought internally, against one's own imperfections³. This differentiation between the greater and lesser *jihad*s is found in the Qur'an. The Qur'an supports both the external interpretation of *jihad* as a holy war:

“Whoever fights against you, do you fight against him to the same degree that he has done it against you”

and the internal interpretation of jihad as a personal struggle:

Go forth light and heavy, and strive hard in Allah's way with your property and your

³Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “The spiritual significance of jihad”, *Parabola*. pp. 3.

persons; this is better for you, if you know strive with one another to hasten to virtuous deeds; to Allah is your return, of all (of you), so He will let you know that in which you differed (9:41)⁴.

The Qur'an urges the faithful to "strive hard in Allah's way", to act in accordance with the ethic of revelation, in all aspects of life and in relationships with others. The word jihad is derived from the root jhd, which primarily means "to strive or exert oneself"⁵. This act of striving, of internal struggle is applied to nearly every aspect of Muslim life. Islam is based in the "idea of establishing equilibrium within [each individual] as well as in the human society where [we] function and fulfill the goals of...earthly life"⁶. What this means is that in order to live a truly Muslim life, one has to try to establish a balance of the what you believe and what you do-- it's a balance that is both outward and inward, in our actions and relationships and in our hearts and minds. And the basis of this equilibrium, the focus of both outward and inward actions and thoughts is peace, salam, which is "inseparable from the very name of Islam"⁷.

But peace takes work. To preserve this equilibrium, one can't just remain passive or inactive. The maintenance of equilibrium "requires continuous exertion"⁸. This is what the greater jihad means: it is the constant struggle to maintain equilibrium, to act and think in terms of peace, and in terms of unity or al-tawhid.

"In its most outward sense *jihad* came to mean the defense of *dar al islam*, that is, the Islamic world, from invasion and intrusion by non-Islamic forces"⁹. While the internal struggle with faith is considered the greater jihad, the controversial lesser jihad, which denotes external violence against others, is still a part of Islamic faith. It is important to recognize that there is violence in faith, in all faiths, just as there is struggle and internal turmoil in all faiths. This recognition of violence in and for faith doesn't justify brutality. By including the question of

⁴Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, *The Holy Qur'an*. 5:48

⁵Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad". Parabloa .

⁶Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad". Parabloa .

⁷Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad". Parabloa .

⁸Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad". Parabloa .

⁹Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad". Parabloa .

war in its sacred legislation, Islam did not condone but limited war. In fact, the acceptance of physical violence as a part of Islam is tempered with a set of four qualifications for violent acts, derived from the Qur'anic Sura 22:39-40:

“Permission to fight is given to those upon whom war is made, because they have been wronged—and God is well able to help them: those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly, only for saying, 'Allah is our Lord'. And if God had not allowed one group of people to repel another then there would have been pulled down cloisters and synagogues and churches and mosques in which God's name is remembered”.

From this Sura, the four conditions for the enactment of the lesser jihad are derived:

“1. fighting has to be initiated by the unbelievers, as is clear from the words “those upon whom war is made”; 2. There has to be extreme persecution of the Muslims--”because they have been wronged”; 3. The aim of the unbelievers has to be the destruction of Islam and Muslims' freedom of worship, as is clear from the words “there would have been pulled down cloisters and synagogues and churches and mosques in which God's name is remembered”; 4. the object of the Muslims must only be self-defence and protection, as shown in the words “if God had not allowed one people to repel another”¹⁰.

Each potential enactment of lesser jihad, of violence against others, should be measured against these criteria.

Lesser jihad, that external violence, does not necessarily always denote Holy War. While the concept of lesser *jihad* may be interpreted to sanction violence, it may also be understood as the external struggle to preserve tradition, not as an end itself, but as a guide by which humanity may follow the right path (“Allah’s way”): “it means the reassertion of justice in the external environment of human existence starting with man himself”¹¹. The Prophet’s delineation certainly emphasizes the greater, internal *jihad* as primary struggle, but also suggests a “balance that must be maintained between [the] outward and inward forms”¹². Essentially, it is not possible to “reform people and society from ‘without’...without first

¹⁰Ahmad, Mohammad. Jihad in Islam. Presented at the Symposium on “Islam and World Peace”, Columbus, Ohio, July 31st, 2004.

¹¹Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Spiritual Significance of Jihad”. Parabola .

bringing about a sincere change in their hearts and minds”¹³.

Nichole Argo points out that it seems that most Muslims, including terrorists, justify defensive (lesser) jihad in response to violent social injustices. Though even then the use of the Qur'an and Hadith in their justifications for violence are primarily secular and grievance-based:

“the jihad that originally appeals to [the suicide bomber] appeals on the emotional basis of defense. The jihadi narrative solves a pressing emotional problem: Why are my people dying, or oppressed? What can I do”¹⁴?

While the unfortunate eventual response might be the invocation of the lesser jihad, the struggle with helplessness, distress and anger is the process of the greater jihad. The two forms of jihad are connected “in the constant tension between what we appear to be and what we really are”¹⁵. Each fear or rage or sorrow presents a struggle to be welcomed and met. Rumi noted that “This being human is a guest house”. He urged that “the dark thought, the shame, the malice” should be invited in” that we might overcome them. This is the internal struggle of jihad-- the battle against the violence within ourselves, the challenge to greet each part of ourselves.

Guidelines for your Struggles

Returning from battle, the Prophet Mohammad stated “you have returned from the lesser struggle to the greater struggle” and when he was asked, “what is the greater struggle?” he replied “the struggle against one's self, which is the struggle between the two sides of your body.” This is a violence in faith. The struggle between our tendencies towards violence and selfishness and our desire for peace. We might ask why, then, if the greater jihad focuses on the internal struggle of the individual, are there so many acts of physical violence carried out in the name of faith? Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this question. Violence in the

¹² Lumbard, Joseph E.B., *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004. pp. 4.

¹³ Lumbard, Joseph E.B., *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*. pp. 4.

¹⁴ Argo, Nichole. “The Hard Truth About Suicide Bombers”. *Alternet*. May 8th, 2006.

¹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Spiritual Significance of Jihad”. *Parabola* .

name of faith is so often intertwined with violence in the name of political injustice, economic division or social disunity. Sometimes the real cause of the struggle between the two sides of one's body is lost in the pain of the symptoms. In the end, the only way to combat, and perhaps identify, the cause of physical violence in the name of faith is to work from the inside out, to try to see within one's self where the root of the problem lies.

Within the discourse on jihad there are (in addition to the greater and lesser Jihads) four discernable types of jihad, that, in addition to the 10 useless matters that were outlined in the final reading, may serve as a guideline for your struggles:

jihad of the heart: to purify oneself and try to live as the prophets did.

jihad of the tongue: to speak out in support of social justice, to educate.

jihad of the hand: to touch others with dignity and respect.

jihad of the sword: to fight, as a last resort, against economic and social injustice¹⁶.

Jihad is the spiritual process of the individual, as well as the community. It is the recognition of the self, and the violent struggle to achieve both internal and external peace. And the peace that is sought is a positive peace-- one that does not rely on the existence of violence to define itself, but a peace that is more than the absence of violence. This is an active peace that is not easily come by. It requires constant effort and renewal. When we pray for peace, then, the prayer should not only be directed outward, for peace among neighbors and nations. We should pray for internal peace as well, for the strength of heart and mind to "meet laughing at the door and invite in" those challenges to our faiths.

I'll finish with two short passages by the 13th-century poet Rumi, who summed up the internal struggle of jihad quite simply when he wrote:

I have lived on the lip of insanity, wanting to know reasons, knocking on a door. It opens. I've
been knocking from the inside!

¹⁶Firestone, Rueven. *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*. Oxford University Press. 1999 pg. 17

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

sufi mystic - jalaluddin rumi - 13th century

The first two readings are by Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, a 13th century mystic theologian and poet.

Reading I:

"The lion who breaks the enemy's ranks is a minor hero compared to the lion who overcomes himself."
~ Rumi

Reading II:

"This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whomever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond". ~ Rumi

The final reading is by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (1292-1350 CE), a famous Sunni Islamic jurist, Qur'anic commentator, astronomer, chemist, philosopher, scientist and theologian.

Reading III:

"Ten Useless Matters

They are:

1. Knowledge that is not acted on
2. The deed that has neither sincerity nor is based on following the righteous examples of others
3. Money that is hoarded, as the owner neither enjoys it during this life nor obtains any reward for it in the Hereafter
4. The heart that is empty of love and longing for Allah, and of seeking closeness to Him
5. A body that does not obey and serve Allah
6. Loving Allah without following His orders or seeking His pleasure
7. Time that is not spent in expiating sins or seizing opportunities to do good
8. A mind that thinks about useless matters
9. Serving those who do not bring you close to Allah, nor benefit you in your life
10. Hoping and fearing whoever is under the authority of Allah and in His hand; while he cannot bring any benefit or harm to himself, nor death, nor life; nor can he resurrect himself". ~Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya

Muslim Prayer:

In the name of Allah,
the beneficent, the merciful.
Praise be to the Lord of the
Universe who has created us and
made us into tribes and nations
That we may know each other, not that
we may despise each other.
If the enemy incline towards peace, do
though also incline towards peace, and
trust God, for the Lord is the one that
heareth and knoweth all things.
And the servants of God,
Most gracious are those who walk on
the Earth in humility, and when we
address them, we say "PEACE."