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Is Islam a Violent Religion?

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The vast majority of Muslims reject violence, but the absence of the notion of divine self-limitation has important implications for Islam.

Jihadists killed 98 percent, or 3,612 of the 3,676 of the terror victims counted in the 2022 Global Terrorism Index. Israel's 1,300 victims of the October 7th Hamas massacre constitute the worst casualty count due to terrorism in terms of relative population size (the equivalent of 33,000 Americans). The killings, moreover, were horrifically gruesome and sadistic. Most practice of Islam is emphatically not violent, but most religious violence is perpetrated by Muslims in the name of religion. Violence is not a necessary characteristic of Islam as a religion, but it is evidently a susceptibility. Is there something about Islam as a religion that predisposes its believers toward terrorism?

Most Muslims abhor terrorism. Pew Research reported in 2015: "Muslims mostly say that suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians in the name of Islam are rarely or never justified, including 92% in Indonesia and 91% in Iraq. In the United States, a 2011 survey found that 86% of Muslims say such tactics are rarely or never justified. An additional 7% say suicide bombings are sometimes justified and 1% say they are often justified." However, significant Muslim majorities in other countries think terrorism is justified. Pew found that "in a few countries, a quarter or more of Muslims say these acts of violence are at least sometimes justified, including 40% in the Palestinian territories, 39% in Afghanistan, 29% in Egypt, and 26% in Bangladesh."

Muslim-majority regimes, moreover, range from the modernizing monarchs of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which established diplomatic relations with Israel under the Trump Administration's Abraham Accords, to state sponsors of terrorism like Iran. Most Muslim regimes eschew terrorism and cooperate with Western security services to suppress it. Iran and Syria remain on the State Department's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.

It is plainly false to allege that individual Muslims and Muslim regimes have an inherent predisposition to violence, but the observation cannot be brushed aside that violence against civilians is overwhelmingly more prevalent among Muslims than adherents of other religions.

A preeminent Catholic scholar of Islam and former advisor to Benedict XVI, Fr. Samir Khalid Samir, S.J., observed that Islam can be violent or non-violent according to the believer's choice:

> Many Westerners fear Islam as a "religion of violence." Muslims often call simultaneously for tolerance and understanding as well as for violence and aggression. In fact, both options are present in the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. These are two legitimate manners—two distinct ways to interpret, to understand, and to live Islam. It is up to the individual Muslim to decide what he wants Islam to be.

Consequently, in the Qur'an, there are two different choices, the aggressive and the peaceful, and both of them are acceptable. There is a

need for an authority, unanimously acknowledged by Muslims, that could say: From now on, only this verse is valid. But this does not—and probably will never—happen.

Fr. Samir dismissed the concept of three Abrahamic religions, noting that the concept of covenant is central to Judaism as well as Christianity, but entirely absent from Islam. Covenant presumes divine self-limitation: God binds Himself to promises to man contingent on man's fulfillment of the covenant. For Allah to impose limits on himself is an absurdity in Islam. In mainstream Muslim theology, Allah's absolute sovereignty excludes the concept of natural law, which is a form of divine self-limitation: God rules the world through laws of nature that human reason can comprehend. The Catholic writer Robert Reilly observes, "Ash 'Arite theology concluded that, if God is to be omnipotent, no other thing can even be so much as potent. There can be no secondary causes, and there is no such thing as natural law or cause and effect in the natural world." Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), the most influential Muslim theologian of the past millennium, taught that there is no causal connection between "the quenching of thirst and drinking, satiety and eating, burning and contact with fire. Light and the appearance of the sun, death and decapitation, healing and the drinking of medicine, the purging of the bowls and the using of a purgative, and so on to [include] all [that is] observable among connected things in medicine, astronomy, arts, and crafts."

The German-Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig wrote, "The God of Mohammed is a creator who well might not have bothered to create. He displays his power like an Oriental potentate who rules by violence, not by acting according to necessity, not by authorizing the enactment of the law, but rather in his freedom to act arbitrarily. … [Islam] presumes that Allah creates every isolated thing at every moment. Providence thus is shattered into infinitely many individual acts of creation, with no connection to each other, each of which has the importance of the entire creation. That has been the doctrine of the ruling orthodox philosophy in Islam. Every individual thing is created from scratch at every moment. Islam cannot be salvaged from this frightful providence of Allah." Islam, Rosenzweig concluded, was a monistic polytheism, and Allah represents

“the colorfully contending gods of the pagan pantheon rolled up into one.”

Biblical creation, by contrast, concludes with an act of divine self-limitation: on the seventh day God desisted from His work of creation. In rabbinic interpretation, God intentionally left creation incomplete so that man could become His partner in continuing the work. The Jewish idea of a divine-human partnership, or the Christian belief that God became incarnate as a man who walked, talked, and broke bread with other men, is unimaginable in Islam.

This has deep implications for the divine-human relationship, which entails a dimension of sacrifice in all religions. In Genesis 22:16–17, God acknowledges Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac with this oath: “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.”

Divine self-limitation is the starting point of the Jewish theology of creation, expounded most clearly in the sixteenth-century teachings of Isaac Luria. How is it possible for God, in whom the world is contained, to create something which is not God? Luria’s solution, which has become normative Jewish theology, states that God delimited himself to make an empty space in which He might create something that was not God. In contrast to the static god of the philosophers, who preside in Greek thought over an uncreated universe, Judaism worships what Gershom Scholem termed the “turbulent God” of the Bible. The Christian scholar Agata Bielik-Robson draws an analogy between God’s *tzimtzum* (literally, contraction) and the Christian concept of divine *kenosis*, that is, Jesus’ self-emptying of his divinity. In a recent review of Bielik-Robson’s book, I took issue with the comparison. But the two covenantal religions, Judaism and Christianity, understand a God of self-limitation, although in radically different ways. Finite man in Judaism engages the infinite God in a way specified by God himself, through the performance of the commandments in the narrowest sense. In a broader sense, according to Joseph Soloveitchik, the leading thinker of Modern Orthodox Judaism, walking in God’s ways requires the exercise of creativity to improve the

condition of humankind. The Christian God limits Himself by becoming human.

> Islam, in Rosenzweig's understanding, is a sacrificial religion as much as Christianity, but every man is his own Christ in the jihadist interpretation of self-sacrifice.

In quite different ways, Judaism and Christianity share a concept of vicarious sacrifice. Abraham offered his son Isaac to God, and received in return God's covenantal oath. Animal sacrifice disappeared from Jewish practice after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., but observant Jews recite the laws of sacrifice daily in place of the actual event. Blood sacrifice remains central to Jewish practice (the prayer at the circumcision ceremony of a Jewish male infant asks God to find the child's blood acceptable). Circumcision substitutes for human sacrifice, as in the binding of Isaac. Christians believe that the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth replaces all other forms of sacrifice.

Vicarious sacrifice, by contrast, is alien to Islam. As Islamonline.com explains:

> Sacrifice is not a pillar of Islam. ... Not only did the pagan Arabs sacrifice to a variety of gods in hopes of attaining protection or some favor or material gain, but so, too, did the Jews of that day seek to appease the One True God by blood sacrifice and burnt offerings. Even the Christian community felt Jesus to be the last sacrifice, the final lamb, so to speak, in an otherwise valid tradition of animal sacrifice (where one's sins are absolved by the blood of another). Islam, however, broke away from this longstanding tradition of appeasing an "angry God" and instead demanded personal sacrifice and submission as the only way to die before death and reach fana or extinction in Allah.

The slaughter of a sheep or goat at the Festival of Eid is not a ritual requirement but a tradition.

As Rosenzweig explained: "Following the path of Allah means in the narrowest sense propagating Islam through holy war. In the obedient journey upon this path, taking upon oneself the associated dangers, the observance of the laws prescribed for it, Muslim piety finds its way in the world."

Islam, in Rosenzweig's understanding, is a sacrificial religion as much as Christianity, but every man is his own Christ in the jihadist interpretation of self-sacrifice. That is by no means the only interpretation of Islam, but it is an irrefutably legitimate interpretation in Islamic theology.

Rosenzweig also proposed a sociology of religion that proceeds from the response of entire peoples to mortality. Unlike Heidegger, whose concept of Being begins with the individual's awareness of death, Rosenzweig emphasizes the social dimension of death. The peoples of the world anticipate their prospective extinction. He wrote in *The Star of Redemption*:

> Just as every individual must reckon with his eventual death, the peoples of the world foresee their eventual extinction, be it however distant in time. Indeed, the love of the peoples for their own nationhood is sweet and pregnant with the presentiment of death. Love is only surpassing sweet when it is directed toward a mortal object, and the secret of this ultimate sweetness only is defined by the bitterness of death. Thus the peoples of the world foresee a time when their land with its rivers and mountains still lies under heaven as it does today, but other people dwell there; when their language is entombed in books, and their laws and customers have lost their living power.

Rosenzweig added:

> War as it was known to the peoples of antiquity was in general only one of the natural expressions of life, and presented no fundamental complications. War meant that a people staked its life, for the sake of its life. A people that marched to war took upon itself the danger of its own death. That mattered little as long as the peoples regarded themselves as mortal.

Traditional peoples fight to the death, even in the knowledge that one day they must lose their existential fight for existence. The pagan's personality is an extension of race and state, in Rosenzweig's view; therefore, it dies with the death of his society. He risks nothing by sacrificing his life to preserve his society. The explanation for self-destructive behavior on a grand scale is that the spiritual death ensuing from the dissolution of

traditional society bears with it greater fear than the fear of physical death.

Islam channeled the little wars of endangered peoples into the holy war of a horde against the rest of the world. The destructiveness of Muslim conquests in densely populated areas was unprecedented; the seventeenth-century Muslim ruler of India, Aurangzeb, alone is estimated to have killed 4.6 million people. The conquest of Jihad combined the sacramental dimension of sacrifice with the existential brutality of the tide pool.

The catchphrase "You love life, we love death" first came to the attention of the West on March 14, 2004, in an al-Qaeda tape gloating over a Madrid terrorist bombing that killed 200 innocents. A people comes to love death when it is already resigned to death. The most acclaimed poet in the Arabic language, Ali Ahmad Said (who writes under the pen name Adonis) told a Dubai television interviewer in 2007, "We have become extinct. ... We have the masses of people, but a people becomes extinct when it no longer has a creative capacity, and the capacity to change its world. ... The great Sumerians became extinct, the great Greeks became extinct, and the Pharaohs became extinct."

Large parts of the Muslim world feel that modernity has passed them by, or even worse, that integration into modern life would destroy Muslim identity. The deadly combination of the sacral—the sacrifice of the individual in service of Allah—and the existential will continue to nourish the likes of ISIS, Hamas, and other monsters of the ancient world that intrude into modern life.

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