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ZEAL AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN

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Abstract

Without a vibrant belief or faith, it is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the tenets of any religion. Sometimes, this vibrant faith is called religious zeal. This zeal sometimes translates into religious fanaticism, which in turn leads to religious intolerance and violence. Although zeal is highly valued in religious circles and could be an aid in the survival of the phenomenological aspect of a particular religion, when it leads to intolerance and violence, it becomes a hindrance to the realization of the real end of religion, which is the uniting of the human person with God. This paper looks at the role of zeal in the furtherance of religious violence in the Bible and the Qur'an and argues that a fundamentalist interpretation of the texts where violence seems to be encouraged as an expression of religious zeal can only lead to various forms of religious intolerance, including militancy and terrorism.

1. Introduction

When professor Bal wrote several years ago that "the bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed

with the power to kill”,¹ she was perhaps making a one-sidedly true statement. It is true in the sense that several pages of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, seem to sanction the killing of perceived enemies of the Jewish people. It is one-sided because reading through the Qur'an also gives a similar impression of the mandate to kill. For instance, just like the crusaders and the colonists appealed to the Bible in their murderous campaigns, the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Centre on the 9th of September 2001 and the numerous Islamic militant groups derive their motivation for their acts of terror from the Qur'an.

Again, this religious mandate to kill is not limited to Judaism and Islam. Many other religions also bear marks of the religious command to exterminate non-adherents. An example is the famous stone erected by Mesha, the ninth-century king of Moab. The inscription on the stone reads: “And Chemosh said to me, ‘go take Nebo from Israel. So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls, and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar, Chemosh.”² It is evident from the above text that the *genocidal* command to Mesha came from the god Ashtar Chemosh. This explains why seven thousand humans were sacrificed to Chemosh.

¹ Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 14; quoted in John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122/1 (2003), 3.

² Quoted in Michael W. Ford, *Dragon of the Two Flames: Demonic Magick & Gods of Canaan* (Houston: Succubus Production, 2012), 79.

In some cases, the spoils of war are devoted to the gods as thanksgiving for their aid in warfare. W. K. Pritchett noted concerning Greece that, "of all places in Greece, Olympia...offers rich evidence for the custom of making offerings in recognition of benefits bestowed in the temple where dwelt the mighty dispenser of victory, Zeus."³ In the same vein, Herodotus, the father of history, documented the presentation of spoils of war to the temple of Delphi by the Phoceans after the victory over the Thessalians.⁴ History is awash with numerous such examples which lead to the conclusion that violence, strife, mutual suspicion and intolerance have always trailed the history of religions.⁵ Sometimes it has led to full-blown wars. Looking through the history of wars in Europe from the 1560s to the 1650s for example, religion seems to be "the burning motivation, the one that inspired fanatical devotion and the most vicious hatred."⁶

³ William Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War: Volume 5*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). 95.

⁴ Herodotus *Histories* 9.81.1, quoted in Lee. L. Brice (ed.), *Greek Warfare: From the Battle of Marathon to the Conquests of Alexander the Great* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 223f.

⁵ Some scholars feel that religious intolerance and violence are mainly prevalent among monotheistic religions. In the words of Regina Schwartz, "Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass." Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 63. In this sense, the presence of myriads of gods in the Jewish Bible argues against monotheism as description of the religion of the Jews.

⁶ Scott R. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 2.

Without a doubt, religious violence is a phenomenon that has cast a dark shade on the meaning and significance of religion to the modern mind. While some people justify it based on the just war theory, others see it as a major setback to the realization of the original intention of religion, while some go to the extreme position of seeing it as proof that religion is inherently violent, or, that the gods have only terror in their minds.⁷

The three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have had their fair share of different shades of religious violence. Hence there is a suspicion of an intrinsic connection between violence and what Assmann termed “the Mosaic distinction” between true and false religion.⁸ In some cases, religious intolerance or violence in these religions has led to the persecution and destruction of anyone considered to be an infidel or to have transgressed God’s injunctions. This fact dots the historical contours of these religions. Unfortunately, it seems also to accompany these religions in big or small measures in our contemporary times. In most cases, the stench of religious violence exudates from the religious books of these religions and seems to be an integral part of them.

The paper looks at some of the most important expositions of violent religious zeal in the Bible and the Qur’an. It questions the

⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Moses in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1-6. It is needless to say that Assmann’s position has been vigorously attacked. On this see Eliza Slavet, *A Matter of Distinction: On Recent Work by Jan Assmann*. *AJS Review*, 34(2), (2010), 385-393.

application of such texts as normative in the modern era, arguing that such texts could be the effort of a religious leader to appeal to the divine in order to legitimize their violent approach to the things of God. This calls for more critical reading of the Bible and the Qur'an that respects the dignity of the human person.

The Understanding of Zeal

In classical usage, the noun *zelos* could mean a number of things, ranging from jealousy, eager rivalry, emulation, passion, ambitions, fervour, zeal, indignation, pride, honour, glory, etc.⁹ This implies that *zelos* could be seen in a positive or negative sense. The classical understanding of *zelos* implies that it was understood in both positive and negative ways. In a good sense it means zeal or ardour. In a bad sense, it means jealousy or envy.¹⁰ It could be understood as ardour in embracing, pursuing, defending anything or an envious and contentious rivalry, or jealousy.¹¹ The positive usage is seen in Aristotle's distinction between emulation, envy and anger. For him, "emulation [*zelos*] is a certain distress over the apparent presence of honourable good things...not because they belong to another but because they do not also belong to oneself. Thus emulation [*zelos*] is both proper and concerns proper things, but envying [*to phthonein*] is a kind of pain at the sight of [someone else's] good fortune."¹²

⁹ Liddell, H. G/R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 755.

¹⁰ Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, (3rd ed.), (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press), 2000, 337-338.

¹¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, (trans.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (New York: American Book Company, 1998), 271.

¹² Aristotle, *Rhetorics* 2.10.11 (1387b).

Anger, on the other hand, is “always accompanied by a certain pleasure [*hedone*], due to the hope of revenge to come.”¹³ In summary, the noun *zelos* and the verb *zeloo* designate a passionate commitment to a person or cause. One could conclude that the concept of zeal in antiquity was that of “the capacity or state of passionate committal to a person or cause” or “the forces which motivate a personality”.¹⁴ With reference to a cause, zeal is accompanied by “sincere interest in accomplishing it.”¹⁵

The noun *zelos* appears 38 times in the LXX. It is used to translate the Hebrew term *qin'ah*, which refers to “passion, ardour, jealousy.” The word is also employed in the sense of a passionate, consuming intensity in the divine action. With reference to God, there seems to be a close connection between zeal and holiness. For Von Rad, “zeal and holiness are in fact only differently shaded expressions of one and the same characteristic of Yahweh.”¹⁶ This explains why the zeal of Yahweh is provoked when the Israelites sin, especially when they worship idols (cf. Ex 20:5).¹⁷ In this sense, it means jealousy. In Ezekiel 39:25 God manifests his zeal by showing pity on the house of Jacob for the sake of his *holy* name. The violent side of zeal is also present with reference to God. The prophet Isaiah makes this connection when he writes of God that he put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself with zeal as a mantle (Isa 59:17).

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhetorics*, 2.11.1 (1388a).

¹⁴ See Albrecht Stumpff, *Zelos*, ktl. TDNT II.877.

¹⁵ Harun Yahya (Adnan Oktar), *Zeal and Enthusiasm Described in the Qur'an*, (EBook: Global Publishing, 2011), 11.

¹⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 205.

¹⁷ Albrecht Stumpff, *Zelos*, ktl. TDNT II.879.

Here, vengeance and zeal are parallel just like clothing and mantle are. This could explain why zealots believe they are performing a good act when they manifest violence in the pursuit of the object of their zeal. This is the negative aspect of zeal.

The Old Testament idea of zeal is continued in the New Testament, where *zelos* denotes active enthusiasm (2 Cor 9:2), jealousy (Acts 5:17; 13:45), favour for God (Rom 10:2), negative ambition (James 3:14.16), etc. When Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem by knocking down the money changers table and driving the sellers out of God's house with a whip of cords, the disciples remembered the words of the psalmist: "I am eaten up by zeal for your house" (John 2:17; cf. Psa 69:9).

At the other hand, it is difficult to find the exact word, zeal (Arab حماسة *hamasa*) in the Qur'an. However, the instances where enthusiasm, fervour, eagerness or ardour for the cause of Allah occur in the Qur'an are numerous. Just like in the Bible, this ardour could be positively or negatively expressed. Perhaps one could classify the five pillars of Islam - the declaration of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salah*), alms-giving (*zakat*), fasting (*sawm*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*) - as the positive expressions of zeal for Allah. On the other hand, I would tend to classify the lesser jihad as a negative expression of zeal for Allah. The reason for this negative classification would be readily evident.

2. A Note on Violence

On the onset, one must accept the difficulty involved in the definition of violence.¹⁸ In a very broad way, violence could be

¹⁸ This has been noted by notable scholars including Sherry Hamby, "On defining Violence, and why it matters," *Psychology of Violence*

defined as “the attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others through any nonverbal, verbal, or physical means that inflict psychological or physical injury”.¹⁹ It could also be seen as “coercion or force that is illegitimate, and is associated with social disorder”.²⁰ This does not preclude the fact that governments sometimes apply violence as a means of social control. In this sense, violence serves as a means to ensure social order.

However, I will restrict the notion of violence in this paper to the use of physical means that inflict pain or physical injury on others. I will further reduce the study of violence to the religious sphere by noting its connection with religious zeal. In other words, violent religiosity can be equated with zealotry.²¹ I will then elucidate the points by application to the Biblical and the Quranic use of physical force to subjugate those perceived to be on the wrong end of the religious/ethical ladder and bring them back to the perceived true religion. This is what I term religious violence.

7(2) (2017):167-180; Giuliano Pontara, “The Concept of Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 15/1, (1978): 19-32, etc.

¹⁹ Craig, L. Nesson, “Sex, Aggression, and Pain: Sociological Implication for Theological Anthropology,” *Zygon* 33 (1998), 451.

²⁰ John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (1), (2003), 3-21.

²¹ For this equation see Gideon Aran, “The Other Side of Israelite Priesthood: A Sociological-Anthropological Perspective,” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?* Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss (ed.), (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 44.

3. Theorising Religious Zeal

Ruth Rebecca Tietjen has warned that in presenting a theory of religious zeal, two pitfalls must be avoided. The first of the pitfalls is a wholesale acceptance of the negative connotation which religious zeal has in western media discourse as something inherent in the phenomenon itself. In simple terms, one should be careful in cloaking religious zeal only with a negative garb. In the same stroke we should not lose sight of the fact that religious zeal bears a violent potential. Another pitfall to avoid is the de-theologizing of religious zeal by focusing only on its socio-political motivation. Related to the above is the culturalization of religious zeal by treating it as part of a particular culture or as an abnormal reaction. According to her, these pitfalls make us lose sight of the human nature of religious zeal.²² In as much as it is not inherently violent, religious zeal is not devoid of violence and it does not relate to any particular culture. Religious zeal is a normal and universal human attribute.

Having said this, religious zeal can be defined as an “ardent devotion” to an ideal that puts a fire in the zealot’s belly that she is willing to sacrifice for.²³ It can also be seen as an ardent devotion to a transcendent religious object that is taken to be of ultimate significance.²⁴ It involves an affective attachment to an

²² Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, “Religious Zeal as an Affective Phenomenon,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (20), (2021), 76–77.

²³ Joel Olson, “The Freshness of Fanaticism: The Abolitionist Defense of Zealousness,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(4), (2007), 685–701, here, pp. 688–689.

²⁴ Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, “Religious Zeal as an Affective Phenomenon,” 79.

object of transcendent value. It is a burning passion that longs to embrace the object of ultimate concern. Since it relates to the affective dimension of the human person, it involves an intense longing. This intense longing is expressed in series of actions, mostly repetitive, that effectively classify the subject as a religious zealot. Just like zeal itself, the expression of religious zeal could either be positively or negatively evaluated. A positive expression of religious zeal leads to heroic virtues evinced in the lives of the saints of various religions. The desert fathers who lived a life of asceticism or the martyrs who chose to die than denounce their faith are shining examples of religious zeal. Religious fanaticism seems to be an aspect of the negative expression of religious zeal. It is such a negative expression that leads to varied forms of religious violence like militancy and terrorism.

4. Zeal as Motivation for Violence in the Bible

It is the contention of Gerhard von Rad “that the concept of faith- in other words, that confident trusting in the action of Yahweh- had its actual origin in the holy war, and that from there it took on its peculiar dynamic.”²⁵ Surely, the underlying motif of violence or warfare for God in the Jewish religion is the notion of Yahweh as the God of war. This seems to be one of the earliest characterisations of the God of Israel. A typical expression of this characterisation is in the “song of Moses” in Exodus 15.²⁶ As

²⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (M. J. Dawn trans.), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 71.

²⁶ The antiquity of the song has been defended by Frank Moore Cross, “The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 112-144.

servants of this war-faring God, the Israelites were mandated to be God's partners in warfare and were cursed when they fail to do so (cf. Judg 5:23). Hence, zeal for Yahweh is shown in the readiness to engage in warfare in Yahweh's name.

A first instance of the notion of zeal as motivation for violence in the Jewish Testament comes from the book of Genesis. Genesis 34 records the rape of Dinah, the only girl among Jacob's children, by Shechem, the son of Hamor. Although Shechem spoke tenderly about the girl to his father and wanted to marry her, the brothers of Dinah schemed revenge. In retaliation for the defilement of Dinah, Simeon and Levi, Jacob's sons killed Shechem, his father, Hamor, and all the males of the city (Gen 34:25.26). The gruesome account of the murder of the Shechemites is nothing short of genocide. In Jacob's last testament, violence is applied in the description of Simeon and Levi, saying that "weapons of violence are their swords" and "in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen" (Gen 49:5). Although Genesis 34:7 remarks that the action of the sons of Jacob was motivated by anger, the book of Judith (9:2-4) records that Simeon and Levi burned with zeal for God and abhorred the pollution of their blood, which referred to their slaughter of the Shechemites after the seduction of their sister Dinah by the son of Hamor. In Jubilees 30 the avenging of Dinah's defilement (vv. 4-5) and protection of Israel's holiness from Gentile defilement (vv. 8, 13-14) was counted to them for righteousness (v. 17).

Perhaps, the apex of zeal for Yahweh in the Jewish scriptures was reached by Phinehas.²⁷ In many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, Phinehas is acknowledged as model and reflection of the zeal of Yahweh. The incident that brought Phinehas to the limelight occurred at Baal of Peor. After the saga of the unsuccessful attempt of Balak to curse the Israelites through Balaam (Num 23–24), the Israelites gave in to prostitution with Moabite women and participating in the sacrifices to the gods of the Moabites (Num 25:1–2).²⁸ This attracted the wrath of God (Num 25:3). And as Moses was seething with anger, Zimri, the son of Salu, brought Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a Midianite woman,²⁹ to his family. This happened in the full glare of Moses and the Israelites, as they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Phinehas followed the couple into alcove and ran them both through the stomach (Num 25:8). His action is swiftly described through a succession of five verbs: he saw . . . he rose . . . he took . . . he came . . . he pierced. The grossly violent

²⁷ A tremendous scholarship on Phinehas is contained in Martin Hengel's, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989). See also Torrey Seland, *Establishment Violence in Philo and Luke: A Study of Nonconformity to the Torah and Jewish Vigilante Reactions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

²⁸ Levine contends that the offense in this verse is one of "betrayal" – consorting with the Moabite women resulted in idolatry. See Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 4a (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 282–283.

²⁹ The apparent tension between the Israelites' consort with Moabite and Midianite women gives the impression of the fusion of two distinct traditions. See John Sturdy, *Numbers*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 183.

nature of this act cannot be more acutely presented. The result was the death of the unsuspecting couple. The word of Yahweh, addressed to Moses, approved this action of Phinehas:

The priest, Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron has deflected my wrath from the Israelites, he being the only one of them to have the same zeal as I have, for which reason, I did not make an end of the Israelites in my zeal. For this reason I say: To him I grant my covenant of peace. To him and his descendants after him, this covenant will assure the priesthood for ever. In reward for his zeal for his God, he will have the right to perform the rituals of expiation for the Israelites (Num 25:10–15).

No matter the origin³⁰ and intention of the story,³¹ the deed of Phinehas, like that of the Levites in Exodus 32,³² ceased the plague which already took the lives of 24, 000 Israelites (Num 25:9). God pronounced this action an act of zeal, which granted Phinehas the covenant of peace and the right to perform the

³⁰ The story as serving “to legitimize the descendants of Phinehas, in the face of any possible opposition, as the true heirs to “Aaronite” privileges” see Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1968), 199; Milgrom see it “as justification of Abiathar and his family from the Jerusalem Temple so that the Zadokites alone remained as its officiating priests.” Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 479.

³¹ The story as criticism for Moses’ lack of action, see Jonathan Grossman, “Divine Command and Human Initiative: A Literary View On Numbers 25-31,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15/1 (2007): 54–79, here 60.

³² Both events resemble of another “in their inner details”. See Milgrom, *Numbers*, 211.

rituals of expiation.³³ In simple terms, Phinehas' zeal, expressed through violence, merited him the covenant of peace. This apparent contradiction between the violent action of Phinehas and the prize of the covenant of peace which he won was recognized by the rabbis who tried to clarify it in many tractates.³⁴ The major argument of the rabbis is that Yahweh granted Phinehas the covenant of peace in order to turn his heart from the path of violence. In effect, he was praised for his zeal and not for his violence. 1 Macc. 2:54 documents that Phinehas was given the covenant of everlasting priesthood because of his burning zeal. I agree with Jansen that "the exemplary dimension of his act was not its violence... but Phinehas's (sic) zeal for the Lord and his atoning for the people. These were hallmarks of true

³³ Many studies have tried to link the foundation of the Israelite priesthood to violence. See, for instance, Joel S. Baden, "The Violent Origins of the Levites: Text and Tradition," in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition*, Mark Leuchter and J. M. Huton (ed) (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 103-106; Gideon Aran, "The Other Side of Israelite Priesthood: A Sociological-Anthropological Perspective," in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?* Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss (ed.), (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 43-58; Arnold Arluke, Jack Levin, Carter Luke, and Frank Ascione, "The Relationship of Animal Abuse to Violence and Other Forms of Antisocial Behavior," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 14:9 (1999): 963-975.

³⁴ Rabbinic Text 1: Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 9:7 "The Elders of Israel sought to excommunicate Pinhas until the Holy Spirit hurried and said: "It shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of priesthood for all time, because he took zealous action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites."

priesthood.”³⁵ His example was followed by other notable Israelites who burned with zeal for Yahweh.

A typical example of an Israelite who followed the violent zealous lead of Phinehas was Elijah. The famous encounter between him and the prophets of Baal on Mount Sinai forms one of the most scenic encounters in the Hebrew Bible. Elijah’s ‘zeal for the Lord’ was most fully expressed in both his victory over the prophets of Baal and their execution (cf. 1 Kgs 18:20–40). Elijah’s response to God’s question: “I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabbaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant” (1 Kgs 19:10) bears out the reason for Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal. Sirach 48:1 alludes to his zeal which is compared to a burning torch.

Similarly, Jehu was given a divine mandate to “strike down the house of Ahab” (2 Kgs 9:7). Jehu killed Jehoram, king Ahaziah, Jezebel, the royal family of Israel (about 70 sons of Ahab) and the princes of Judah. Then he boasted to Jehonadab: “come and see my zeal for Yahweh” (2 Kgs 10:16), before wiping off the remaining members of the house of Ahab. His deeds attracted divine approval and the promise of a non-eternal dynasty.³⁶ The words of God are clear on this “Yahweh said to Jehu: because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of

³⁵ Waldemar Jansen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 108.

³⁶ For the unique nature of the non-eternal promise to Jehu see David T. Lamb, “The Non-Eternal Dynastic Promises of Jehu of Israel and Esarhaddon of Assyria,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 60/3, (2010), 337-344.

Israel" (2 Kgs 10:30). From the way the story is presented in the bible, the background of Jehu's massacre is the religious struggle between Baalism and Yahwism and reveals how religious violence could be couched as religious zeal.³⁷

The violent zeal shown by Phinehas, Elijah and Jehu was replicated in the Maccabean revolt. Faced with severe persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes,³⁸ we are told that Mattathias "burned with zeal and his heart was stirred with righteous anger" (1 Macc 2:24). In his zeal for the law, he executed the Syrian officer and the fellow Jew who was made to apostatize by offering forbidden sacrifice. Mattathias rallied the rebellion against Antiochus by crying out, 'Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come with me' (1 Macc 2.27; cf. Josephus, Ant. 12.271). Finally, his death-bed testimony is in praise of the zeal of the heroes of Israel (1 Macc. 2.51–60).³⁹ Finally, the example of Phinehas and Mattathias became the model for the zealots in their fight against the Romans in the first century CE.⁴⁰

³⁷ However, the discovery of the Tel Dan Inscription in 1993 adds a twist to the story. In the inscription, Hazael of Syria records that he killed king Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah. See Matthew D. Stith, *The Coups of Hazael and Jehu: Building an Historical Narrative* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2008), 214.

³⁸ On the circumstances that led to the revolt, see John J. Collins, "Cult and Culture: The Limits of Hellenization in Judea," in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling (eds.) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 38-61.

³⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 343.

⁴⁰ John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122(1) (2003), 13.

These examples are only representative of the violent aspect of religious zeal in the Old Testament. Its influence is also evident among Jewish theologians of the second temple period. Philo writes that "if any members of the nation betray the honour due to the One they should suffer the utmost penalties. . . . And it is well that all who have a zeal (*zelos*) for virtue should be permitted to exact penalties offhand and with no delay, without bringing the offender before jury or council or any kind of magistrate at all, and give full scope to the feelings which possess them, that hatred of evil and love of God which urges them to inflict punishment without mercy on the impious."⁴¹ In the same line of argument, Philo claims that perjury is unforgivable in the sight of God and warns that the potential perjurer should be careful "for there are thousands who have their eyes upon him full of zeal for the laws, strictest guardians of the ancestral traditions, merciless to those who do anything to subvert them."⁴²

Although the New Testament encourages zeal for the Lord, the only place in the New Testament where the zeal of Jesus is mentioned is John 2:17. As already remarked, this was recorded after his violent expulsion of the traders in the temple. It was then that his disciples remembered the saying of Psalm 69:9 "zeal for your house has consumed me". With Paul, however, the idea of violent zeal infiltrated the New Testament. He made the bold statement that he was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers (Gal 1:14). He classifies the hallmark of his zeal in these words: "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (Phil 3:6), thus

⁴¹ Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.54-57. Quoted in James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 344, n.112.

⁴² Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.253. Quoted in Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 344.

linking zeal and religious persecution. Hence, we are not surprised that he was the young man at whose feet the executioners of Stephen led down their garments (Acts 7:58). He is also said to have approved the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1). He later sought and received letters from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to drag into prison all those who followed Jesus (Acts 9:2; 22:5; 26:12). In his zeal, Paul ravaged the church (Acts 8.3) breathing out threats and murder (Acts 9.1) to the point of not only locking up many of the Christians in prison, but also casting his vote against them when they were being condemned to death (Acts 26.10). Although this seems “to go beyond the judicial discipline which the synagogue was permitted to exercise,”⁴³ it seems to be an expression of religious zeal in the manner of Phinehas, Elijah, Jehu and Mattathias.

Zeal and Violence in the Qur'an

As already said, it is difficult to find the word *hamasa* (zeal) in the Qur'an. However, the injunction to strive hard for the things of Allah is very prominent in the Qur'an. This striving is at the root of the concept of jihad. The Arabic root of jihad (*jahada*) relates to ‘striving’ or ‘exerting’ oneself towards some goal.⁴⁴ The Qur'an employs the verbal form in two places to indicate the efforts of pagan parents to induce their children to return to polytheism after converting to Islam (cf. 29:8; 31:15). In most cases, however, jihad is a virtuous struggle by Muslims to maintain their faith. In this aspect, the striving has come to relate

⁴³ James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 338.

⁴⁴ “Jihad” *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*. Retrieved July 31, 2021 from [Encyclopedia.com: https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/jihad-0](https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/jihad-0).

to three principal dimensions. The first dimension, the greater jihad, is jihad *al-akbar*. It is the spiritual struggle to be a faithful Muslim. The second dimension, the lesser jihad, is jihad *al-asghar*. It is the armed struggle to establish a Muslim state (*dar al-Islam*) over particular territories. The third dimension is *ijtihad*, which refers to the struggle of Muslim jurists. These three jihads seldom function in isolation. For instance, the struggle to be a faithful Muslim is sometimes accompanied by the armed jihad. In the same vein, a militant jihad creates the ideal state (*dar al-Islam*) for the practice of the spiritual jihad.⁴⁵ For instance, Muslims are commanded to “strive for Allah with the endeavour which is His right” (22:78), in a spiritual jihad. They should also strive “with their lives and with their wealth” (4:95), in a violent jihad. It is this violent jihad that is my interest in this section.

The violent understanding of jihad seems to have developed after Muhammad’s Hijrah to Medina in 622⁴⁶ and seems to be the primary understanding of Jihad among many Muslims.⁴⁷ This change seems to be reflected in Surah 2 which was revealed

⁴⁵ Matthew J. Kuiper, “Joshua’s Jihad? A Reexamination of Religious Violence in the Christian and Islamic Traditions.” *Transformation*, 29/2, (2012), 149-169.

⁴⁶ See Marshal Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: History and Conscience in a World Civilization* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2004), 187.

⁴⁷ In the words of Cook, “in reading Muslim literature - both contemporary and classical - one can see that the evidence for the primacy of the spiritual jihad is negligible. Today it is certain that no Muslim writing in a non-Western language... would ever make claims that jihad is primarily non-violent or has been superseded by spiritual jihad. David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 165f.

during the first four years after the Hijrah. It teaches the Muslims that being persecuted is worse than killing (2:191, 217), that turning people away from the way of Allah is worse than warfare (2:217). It also teaches them the necessity of self-defence (2:190, 194) and that warfare is ordained for the Muslims (2:216). Surah 2:190 states: "fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah does not love transgressors." The progression of the divine command to warfare seems to have experienced some historical mutations. For instance, while in Mecca, the prophet was instructed not to wage war (Surah 5); after the migration to Medina, fighting became necessary only as retaliation of injustice (Surah 22:39f). This retaliation was to be carried out with some restrictions. Eventually, these restrictions were removed (Surah 9:1-14) and the warfare was spiced with divine commands (Surah 9:5 and 9:29). In Surah 9:29 Muslims are enjoined to fight 'people of the Scripture', that is Jews and Christians 'until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low'. This makes jihad part of a religious agenda "to conquer and dominate non-Muslims."⁴⁸

This historical progression of jihad from an intra-personal struggle for perfection to a total declaration of warfare against the enemies of Islam, especially in Surah 9 is interesting from Muslim jurisprudence. Surah 9 comes towards the end of Muhammad's life, probably around 631. Following the Islamic juridical doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*)⁴⁹ which states that where

⁴⁸ David Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 10.

⁴⁹ On *naskh* see John Burton, "The Exegesis of Q. 2: 106 and the Islamic Theories of "naskh: *Mā nansakh min āya aw nansahā na'ti bi khairin minhā aw mithlihā*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 48/3, (1985): 452-469.

there is a divergence of teachings in the Qur'an, the later revelations take precedence over the earlier ones, I agree with the conclusions of Kuiper that the later revelations to Muhammad in Medina, which, as we have seen, encourage the violent understanding of jihad, supersede the non-violent appeal of Islam.⁵⁰ In other words, the primary understanding of jihad in Islam is a violent warfare in the name of Allah. It is a manifestation of religious zeal analogous to that of Phinehas of the Hebrew Scriptures and the early life of Paul in the Christian Scriptures. This being the case, most works that tend to accord Islam or Muhammad "a policy of non-violence that was worthy of Gandhi"⁵¹ are only an attempt to read non-violence into overt militant Quranic texts.⁵²

5. Conclusion

As seen in our study, one of the principal motivating factors for religious violence is the intention to be faithful to God. This faithfulness is couched as religious zeal and sometimes expressed in the annihilation of perceived enemies of God. After going

⁵⁰ This conclusion was also arrived at by Kuiper, "Joshua's Jihad?" 154. For the Quranic references to *naskh* see 2:106; 16:101.

⁵¹ The words in quotes are those of Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography* (New York: Phoenix, 2006), 14. A similar sentiment is expressed by Asghar, A. Engineer, *Rethinking Issues in Islam*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1998), 18-29. For a caveat on a militant interpretation of the 'militant' texts in the Qur'an in the 21st century, see Rowland Onyenali, *Appraising the Nigerian Problem through Education and Religious Dialogue: A Cognitive Approach* (Frankfurt: Peterlang, 2013), 125-130.

⁵² For the discussion regarding the ambiguous and contradictory doctrine of warfare in the Quran see Jane D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. III (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 38.

through some of the texts of the Bible that see the destruction of God's enemies as a show of zeal, one cannot but wonder how such texts could be defended as divine injunctions. For instance, how would God commend the destructive zeal of Phinehas and Jehu? And by extension, how would God command the consecration of a nation to destruction? In the words of James Barr "the command of consecration to destruction is morally offensive and has to be faced as such."⁵³ John Collins summarizes: "there is much in the Bible that is not worthy of humanity, certainly much that is not worthy to serve as a model for imitation."⁵⁴ Gerd Lüdemann has aptly termed these verses "the dark side of the bible".⁵⁵ Perhaps, the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus expounded the "pacifist doctrine" of turning the left cheek when the right cheek is struck (cf. Matt 5:38f) understands the tolerant stride of religion. It is mainly because of such teachings as those of the Sermon that Marcion made a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. But this distinction must not be. Already in the Old Testament, God had rebuked the bloodshed carried out in his name. Through the mouth of the prophet Hosea we hear that God will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed at Jezreel (Hos 1:4).

Following the same arguments, the texts that encourage a violent form of jihad in the Qur'an should also be termed "the dark side of the Qur'an". This has led seasoned Islamic scholars to

⁵³ James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Edinburgh: Clarendon Press, 1995), 218.

⁵⁴ Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas," 20.

⁵⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scriptures: The Dark Side of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

maintain that “acts of terrorism or attacks on civilians are strictly prohibited and detestable in Islam, even if they should be done by individuals claiming to be Muslims.”⁵⁶ Janin and Kahlmeyer have explained that “no war could be considered a jihad unless it was formally authorized and led by the legitimate religious leader. Islam’s enemies were to be given fair warning before they were attacked.”⁵⁷ The injunctions to Jihad are guided by strict principles which should not be transgressed by any devout Muslim. In his *No god but God*, Resa Aslan explains in the following lines:

thus, the killing of women, children, monks, rabbis, the elderly, or any other noncombatant was absolutely forbidden under any circumstances. Muslim law eventually expanded on these prohibitions to outlaw the torture of prisoners of war; the mutilation of the dead; rape, molestation, or any kind of sexual violence during combats; the killing of diplomats, the wanton destruction of property, and the demolition of religious or medical institutions...⁵⁸

One could then conclude that “good Muslim is a good religionist in the sense that he shows respect to all the religions of the world

⁵⁶ Suzanne Haneef, *Islam: The Path of God*, (Chicago: Library of Islam, 1996) 98.

⁵⁷ Hunt Janin and André Kahlmeyer, *Islamic Law: The Sharia from Muhammad’s Time to the Present*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 108.

⁵⁸ Resa Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 57.

and to all the leaders of the religions of the world.”⁵⁹ This is where the zeal to serve Allah is manifested in its pure state.

From all these, it is easy to argue that most of the commands to warfare and acts of genocide found in the religious books are a product of the king or commander projecting his ideals into a divine realm. This is easy to understand since “a king must convince his god(s) and his subjects that his military acts have just causes in order to gain both divine and public support”.⁶⁰ This is not a critique of God. It is a searching question to religious leaders. A religion that demands blood on a platter as means of avenging the enemies of her god does not fit the modern world where religious freedom is considered a human right.

⁵⁹ I. Khan, “Islam means Peace,” In: J. B. Taylor/G. Gebhardt (eds.), *Religions for Human Dignity and World Peace: Unabridged Proceedings of the Fourth World Conference on Religion and Peace, (WCRP IV) Nairobi, Kenya, 23-31 August, 1984*, 29.

⁶⁰ Nadav Na'aman, “King Mesha and the Foundation of the Moabite Monarchy.” *Israel Exploration Journal*, 47(1/2), (1997), 83-92, here, 85.