

**Islam And War: A Study in Comparative Ethics,**  
By John Kelsay. Louisville, KY:  
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. Pp. ix + 149. \$14.99 (Paper).  
Reviewed by Rev. Bassam M. Madany

A new era in world history began when the United States dropped two atom bombs, one on Hiroshima, August 6 and the other on Nagasaki, August 9, 1945. The subject of war and peace assumed a critical importance as man had now at his disposal the ability to make the earth a wasteland.

Even though the danger of nuclear war has diminished with the fall of the Soviet Empire, our world is not entirely safe from nuclear conflicts. Several countries such as North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Libya have shown a great interest in pursuing research that will enable them to join the nuclear bomb club. We are therefore indebted to John Kelsay who teaches in the Department of Religion at Florida University in Tallahassee, for offering us such a timely study of *Islam And War: A Study in Comparative Ethics*. It was occasioned by the Gulf War and as the events in Somalia, and Bosnia have shown, there is an urgent need to conduct a serious discussion of the ethics of war. Since we live in a global era when all nations have become our neighbors, our reflection must take into account other traditions. Specifically, we need to acquaint ourselves with the Islamic view of war.

The author divides his work into six chapters dealing with: *The Gulf War and Beyond: Thoughts on the Legacy of Saddam Hussein; The Islamic View of Peace; Religion as a Cause of War: Resort to War in the Islamic Tradition; Islam and the Conduct of War: The Question of Jus in Bello Restraints; Soldiers Without Portfolio: Irregular War in the Tradition of Islam; and Religion and World Order.*

Even though Saddam Hussein is regarded as a 'secular' Arab leader following the nationalist *Baath Arab Socialist Party* ideology, his rhetoric during and after the Gulf War has shown his appropriating Islamic symbols. He wants to be known as the believer president fighting for the cause of Islam. Upon his instructions, the Iraqi flag now carries the Islamic assertion of the greatness of God, Allahu Akbar that has always served as the war cry of this faith. Whether the Iraqi leader is a true believer or not, one thing is certain, he must appear as a Muslim leader fighting within the tradition of Islam in order to legitimize his actions before, during and after the Gulf War. Thus it becomes very important for the West in general and for Christians in particular to learn about the basic view of Islam regarding war and peace. John Kelsay offers us this description of the classical Islamic teaching regarding war:

*The territory of Islam is theoretically the territory of peace and justice. ... Islam provides the best and most secure peace available to humanity. The peace of the world cannot be fully secure unless all people come under the protection of an Islamic state. Thus there always exists an imperative for Muslims: to struggle to extend the boundaries of the territory of Islam. Thus ... the classical Sunni perspective on peace involved a program of action. The struggle to extend the boundaries of the territory of Islam is the jihad. (Page 34)*

Before the advent of Islam, Arab tribes fought each other. Now that they embraced the new faith and have become brothers, they were no longer to raid and plunder each other. Their energies had to be spent in the territories of the Infidel. Following the death of Muhammad in 632 A.D., his successors, the caliphs, presided over the conquest of the world. By 732, the Arab Muslim empire extended from Spain to India. Theorizing on the subject of war among Muslims followed their conquests. The lands belonging to them were known as **Darul-Islam (Household of Islam)** and the lands outside that realm were designated as **Darul-Harb (Household of War.)**

Since in Islam there is no distinction between ‘church’ and state, religion and politics, the faith may be spread by preaching or by war:

*[For] Sunni intellectuals, a ‘normal’ war is connected with the effort to extend the boundaries of Islamic territory. This struggle, for which the preferred means is the spread of the Islamic message through preaching, teaching, and the like, may nevertheless take on the character of war. ... The territory of Islam --- really, the world --- could not be a secure place until and unless Islamic hegemony was acknowledged everywhere. To secure such hegemony was the goal of the jihad, or ‘struggle’ in the path of God." According to the Sunni theorists, war or jihad by means of killing is justified when a people resists or otherwise stands in opposition to the legitimate goals of Islam. (Page 61)*

But what about today's Muslim thinkers? On the one hand, they realize that to live in our modern world, they cannot simply hold on to the classical Islamic view regarding the legitimacy of war as a means for the expansion of the faith. They can quote the Quranic verse ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ (2:256) to support some type of **modus vivendi** with peoples and nations living outside *Darul-Islam*. While John Kelsay’s irenic spirit is clearly detectable throughout his study, he could have stressed the fact that whenever circumstances are in their favor, both Muslim intellectuals and rulers justify their involvement in wars such as the conflict in southern Sudan. For almost two decades, the Muslim dominated government in the north has waged a brutal war against the Christians and animists of the south. This action has been portrayed as a war against a secessionist movement, but the majority of the Southerners, as well as some Western observers, perceive it as a planned effort to Islamize the south!

In any treatment of the topic of **Islam and War** such as in the book under review, I find it rather strange that the comparison restricted itself to **Islam and the West**. The underlying thought is that we are comparing two distinct, political traditions. But this is partially true. Islam has always been regarded as much more than a religion, as this word is understood in the modern West. But as a religious faith, it ranks itself among the heavenly (i.e. theistic) religion such as Judaism and Christianity. Thus, when a comparative study is made with Islam as one side of the comparison, the other side must also include Christianity. Should such a theological and ethical pursuit be undertaken, the comparison would readily appear as a contrast between two widely different worldviews.

For example, the New Testament does not sanction theocracy in the present world order. The contrast is not between ‘Christendom’ and some other political realms, but between the Kingdom of God and the world, the latter word understood as **an organized opposition to God**. In

early Christianity, converts were either citizens, or subjects, or slaves within the Roman Empire. Their faith spread through proclamation, witnessing and martyrdom. As Christians did not exercise political power, they did not face seriously the subject of war and peace. Eventually following the conversion of Constantine and the gradual 'Christianization' of the Roman Empire, it became necessary for Christians to reflect on the subject of war. Thus, it was within the Christian community that the **Just War** tradition was born. As our author reminds us in his Introduction:

*Over the last thirty years, perhaps no issue in religious ethics has attracted more consistent attention than the use of force in war. Inspired by the attempts of Fr. John Courtney Murray and Paul Ramsey to recover the just war tradition for theological ethics, more recent writers have been interested in philosophical and historical inquiries concerning the ethics of war.*

Both Murray and Ramsey are churchmen and dealt with the subject from within the Christian tradition. It is the responsibility of Christian theologians and ethicists to pursue their studies on the subject building on the rich heritage handed down to us since the days of Saint Augustine. In our reflection on our past, we do confess that the church has not always been consistent with New Testament teachings. For example, it was Pope Urban II who launched the First Crusade in 1096 claiming a divine right to reclaim the Holy Land. But today, no responsible Christian church leader or theologian of whatever communion would advocate the resort to war for the spread of the Christian faith or the Reconquista of a lost territory!

While moderate Muslims do acknowledge today the interdependence of all nations and no longer think in terms of *Darul-Harb and Darul-Islam*, radical Muslims still cherish this outlook. It becomes the urgent responsibility of Christians to point to Muslim intellectuals, many of them now living in the West, that it is their duty to speak loudly about the necessity for all peoples and nations to live in peace. The global situation requires the recognition that we face unique challenges that must be met without resort to war. And it is specifically Muslim nations facing problems of gigantic proportions that need to realize that history does not repeat itself and past conquests and exploits cannot be duplicated. In order for them to cope with modernity in this high tech era, they must not waste their resources in a pursuit of more sophisticated armaments. They need to tackle such real problems as population explosion, unemployment, desertification, scarcity of water supplies and weak agricultural output.

We thank John Kelsay for his serious initiative in the study of the ethics of war bringing to our attention the teachings of a major 'other' tradition about this subject. We hope that similar studies will be conducted in the future enabling us to face the challenges of what was hoped to have been a new world order and which unfortunately has turned into a frightening world disorder.

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