# Religion – Source of Conflict or Resource for Peace: Islamic pacifism

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*"It is my inmost conviction,*
*that Islam is amal, yakeen, muhabat*
*– selfless service, faith and love"*
*Badshah Khan*

## Introduction

In this article, I will look at the tradition of Islamic pacifism. In a class, I studied role religion plays in conflict and positive potential in religions for conflict resolution. In the course, we looked at both the positive Islamic tradition of pluralism and acceptance of religious diversity and the more ambiguous Islamic justifications for the use of violence in conflict and even in terrorist attacks. We worked with the Islamic notion of just war, the tradition of jihad and the challenge with Islam's prescriptions for use of force.

In relation to these questions I find it interesting to look at how Muslim pacifistic peace-activists deal with the concept of jihad and just war. Pacifism can at a superficial glance be thought of as passivity. The Qu'ran clearly calls believers to act against injustice and to protect one's own land and people, if necessary with force. Non-action, or passivity, will therefore not easily be accepted as a valid form of engagement for a Muslim.

How is it then possible to speak of Islamic Pacifism? How should Islamic teaching with regards to conflict be applied today and how can we understand the concept of jihad? To elucidate this question, we also have to look at the concept of pacifism and the thought that lies behind this specific tradition.

I will use the terms pacifism and non-violence interchangeably to express the same concept**.** As we will see in the account for the principles of pacifism, there is no equality between pacifism and passivity. According to Mohatma Ghandi and Badshah Khan, the true pacifistic approach to conflict is in all ways an *active* approach.

I will first look at the development of the just war tradition in Western thought, using it as a method to approach the theme. Then I will refer to the Chaiwat Satha-Anand's paper, "The Nonviolent Crescent: Eight Theses on Muslim Nonviolent Action", to look at the traditional Islamic understanding of the concepts and how he deals with them as a pacifist. In addition to Satha-

Anand, I am going to look at the story and teaching of a Pasthun leader, Badshah Khan and his nonviolent struggle for social reform and independence from Britain.

## Just war

To investigate the tradition of Islamic non-violence, I will use terms and ideas from the political and philosophical thinking of *Just War* as it has been developed throughout the history of Western thought. According to John Howard Yoder (*When War Is Unjust. Being Honest in Just-War Thinking, 1996*), there has been a tradition of thinking morally about war since the dawn of Christianity, starting with Ambrose (d. 397) and Augustine (d. 430).[i] Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) wove the concept into a larger moral system and Francisco de Vitoria (d. 1546) and Francisco Suarez (d. 1617) later established it as an independent concept of legal/moral thinking. This concept has in history been agreed upon by most Christian churches and is today a large field within fields - ethics, social sciences and political philosophy.

The main thrust in the just-war tradition is not that war is morally acceptable per se; war is and should always be considered evil and as a great disaster to humankind. Even though war is to be avoided by any cost, there are certain circumstances where it can be argued that war is morally defensible. These situations are thoroughly defined and widely debated among churches and scholars. There is no consensus on all of the specific criteria needed to speak of a war as just, but there are some common main concepts that are usually agreed upon. The central issue of just war thinking is the question of what are the necessary conditions for claiming that a war is just. These criteria are usually grouped in two categories. The first group of criteria defines which conditions make it permissible to wage a war, *jus ad bellum* (the right to fight). The second category deals with how the war should be fought, *jus in bello* (fighting right).[1]

To further elaborate the Western tradition of just war, I will refer to two chapters from the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, second edition of 1997, the present exposition of their official teachings (see side box).

Here we can see how the Roman Catholic Church understands the necessary criteria for making use of and carrying out force. The damage inflicted should be lasting, grave and certain, all other means have to be tried, and the outcome must promise better conditions. These are all jus ad bellum-criteria. Further does it say that the use of arms have to be of a lesser evil than the situation which is to be changed. This refers to the use of force in itself, making it fit within the category of jus in bello. This decree is by no means agreed upon by all churches and, as

**2309** The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time:

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- there must be serious prospects of success;
- the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modem means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

These are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the "just war" doctrine. (...)

**2243** Armed resistance to oppression by political authority is not legitimate, unless all the following conditions are met: 1) there is certain, grave, and prolonged violation of fundamental rights; 2) all other means of redress have been exhausted; 3) such resistance will not provoke worse disorders; 4) there is well-founded hope of success; and 5) it is impossible reasonably to foresee any better solution.

with the whole tradition of just war thinking, it is being deeply questioned by many contemporary theologians and scholars (i.e. Yoder's article).

## Islamic non-violence

To look at the concept of Islamic non-violence, we first have to understand Qu'ranic teachings of the value of human life and the concept of just war. The Qu'ran and the Hadiths are the foundation for the teachings on all Muslim ethics and morals. The Qu'ran is by the Muslim community understood as God's word revealed to mankind and therefore the main source for authority on how life and religion should be practised. Furthermore, the account of Prophet Muhammad's life, gathered in several collections of *hadiths,* elaborates Islamic teaching and shows how the Qu'ran should be interpreted. As the receiver of God's revelation and the leader of the early Muslim community, Muhammad's life is given a central role in explaining and interpreting the Qu'ran.

How does the Qu'ran understand the dignity and value of human life? According to Satha-Anand, the Qu'ran tells us that every human being, no matter race, religion or society, has an innate and holy value.[2] Given that all mankind is created by God, all have share in the same sacredness which essentially makes all humans a part of the same entity, God's holy creation. The Qu'ran tells us that God created men and women from the earth and breathed His Spirit into them, giving them life (Verse 15:29). This breath of spirit is the source of all living things and must be understood as the ground premise for how we should regard each other, friend or foe.

With this in mind, what are the necessary conditions for accepting the use of force according to Islamic teaching? Murder is considered to be one of the four major sins in Islam.[ii] How does tradition come to terms with the taking of a life, thinking of Islamic anthropology?

Contemporary debates on Islam and violence evolve much around the concept of jihad, the Arabic term for striving.[ii] This concept is with a superficial approach understood as the Muslim's *Holy War*. Jihad is depicted in tabloid debates as a demand to all Muslims to fight the infidel with force until they submit to Muslim rule and accept the Islamic religion. This image of Islam is confirmed further by Muslim terrorists using religious rhetoric in their cause. This understanding is, according to Chaiwat Satha-Anand, far from the original concept.

The use of force in Islam is, according to traditional teaching, strictly governed by a defined set of rules and requirements. Aggression itself is prohibited and transgression is not approved. Self-defence and the fight against injustice are the only situations where it is allowable for Muslims to make use of sheer force. In his presentation of Islam's traditions, Satha-Anand makes use of many Qu'ranic references. With verse 2:190, he shows Islam's prohibitions on using force other than for self-Badshahce:

> *Fight in the cause of Allah*
> *Those who fight you*
> *But do not transgress limits;*
> *For Allah loveth not transgressors.*

Further, he shows how the concept of jihad and Islam's stance towards injustice is closely knit. Satha-Anand refers to classical Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiya and his threefold definition of jihad, the struggle of the heart, the tongue and the hand.[ii] The greatest struggle is to strive with your own ego, to abolish self-centeredness and egoism, which is spoken of as the *Greater Jihad.* A hadith accords the Prophet saying: "The greatest jihad is the fight against one's own evil passions" The *Lesser Jihad* is the struggle for a just and lawful community. The jihad of the tongue and the hand has, according to Ibn Taymiya, to be guided with two cardinal rules: understanding and patience. This makes the overall idea of jihad into a concept of constant self-re-examination, to always question your personal character and the living conditions of your community. According to Satha-Anand: "The purpose of *jihad*, ultimately, is to put an end to structural violence".[ii] In situations demanding use of force, the implementation always has to be within the criteria of jus in bello. The lives of all non-combatants are to be held holy, crops and cattle have to be spared in respect of people's livelihood.

As we have seen, there are clear similarities between the Western and the Islamic tradition on the core principles of just war. Since

the basis for ethical and political reasoning is different between the Christian and the Muslim tradition, they differ in the way they reason on the subject. As a political leader, Prophet Muhammad had to deal with ethics concerning war, and thus made it a part of his own teaching and also addressed it as a topic in his revelations. The Christian tradition of just war does not relate to the story of Jesus in a parallel manner, but developed alongside Christianity as it became an official state religion.

As a contemporary propagator of Islamic non-violence, Chaiwat Satha-Anand fully acknowledges the Islamic tradition of just war. His reasoning for interpreting Islam as a message of pacifism is based on the conditions of modern society and modern warfare. The new technological weapons of war, especially weapons of mass destruction, make it more and more impossible to distinguish between combatants and civilians. "As a result it is virtually impossible for innocents to remain safe in an age when the sophistication of modern technology of destruction is coupled with the growing disregard of human life."[ii] His argument is thus roughly the following: Islam *does* deal with the use of force. The conditions for using force are strictly governed. Today we are not able to live up to the Islamic rules of just war. Nonetheless, Islam demands fighting against social injustice, and therefore we can only make this happen by engaging in nonviolent struggle.

## Badshah Khan

During India's struggle for independence from the British Empire, Badshah Khan was often spoken of as the *Frontier Ghandi*. The Frontier area is the northwestern part of India, the land of the Pashtuns, as referred to by the British.[3] Today the area is mainly within Pakistani borders and some parts are on Afghan land.

The Badshah was the son of a local khan governing a small village in the Frontier. His given name was Ghaffar Khan, son of Behram Khan, members of the Mohammedzai tribe. This tribe was said to be descendants of Prophet Muhammad himself. Ghaffar grew up in a home with a hospitable and devout father. Their village was relatively prosperous and they were known among the Pashtuns for their humble and peaceful ways.

Ghaffar Khan was unlike most Pashtuns fortunate enough to be sent to school by his family. He attended Christian mission schools and completed Islamic studies. While he was young, a Muslim social movement was established in his region by a mullah named Haji Abdul Wahid Saheb of Tarangzai. They eventually became associates and Khan worked with him to establish schools and organise different projects to raise living standards among the Pasthuns. The British rulers struck down this movement and Mullah Haji had to flee the region.[iii]

Ghaffar Khan continued this work alone. He lived a simple and devout life, dedicated to serving his own people. He always made use of Islamic teaching and rhetoric in his campaigns. He got into many debates and quarrels with local Muslims leaders, who regarded his social reform movement as a threat to their customs and authority. The Pashtun people lived under harsh conditions and brutal traditions of blood-revenge and warring among the different tribes.

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SOURCE: HTTP://WWW.BETTERWORLDHEROES.COM/KHAN.HTM

Ghaffar had from his own upbringing been given faith in the importance of forgiveness and strongly disregarded the violent ways of the Pashtuns.

Alongside Ghaffar Khan's growing popularity as a social reformer, tension was growing towards the British occupiers. Ghandi was gaining popularity in sub-continental India and the principles of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and patient struggle (*satayaghara*) were starting to spread.[iii] Parallel with the tendencies in the south, Ghaffar saw the same need for liberation and moral reform in his own area. He was deeply inspired by Ghandi's teachings and found them perfectly compatible with his own spiritual understanding of Islam. After attending a meeting where Ghandi spoke in New Dehli, Ghaffar Khan was inspired to start a new movement amongst his own people.

Rooted in Ghandi's principles and Islamic teaching, Ghaffar founded the movement "Servants of God" - Khudai Khidmatgar (see side). He opened a newspaper teaching hygiene, social reform and Islamic Law. His organization began as a social reform movement but quickly transformed into a force of liberation with freedom from British rule as its goal. Ghaffar Khan was given the honorary title Badshah Khan, "King of Kings", by his followers. His style of leadership was simple and humble. He walked on his feet from village to village, giving speeches and holding lectures in each town he visited. He appeared much in the same fashion as Ghandi, simply clothed and only bringing a walking stick. In the villages he always made sure to spend time with children and the poor people. He was also concerned with the situation of women in his society and he addressed the patriarchal tradition with Islamic rhetoric and promoted women's leadership and participation in society. His sisters had central positions in the movement.

Badshah Khan's followers were organized in an army-like structure. They had to swear an oath of social involvement and nonviolent struggle to join the community. Khan emphasized this oath throughout his campaign, especially during encounters with British soldiers, since the Pashtun mentality gave great reverence to the tradition of swearing loyalty. Their uniform was a simple red coloured dress which they always wore, marching from village to village while singing religious marching chants. They never carried weapons; their only utensils were walking sticks. They were treated violently by British soldiers and experienced several encounters where they were directly shot and killed, beaten and harassed in all thinkable ways. The British put tough restrictions on the entire Frontier, villages were burnt and looted, people were kept from harvesting and thus forced to starve. Every means was tried to make the Khudai Khidmatgar break their nonviolent oath and react back with violence. All of their leaders were put in jail on several occasions, and Badshah Khan himself sat nearly 10 years in prison. In this way, the British figured they would be able to instigate violence and then would be able tighten their grip on the area in response to it. At the end of their fight for liberation, Khan had

nearly 100 000 followers. The only lives lost in the fight were their own, never having raised a weapon other than their own pride and faith.

## The teaching of Khudai Khidmatgar

As a movement founded on religious principles, Badshah Khans always referred to the teachings of Islam to encourage and define their way of action. With the Islamic tradition of just war in mind, how did Khan make use of the religion in promoting his campaign? Is unconditional non-violence compatible with an Islamic approach to conflict? How did they understand their right to self defence and how could they accept being continuously harassed, beaten and shot at?

Ghaffar Khan was a man of deep spiritual commitment. He lived his life in simple manners, gave away his property (his village, becoming landless, something that was regarded as shameful by the Pashtuns) and spent a lot of time on prayers and meditation. His spirituality had a universal direction and he emphasized the innate value of every human person, being born and cared for by God. He did not like being spoken of as a Badshah or as the second Ghandi, and ended up, against his will, being regarded as a saint by his commoners while still alive.

What ideas and traditions within Islam did Ghaffar Khan make use of? According to Khan,

"There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, and it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off an oppressor's yoke. But we had so far forgotten it that when Gandhiji placed it before us, we thought he was sponsoring a novel creed". [iii]

*Sabr* is considered a central virtue in Islam. [iii] Khan spoke of nonviolence as the "weapon of the Prophet". By this he understood *sabr* as the patience and endurance Prophet Muhammad and his followers suffered while still in Mecca, as reflected in his revelations, teachings and early stories from this period. This concept can be easily compared to Ghandi's term Satyagraha, which is compiled by the two words, *satya*, "truth" in Sanskrit, and *agraha*, meaning "to hold on to". In the same way the Prophet and his companions had to firmly hold on to their faith in God while under suppression in Mecca, Badshah Khan encouraged his followers to hold on to their faith and love for God and mankind, while enduring suffering without answering back with violence.

### The Army's oath:

**I am a Khudai Khidmatgar; and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God.**

**I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge.**

**I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.**

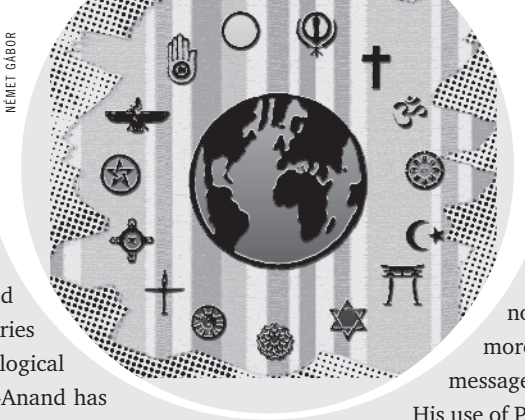
**I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity.**

**I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and my friend.**

**I promise to refrain from antisocial custom and practices.**

**I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and refrain from evil.**

**I promise to practice good manners and good behaviour and not to lead a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work.**



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## Discussion

Looking at these two cases of Islamic pacifism, it is clear that I have investigated two wholly different histories and contexts. The theological reasoning of Chaiwat Satha-Anand has been presented in an environment of peace-activism among Islamic scholars in Thailand and internationally. His theses are systematically built, at first taking account of Islam's different approaches to the concept of just war through history, then applying these principles to the contemporary context. His project seems to be a thorough attempt to reinterpret Islamic teaching so that the new perspective could effectively contribute to healing a world troubled with growing disregard of human life and advanced weapons which severely damage without separating combatants from civilians.

Badshah Khan was a local tribe-leader; he was lifted up by his fellow people when preaching the message of pacifism. He did not use the same theological academic reasoning as Satha-Anand does in his manifesto. Badshah Khan was a devout believer leading a movement of 100 000 people in a struggle for independence. His rhetoric was simple and in plain manners. He emphasized the importance of forgiveness and the love for God and his people. To him, nonviolence was the only possible path for Pashtuns to escape their miserable situation. The violent oppression of the British and the local customs of violent blood-feuds could not be conquered by shedding more blood. Khan saw Ghandi's message as the only feasible way out.

His use of Prophet Muhammad's example of a suffering in *sabr* from Mecca would surely be counter argued by Muslim scholars, sceptical and unfamiliar with this specific situation. Would not it be wrong to only emphasize one part of the Prophet's history? Would not Khan leave out most important sanctions when it comes to fighting oppression and being able to defend your own life if under attack? Khan was surely aware of this thoroughly developed way of reasoning. His own conviction on the contrary, seems to be based on a simple faith deeply rooted in his spiritual practice and the virtues he had been brought up with, hospitality and forgiveness – all of which to him formed the true and original meaning of Islam.

I find both approaches to be good and valid perspectives on the Islamic stance towards conflict. In fact, they enrich each other. Satha-Anand has shown how one can argue with theological reasoning for pacifism, while Badshah Khan has shown how it is performed, both the technical way of pacifistic engagement as well as the spirituality and philosophy behind it.

**(Endnotes)**

1 Yoder, J. H.: *When War is Unjust. Being Honest in Just-War Thinking*, 1996. Orbis Book, Maryknoll, N.Y. p. 3.

2 Satha-Anand, Chaiwat (Qader Muheideen). *The Nonviolent Crescent:Eight Theses on Muslim Nonviolent Actions.* Article in Islam and Nonviolence Edited by Glenn D. Paige, Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Qader Muheideen), and Sara Gilliatt, 1989. Center for Global Nonviolence, Honolulu. p. 15, 8, 10.

3 Easwaran, Eknath: *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam, Badshah Khan, A Man to Match His Mountains,* 1999. Nilgri press, Tomales, CaliforniaAppendix 1. p. 67, 80, 103, 235, 247.