Situations 9.1 (2016): 93–97 ISSN: 2288-7822

Book Review

Robert Gleave and István T. Kristó-Nagy, eds., *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'ān to the Mongols* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. viii, 288.

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The association between violence and Islam has played a central role in Western understandings of Muslim societies, institutions and beliefs since the eleventh century. The notion that Islam filled its adherents with a violent fanaticism and a "barbaric fury," as characterised by Pope Urban II in 1095 CE, has in turn been used by Western leaders and thinkers to justify their own supposedly "retaliatory" attacks against Muslim communities from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indonesian archipelago over a similar time frame. The recent revival of this connection between violence and Islam in the Western popular media, particularly over the last decade and a half, was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of a three-year research project funded as part of the Global Uncertainties Programme, entitled Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Islamic Thought (LIVIT). The present work, *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'ān to the Mongols*, represents the culmination of the LIVIT project and will be the first in a three-part series documenting the role of violence in Islamic thought from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) up to the present day. The periodization for the present volume covers the period from the dawn of Islam in the seventh century up to the Mongol conquest and rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The papers included within this edited volume were presented at the first LIVIT conference held in 2011, which addressed the hypothesis

that "understanding the history of thought processes around violence over time is essential for a clearer understanding of how violence is legitimised by ideologies and belief systems." The conference papers have been published under three subheadings: "*Jihād* and Conquest: Attitudes to Violence Against the External Enemies of the Muslim Community," which is concerned primarily with acts of violence against foreigners and non-Muslims; "The Challenged Establishment: Attitudes to Violence Against the State and in its Defence Within the Muslim Community," which covers violence against internal enemies, such as rebels and heretics; and "Lust and Flesh: Attitudes to Violence Against the Defenceless, Intra-Communitarian Violence by Non-State Actors," covering violence against the more vulnerable members of a society such as women and animals.

As with many conference proceedings, *Violence in Islamic Thought* covers a very diverse and often quite specialized range of topics. The book begins with one of the co-editors, István Kristó-Nagy, establishing the working definition of violence as "any detrimental act performed by a living being against a living being." He then builds upon this premise to engage in a discussion about the relationship between violence and the living world. This discussion incorporates biological, social and ethical interpretations of how violence is to be understood in the context of human interactions. The focus then shifts to a textual evaluation of the role of state violence in Islamic history through a series of articles on the Qurʻrān, Qurʻānic exegesis and historical traditions. The concept of violence expands in the third section of the book to include sections on sexual violence, criminal violence, cannibalism and violence against animals. The diversity of topics certainly means that there is something in this book to appeal to all interests. Indeed, the breadth of topics discussed is quite refreshing in a field that has traditionally been dominated by monographs on the historical role of *jihād* (religiously-sanctioned war) and the supposed marriage of violence and political Islam in the twentieth-century. Of course, those who were enticed to read this volume on the promise that it would provide a "deeper understanding of global security threats" will probably have to wait until the publication of the third volume.

The contributors to *Violence in Islamic Thought* adopt a refreshingly nuanced approach to their topic, which provides a clearer understanding of the multifarious ways in which violence has been interpreted by historical Muslim communities. They eschew the tendency of many Liberal Islamic historians to argue that Islam is a religion of peace, using scripture to deny the historic role of violence in Islam—an anachronistic position that misrepresents the teachings of the Qur'ān almost as egregiously as those who argue for the inherently violent nature of Islam. Instead, the contributions to the present study draw distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence appearing in early Islamic theology, history, law, poetry and ethnography from the foundation of the Islamic community at Medina in 622. Andrew Rippin's essay, "Reading the Qur'ān on *Jihād*: Two Early Exegitical Texts," for example, compares the writings of two early traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*), Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767) and Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838) to show that interpretations of violence in Islam depend on the focus of the text, whether it be a legal, ethical or theological study on the reported sayings and actions of the Prophet (*Sunnah*). Similarly, Christopher Melchert suggests in his contribution, "Ibn al-Mubarak's *Kitāb al-Jihād* and Early Renunciant Literature," that the relative importance of *jihād*, as opposed to other forms of devotion, fluctuated depending upon time, context and the juridical tradition of the writer. Elsewhere, Milós Sárközy argues that the theme of violence in hunting narratives was used to show the prowess and suitability of Persian Muslim rulers, whereas Maribel Fierro suggests that violence perpetrated by the state against women, and even heretics, could undermine the authority of a ruler and see them branded as tyrants. In short, violence is shown to be neither inherently moral nor immoral within the Classical Islamic intellectual tradition. Rather, the ethical value attributed to violence depended very much upon the time and place in which it was viewed.

Insofar as it suggests a degree of congruence between interpretations of legitimate and illegitimate violence in the early Islamic community and its neighbours in Europe and Asia, *Violence in Islamic Thought* supports the argument that the early Islamic Empire should be seen as an extension, rather than the end, of Late Antiquity. Comparisons between

Islamic and Late Antique Christian theology and narrative traditions are made briefly by István Kristó-Nagy in his analysis of violence in Islamic scripture ("Who Instigated Violence: A Rebelling Devil or a Vengeful God?") and by Andrew Marsham in his study into narrative accounts of the use of immolation as a punishment for heretics and rebels ("Attitudes to the Use of Fire in Executions in Late Antiquity and Early Islam: The Burning of Heretics and Rebels in Late Umayyad Iraq"). The latter of these two studies convincingly demonstrates that *topoi* from early Christian hagiographies were adopted freely by early Abbasid historians seeking to criticise the supposed brutality of the previous Umayyad regime. Zoltán Szombathy makes similar comparisons in his discussion of cannibalism in the travelogues of several Muslim journeymen. Szombathy observes that accounts of cannibalism were used equally by Ancient Greek and early Muslim geographical treatises to delineate the border between the civilized and uncivilized world.

One minor criticism that may be levelled at the book is that it focuses very heavily on the intellectual traditions of the Classical Age of Islam, which coincided with the height of the Abbasid caliphate (750-905). The earlier Umayyad caliphate (661-750) receives some attention, as does the Arab conquest of Iran, but the period of Mongol rule (1220-1335), and, by extension Temürid rule (1380-1506), which is usually grouped with the Mongol dynasties, receives virtually no attention at all. This despite the fact that the "Mongol period" produced some of the most innovative and challenging exegetical studies (*tafsīr*) of the Qurʻān in pre-modern history, including the *Laṭāʻif al-Ḥaqāʻiq* of Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh al-Ṭabīb (d. 1319). Dorothea Krawulsky has briefly hinted at the way that Rashīd al-Dīn used the doctrine of abrogation (*al-naskh*) to argue against the use of violence as a means of spreading Islam into the *dar al-ḥarb* (domain of war/non-Muslims). His views were, no doubt, pushed by the conversion of the Mongols to Islam towards the end of the thirteenth-century, which forced jurists, such as the Hanbalite Ibn al-Taymiyya (d. 1328), to ponder whether it was still legitimate to wage war on the Mongol conquerors now that they had become Muslims. Nevertheless, these limitations are to be expected in such an ambitious work as *Violence in Islamic Thought*, and the editors openly acknowledge

that their study was "intended neither to offer a survey of the immense scholarly literature on violence, nor to represent a set of ideas agreed to by all the contributors to this series." Rather, the book provides a sense of the highly complex and fluid role that violence played in Islamic thought over the course of several centuries, a target that the book undoubtedly strikes.

This review should not pass without mentioning that the current volume was dedicated to the memory of Thomas Sizgorich (1970-2011), whose work on violence in Islamic intellectual history informed many of the essays.