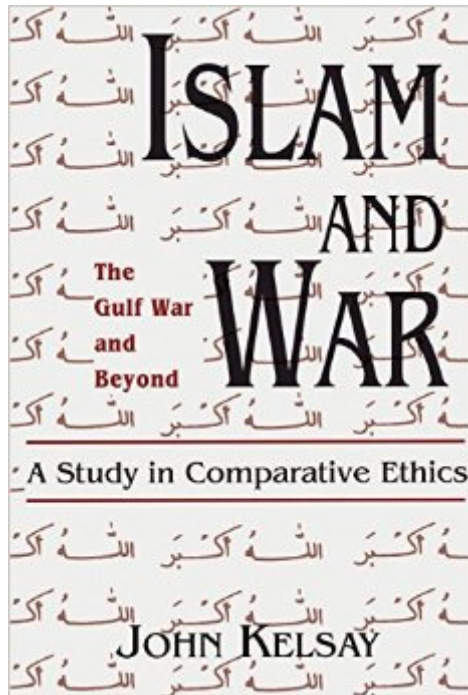# Islam And War: A Study In Comparative Ethics

Synopsis

This book explores questions regarding the justice of war and addresses the lack of comparative perspectives on the ethics of war, particularly with respect to Islam. John Kelsay begins with the war in the Persian Gulf, focusing on the role of Islamic symbols in the rhetoric of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He provides an overview of the Islamic tradition in regards to war and peace, and then focuses on the notion of religion as a just cause for war.

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Customer Reviews

This is an essential "read" for understanding classic Islamic theory of warfare as it relates to 9-11. Dr. John Kelsay, Chairman of the Department of Religion at Florida State University, an authority on the ethics of religion and war, wrote this book after observing how Saddam Hussein appropriated Muslim theology in his war with Iran and his invasion of Kuwait with the resulting Gulf War. In less than 150 pages, Kelsay makes an unfamilar subject understandable to the average college student. If this title is not on reading lists for Islam and terrorism, the list is plainly inadequate. "The territory of Islam is theoretically the territory of peace and justice....By contrast, the territory of war is the epitome of human heedlessness and internal strife; it also constitutes a continual threat to the security of the territory of Islam....The peace of the world cannot be fully secure unless all people come under the protection of an Islamic state." This is the classic Sunni meaning of "jihad"--the struggle to extend the territory of Islam, whether by the tongue, pen, or warfare. Understanding this doctrine is necessary for Western comprehension of the motivation of militant Muslims in their attacks on both Israel and Western nations. Kelsay discusses the Islamic rules of armed force: just

cause, an invitation to become Muslims or pay tribute to the Islamic state, a requirement of right authority in declaring war, and war must be conducted by Islamic values. He demonstrates the parallels between the western theory of "just war" developed by Christianity and the Muslim philosophy of the ethics of warfare, noting that an understanding of culture and history are essential for proper understanding. Of highest interest to the West, in light of September 11, 2001, is Kelsay's chapter on "Soldiers without portfolio: irregular war in the tradition of Islam." He discusses the status of Islamic rebellion against a legitimate Muslim government and the protection the rebels have under Islamic law. Iran considered the more secular Iraq to be corrupt, an apostasy, forfeiting traditional Moslem protections. This is precisely the problem which faces the more "westernized" Middle Eastern nations such as Egypt and Jordan. Bands of "irregulars" within these countries believe that they must overturn established regimes in order to return justice and true Islamic values to their societies, a "defensive jihad." Palestinians living on the West Bank and Gaza see their activities against Israel as overturning injustice. As a consequence, these "irregulars" have challenged traditional "jihad" and the right of established governments to declare war. Muslim governments which negotiate treaties with "foreign" governments (e.g. Egypt's treaty with Israel) or allow the United States or others to place troops in the Arabian peninsula are "corrupt." The Islamic Jihad's assassination of Egypt's President Sadat, Hamas terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, and Osama bin Laden's proclamation of "jihad" against the United States become obligations for "proper" Muslims. Because such warfare must be waged against superior forces, Muslim warriors possess "right authority" in using whatever means they have. Classic Sunni Islam theory of war differs from western theory of "just war." Western culture divides people into combatants and noncombatants. For Islam, Kelsay states, "...guilt and innocence had to do with religious and political factors. How does one fit into the scheme of things, as understood from the Muslim point of view?" If women and children are killed in battle, it is not the fault of the Muslim--it is their leaders who are responsible for the death of innocents. Kelsay clearly explains the challenge that the use of terrorism, directed as it is toward non-combatant civilians, presents to modern Muslim scholars and clerics. They must develop theories on the justification and limitation of warfare that reflect reality rather than the pre-modern Islamic society in which the bin Ladens of the world operate. The "irregulars" have stretched the tradition farther than it can go. Despite the pleas of both Westerners and Muslims in western nations to "understand" the militant Muslim position and injunctions to change American foreign policy, in the words of John Kelsay, "...listening, understanding, and accommodating are distinct activities."

John Kelsay takes a critical look at Islam and "Just War" in this book, with the intent to (at least) partially exonerate Islam from some of the misguided criticisms and confusions that circulate about it. While this book has rich resources that examine the Islamic tradition and its practices on war, one wonders if Kelsay fully succeeds in his aims. Undoubtedly if you are interested and engaged in the topic of Islam and war, you will appreciate this short work. That said, however, the reader is left wondering: is Islam really so non-violent, or is it inherently radical? Kelsay says that the only time that Muslims can go to war are generally for defensive purposes, and when the religion itself is under threat. But it appears very clear in his text that this has been used in Islamic history as a mere pretext for expansion and even offensive jihad. I must commend this book as at least a first milestone in a subject which needs much more serious academic exploration, but I have to say that there are many questions that remain. In a nutshell - this book is a rich source for Muslim thought about war from the ancient to the modern period, but it does not accomplish the kind of clarity or resolution of what Muslim "Just War" is. Further scholarship and the contribution of Muslim voices will have to achieve this end.

I read this book about 5 years ago. It was the first I'd seen clearly explaining that under shari'a (Islamic law), it is acceptable to attack even women and children under certain circumstances--if Muslims believe they are "defending Islam"--which basically amounts to prosecuting war to spread Islam.The book is highly useful in many respects, and was certainly an eye opener for me.However, Kelsay one must read this with an awareness that Kelsay is overly sympathetic to Islam. He erroneously seems to believe that, while Islam justifies virtually all war without distinction--and also holds spreading religion by war as a bastion of faith--Islam also has some things to teach the West in terms of human rights. Given the amount of rape, pillage, murder and plunder prosecuted in Islam's name over 14 centuries--this frankly amounts to naive dhimmitude.With all its flaws, secular western Democracy is undoubtedly the best political system in the world, while "Islamic democracy" is by definition a contradiction in terms.As Irshad Manji wrote about a current Kelsay title moderate Muslims cannot be counted on to rescue shari'a reasoning from radicals. Kelsay hopes that three particular moderates will, in Manji's words, "rehabilitate democracy's appeal after the serial hypocrisies practiced in Washington" and elsewhere.Oh my. Serial hypocrisies is far more apt a description of Islam than Western democracy much less Western thinking on just war. As Manji notes, "Muslim democrats will also have to confront Koranic passages" on which radicals base what turns out to be rather traditional Islamic reasoning.As a courageous Muslim commented concerning my Jan 2, 2007 article on shari'a now affecting U.S. libel cases, Islamic law is "a highly self serving

tool for purposes of maintaining "religious authority," and that "a central tenet of Islamists in Denmark, in Great Britain, in Canada, in France and (apparently) in the United States is to keep up pressure for principles of shari'a to erode and (eventually) replace civil and constitutional law?"Unfortunately, in both this and later volumes, Kelsay has clearly missed that critical point.Consequently, this volume is useful only up to a point. It does explain several very alarming points about Islamic theology and jurisprudence on warfare. But then, Kelsay erases some of that value--going to great lengths to excuse those immoral and untenable traditional Islamic positions.Like Manji and the courageous above-noted anonymous commentator, I believe Islam needs a reformation, but also that scholars ought to quit apologizing for inhuman Islamic practices and start demanding that it, not the west, change.--Alyssa A. Lappen

The material is good but the development by Kelsay could have been organized more clearly. But we need to know this stuff.

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