Theology Faculty Research and Publications   Theology, Department of

9-2008

Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence: A Critical Appraisal of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's View of Jihad (Part I)

Irfan A. Omar
Marquette University, irfan.omar@marquette.edu

Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence.I

A Critical Appraisal of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's View of Jihad

Irfan A. OMAR, Ph.D.

A teacher in the Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA
(Irfan.Omar@marquette.edu), the author studies the work of a well-known Islamic
scholar of India, much influenced by, though at times critical of, Mahatma Gandhi,
to establish the foundation of dialogue in the spirituality of the sources of Islam, and
show that according to the Holy Qu'ran the word *Jihad* does not stand for violent
warfare but for the struggle that every Muslim, indeed every person, should go through
to remain obedient to God's Word and to bring about the will of God on earth.

I. Introduction

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan is an internationally known Islamic '*ālim*
(religious scholar) and founder of the Al-Risāla Movement. He has
authored over a hundred books, originally written in Urdu, many of them
translated into Arabic, English, Hindi and other languages used in the
Islamic world, such as Malay and Turkish. His numerous articles have
appeared in newspapers and journals in India and abroad. He is also the
sole contributor and editor-in-chief of the monthly *al-Risāla*.

Born in 1925, Wahiduddin Khan is a graduate of the Islamic seminary
at Azamgarh.[1] From early on he took a keen interest in trying to acquire
modern scientific knowledge even though he never attended secular
schools. In his effort to bridge the gap between traditional Islamic learning
and modern knowledge, he set out to contemplate and construct a new
style of thinking which resulted in a rather bold interpretation of Islamic
textual sources. In 1970, he established the Islamic Centre in Delhi, which
would later become the publishing site of the monthly magazine *al-Risāla*,
first in Urdu (issued in 1976) and then in English (1984)[2] and Hindi (1990,
now ceased). This journal and Maulana Khan's other writings seek to
present Islam in what he calls the '*asrī uslūb* or the "contemporary idiom."
The main task of this literature was, and still is, to generate among Muslims

[1] He studied at Madrasatul Islah, Sarai Mir in Azamgargh District, which was
founded by Maulana Hameeduddin Farahi in 1909 adopting the style of Nadwatul
'Ulama of Lucknow.

[2] The English edition has recently been renamed *The Spiritual Message*, and
is being published from Mumbai.

a new sensitivity and awareness of their religious and social responsibilities through a moral discourse based on the foundational sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions of Prophet Muhammad).

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's audience has widened in the last decade to include Hindu and Muslim professionals and secular educators and intellectuals, as well as graduates of the *madrasah* (Islamic seminary) system and other religiously minded Muslims. Many traditional scholars read Khan's exposés with interest for his reporting of and commentary on modern scientific and cultural issues of interest for their religious significance. He has written on a wide variety of subjects within Islam. Some of these are *sīrah* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad,[3] *hajj* or the pilgrimage to Makkah,[4] Tablīgh Movement of Delhi,[5] status of women in Islam,[6] interfaith relations, democracy and secularism, Islam and education, Islam and non-violence and many others. In this essay, I will limit myself to the study of Khan's treatment of the notions of peace and nonviolence in Islam. More importantly, I will highlight Khan's attempt to redefine and reclaim the notion of *jihad* for peaceful religious activism supported by his systematic treatment of Islamic textual and historical sources.

II. Al-Risāla: A Movement for Personal Reform

The primary aim of the Al-Risāla Movement is to promote Islamic activism, which for Wahiduddin Khan immediately translates as *da'wah* or 'witnessing for Islam', both by word and deed. To arrive at that goal requires a certain posture, a methodology which must rest on some concrete theological foundations. The vast majority of Khan's works deals with these two major tasks: first, explorations in Islamic theology, history, and tradition, drawing from them a consistent stream of ideas applicable in his view for contemporary situations, and resulting in his new theology; second, highlighting the need for revolutionary change (metaphorically speaking) in Muslim attitudes whereby these ideas may be implemented in social settings where Muslims live, either as a minority

---

[3] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Muhammad: The Prophet of Revolution.* New Delhi: Maktaba al-Risāla, 1986. Reprinted as *Muhammad – The Prophet of all Humanity* (1999). Originally written in Urdu as *Paighambar-i inqilāb* ["The prophet of revolution"] (1982).

[4] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Haqīqat-i hajj* ["True Meaning of *hajj*"]. New Delhi: Maktaba al-Risāla, 1984. Also translated into Arabic under the same title.

[5] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Tablīghī tehrīk* ["Tabligh Movement"]. New Delhi: Maktaba al-Risāla, 1985. Also translated into English as *Tabligh Movement* (1986).

or as a majority, by applying peaceful and almost pacifist methods.

Maulana Khan uses the Qur'an to justify his conciliatory approach. His is a model of cooperation, and even compromise as some would argue, rather than a path of conflict and impasse. He frequently draws on the Truce of Hudaybiyah, which the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) concluded with his Makkan adversaries in the year 628, as a model for his approach. Hudaybiyah is a place where over a thousand Muslims, on their way to Makkah to perform *umrah* (lesser pilgrimage) at the Ka'bah, were stopped by the elite members of the Quraysh tribe as a sign of their hostility towards Muslims. According to Arab custom, every one was entitled to this right of pilgrimage. Faced with this dilemma, Muslims under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad concluded a treaty with the Makkans which was deemed to be humiliating by many members in the Muslim group. Muhammad however was able to see the far-reaching effects of the peace that were to result from signing the treaty. Shortly thereafter Muslims were able to return to Makkah as liberators, without bloodshed. Contrary to all prevailing Arab customs, Muhammad declared general amnesty and reconciled with the former enemies.

This truce is usually characterized as the cornerstone of Muslim success in the early stages of Islam and it was entirely nonviolent. Not only does Khan invoke this incident as a model for the resolution of conflict and reconciliation, he also argues that this is the only possible way out of the ongoing conflicts facing Muslims, not only in India but also in other regions of the world. The way to achieve peace is through non-confrontational, non-idealistic and, above all, non-political means. It is in the last sense that the Al-Risāla approach seems most problematic as it seeks to identify with absolute apolitical pacifism, not widely acceptable among Muslims. In fact, on this point Wahiduddin Khan, who has great admiration for Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948), differs from him and judges him to be in the wrong in advocating political activism.

For Maulana Khan, being non-confrontational means to ignore the problematic aspect of the "other" and to focus on the positive aspects, following in effect the dictum "starve the problems, feed the opportunities."[7] It has to do with guarding one's frame of mind from the

---

[6] Maulana WAHIDUDIN KHAN, *Women Between Islam and Western Society,* tr. Farida Khanam. New Delhi: Al-Risāla Books, 1997, and *Women in Islamic Shari'ah,* tr. Farida Khanam. New Delhi: The Islamic Centre, Goodword Books, 2000.

[7] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, interview by Irfan A. Omar, New Delhi, India, January 18, 1997.

distractions and the strain resulting from conflict. To this end, one should simply operate on the principle of accepting responsibility for one's own share of any given problem and start to build from there. Moreover, all actions must be done in the light of the possible consequences that may arise from any given encounter. It is unwise to *react* in situations of conflict with measures that may cause them to intensify it. It is important to *respond* by being aware of one's immediate goal as well as ultimate objectives. The goal in Khan's view is to maintain peaceful relations with others. In a situation of conflict one's focus should be on the goal, separating it from the issues arising out of temporal conflict.[8]

Wahiduddin Khan's moral discourse has two long-term objectives: one is to cultivate an ethics-based religious environment enabling communities and individuals to settle disputes amiably; the second is to construct the moral stature so as to enhance the Muslims' chances to witness for Islam. Despite conflicts and disagreements, he advises Muslims to focus upon these objectives. This, he says, is the mission enjoined upon Muslims by God, and nothing should come in its way.[9] Only by avoiding the way of conflict and confrontation and pursuing the path of nonviolence will the *ummah* ("worldwide Muslim community") be able to progress in the areas of both *dīn* ("faith") and *dunyā* ("worldly life"). The two are contingent upon each other. In the absence of *dīn*, *dunyā* is a mere facade with no meaning. In the absence of *dunyā*, *dīn* is not wholesome and lacks the challenge necessary to strengthen one's faith in God.

"Islam is not an organizational duty," says Khan. Further, in response to the question, "Is Islam a complete system of life?" he says that this is the wrong way to ask the question. In other words, to say *al-Islām dīn wa-dawla* ("Islam constitutes religion and politics") poses an incorrect dichotomy; religion and politics are not two equal distinct entities that

---

[8] Maulana Khan calls this the principle of *bayn qaziyatain*, which if followed enables one to distinguish between issues and not to confuse problems with resolutions. See his *Fikr-i Islāmi* ["Islamic thought"]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla Books, 1996, 218.

[9] Maulana Khan says that unfortunately today Muslims in many parts of the world are filled with hostile views against non-Muslims and other Muslims. Many Muslim religious and political leaders have based their leadership on preaching injury (*zarar rasānī*) to others. Their counsel of hate in the name of Islam or "Muslim interests" has caused a serious deflation of moral discourse as well as deterioration in inter-religious, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations in many regions where Muslims and non-Muslims live together. Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Safarnāmah: ghayr mulkī asfār* ["Travelogue: Journeys abroad"]. New Delhi: The Islamic Centre, 1992, vol. 1, 199.

can be said to complete Islam.[10] In approaching Islam, one must see first the centre or "essence," which is prayer, or more precisely one's submission to God, and then consider politics, economics and other such things which are merely "accidents." Accidents will naturally flow from the essence (*islām* or submission) once the latter is established in the form of *imān* ("faith") and its outward expressions.[11] For example, a building is composed of many things: wood, iron, cement, etc. Therefore a building can be said to be a combination of those things that went into its construction. A tree similarly contains branches, leaves, fruit, roots, etc. But it cannot be said to be "composed" of these things. One cannot construct an authentic tree by collecting all these parts as in the case of a building. This is so because the "entire tree is potentially present within a seed" and therefore the seed alone is essential (bears the essence) for the tree; other things simply emerge by virtue of the seed's essence. One does not need to bring other things from elsewhere and superimpose them upon a tree to make that tree complete. This is how, according to Khan, one must understand Islam because, as he says,

> ... essentially speaking Islam is one's relationship with God. Other things simply follow as conditions for them ripen along the way. All you need is the seed of '*ibādah* (based on *iman*/faith) and operating on that you fulfill your duty of witnessing to others (*da'wah*). Political, economic and social changes will be made manifest by themselves [through divine help] once the potential present within one's faith is actualized.[12]

In this description of Islam, there is no dichotomy between religion and politics as if they were two opposite, almost rival aspects of a given totality. There is only the *dīn*, the seed alone. It is complete; potentially all things are present in it. If "we nurture this seed properly, it becomes a tree by itself." Khan continues, "with *imān*, *da'wah* will come, with *da'wah* every other need will be fulfilled of its own accord thus we should know that *imān billah* ['faith in God'] is complete *dīn*."[13]

III. Religion as a Source for Peace: Wahiduddin Khan's Theology of Nonviolence

It is important to note that Wahiduddin Khan's works in their entirety are concerned with the interpretation of Islam as a "peaceful religion."

---

[10] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, interview by Zakiuddin Sharfi, Mt. Holly, NJ, September 6, 1996.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

Islam enjoins its believers to establish as closely as possible a society where friction is minimized and harmony is desired at all levels: personal, social, and divine.[14] Harmony has to begin with the understanding of the self and the self's role in the universe as enjoined by the divine commandments in the Qur'an. This will eventually lead to the establishment of peace (*salām*), both inner and outer.

This ultimate interest in peace as reflected in Khan's works and praxis finds its basis in the religion of Islam itself. Therefore he sets out to develop his own elucidation of Islam centred on the principle of peace. This can be found in his interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*)[15] and is disseminated through his books, articles, lectures, talks, and personal meetings with leaders, politicians and others who are interested in advocating religiously based peace initiatives. Arising out of his "theology of nonviolence" is the notion of peaceful co-existence, which applies not only to the *ahl-i kitāb*, or the "People of the Book," but to all other peoples and in fact extending it to include all creation. Wahiduddin Khan's primary motivation in promoting peace is his religious calling, his personal faith in God, from which he earnestly draws the idea of peaceful co-existence as a foundational principle for pluralist living. Hence his celebrated advice offered at many interfaith meetings, "follow one [religion]; respect all."

Wahiduddin Khan is also convinced from the pragmatic perspective that without peace among various communities, religious or otherwise, humanity as a whole cannot achieve its full potential here on earth. Although the religious and pragmatic reasons for Khan are not separated in any artificial way, he nevertheless presents them separately so as to be able to relate to people at large instead of limiting his message to Muslims. In other words, even as it is incumbent upon Muslims to work for peace both in their communal and individual lives, it is required of them by the Qur'an as well as by the demands of conventional wisdom to promote peaceful co-existence with other people within their own communities and with people of other faiths and cultures in the world at large.

"Islam is the answer to the demands of nature," says Khan.[16] It is the goal of Islam to counter human failings and to attempt to maintain

---

[14] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Islam and Peace*. New Delhi: Goodword Books, 1999, 89.

[15] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Tadhkir al-Qurān*. 2 volumes. New Delhi: Maktaba al-Risāla, 1990.

[16] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Islam - dīn-i fitrat* ["Islam – religion of nature"]. Delhi: Maktaba al-Risāla, 1979.

a natural course of the human journey towards the Creator. Human nature desires "peace and love," which are also the demands of Islam.[17] Peace is the ultimate goal of each human being. For that reason, in Islam the goal of religious worship is also peace. Each individual is required to greet others with the salutations of peace (*al-salām 'alaykum* = peace be upon you). Similarly, each of the five formal prayers in Islam ends with the same greeting, implying an intention of spreading peace from within (the spiritual domain) to without (the social domain). It is like a "pledge given to people: 'O people you are safe from me. Your life, your property, your honor is secure with me'."[18]

In the Qur'an one of God's names is *al-Salām* or "Peace" (*Surat al-Hashr*, 59:23). "Those who seek to please God are assured ... that they will be guided by Him to the 'paths of peace'. Paradise, which is the final destination of the society of God's choice, is referred to in the Qur'an as 'the home of [the peaceful]'" (*Surat al-Fajr*, 89:27-30).[19] Peace on earth can be of many kinds. In the Qur'anic sense, it has two important aspects: the first kind is that which comes with God-consciousness and cultivated over a period of time through inner spiritual discipline. This spiritual form is linked with the second manifestation of peace which is between oneself and others, which would be called social peace. The underlying principle in both is the practice of patience (*sabr*). According to the Qur'an, God "abhors violent activity" (*Surat al-Baqarah*, 2:205) and encourages one to be patient, which in turn dissipates violence. As Wahiduddin Khan observes, patience is greatly emphasized in the Qur'an and is clearly the foundation for nonviolence (*la 'unf*):

> [In the Qur'an], . . .patience is set above all other Islamic virtues with the exceptional promise of reward beyond measure (39:10)... Patience implies a peaceful response, whereas impatience implies a violent response. The word *sabr* [patience] exactly expresses the notion of non-violence as it is understood in modern times. That patient action is non-violent action has been clearly expressed in the Qur'an. According to one tradition, the Prophet of Islam observed "God grants to *rifq* (gentleness) what he does not grant to *unf* (violence)."[20]

---

[17] KHAN, *Islam and Peace*, 36.

[18] Ibid. p. 37.

[19] Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, "Non-violence in Islam," unpublished paper presented at the Symposium on 'Islam and Peace in the 21st Century', Washington, D.C., February 6-7, 1998.

[20] Ibid., 1.

Wahiduddin Khan insists that Islam is the foundation for spiritual, religious, social and universal peace. Islam "desires peace to prevail in the world," suggesting that it is a tolerant religion. The Qur'an calls the way of Islam "the paths of peace" (*Surat al-Mā'idah*, 5:16). On the question of nonviolence, which is not directly mentioned in the Qur'an, Maulana Khan provides his own definition. In his mind, nonviolence involves active promotion of peace and "should never be confused with inaction or passivity. Nonviolence is action in the full sense of the word. ... It is more forceful an action than violence. It is a fact that non-violent activism is more powerful and effective than violent activism."[21]

Violence, he argues, is against the spirit of the age and therefore Muslims must learn and utilize peaceful means to resolve conflicts. This is imperative to realizing the fundamental teachings of Islam in their lives. In order to build a truly tolerant society free of violence, Wahiduddin Khan suggests following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi who, in his view, launched the most successful and potent nonviolent movement in the history of humanity. To further Gandhi's mission, he calls for a renewal of *Gandhi āndolan* ("Gandhi Movement") but in Khan's view such renewal should focus on working towards building moral character among people. He believes that the only way to bring about meaningful social change is through revolutionizing the thinking of each individual, as the "basic unit of society" (rather than through mass revolutions as such).[22] Since violence is born in the mind, it must be eradicated there. Echoing Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Wahiduddin Khan argues that in order to achieve this goal, there is a need for an "intellectual awakening" which may enlighten the minds and hearts of people. This is a continuous process and will require a great deal of patience, but once it has been achieved, violence will greatly diminish.[23] Wahiduddin Khan is against public protests, demonstrations and mass rallies as means to strive for peace. Instead he believes in what he calls a "peaceful revolution" where each individual takes it upon him/herself to eradicate violence within.

Wahiduddin Khan is a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. He claims to believe in Gandhi's ways of thinking, yet he is also critical of Gandhi. Few people would venture to criticize Gandhi's political approach in the presence of eminent Gandhian thinkers and scholars and in full view of

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] KHAN, *Islam and Peace*, 99.

[23] Ibid.

the masses.[24] But Wahiduddin Khan did not shy away from expressing his views against what he thought was a mistake in Gandhi's approach to nonviolence. This difference of views may be instrumental in understanding how Khan defines the notions of peace, nonviolence and jihad as discussed below.

Khan does not hesitate to call himself a Gandhian, and indeed he is close to Gandhi's thought in certain respects, but he is also distant from Gandhi in terms of approaches to achieving social reform. He reserves the right to criticize the man and his political actions. He is nevertheless deeply grateful to the Mahatma, especially for the latter's principle of nonviolence (*ahimsā*).[25] This is the area where he resonates with Gandhi most. But even here there is a moderate distinction between Gandhian nonviolence and Khan's vision of a nonviolent struggle.

There seem to be two major points of criticism directed against Gandhi. The first has to do with his view of nonviolence: in Gandhi's approach, nonviolence is a tool employed to actively seek justice by way of protest, demonstration and boycott without using physical force. It implies active resistance to things that are deemed unjust. This inevitably involves political activism. Khan on the other hand is against political manoeuvres and actions. To him, Gandhi's nonviolent struggles, because they were political, were a waste of time and were misdirected. By challenging the British Raj, even nonviolently, he instantly aroused the emotions and political hopes of the masses without allegedly providing tools to develop basic moral framework necessary for the execution of nonviolence as a principle. Nonviolence has to be adopted as part of personal morality by individuals in order for it to work in social movements. In Khan's view, nonviolent struggle implies "accepting the status quo"

---

[24] He did just that in front of a panel of five renowned experts on Gandhi, which included Gandhi's grandson and famous Indian philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi. The panel was organized by a leading daily newspaper, the report of which was published as "Could Gandhi Have Succeeded Today?" *The Pioneer* January 26, 1997.

[25] Mahatma Gandhi drew much from his readings in western humanism and Christianity. For example he added to his understanding of non-violence the notion of "agape," the Christian love producing a greater understanding than *ahimsā* would entail. See Bhikhu PAREKH, *Gandhi*. London: Oxford University Press, 1997. He also knew quite a lot about Islam and other religions such as Zoroastrianism and Sikhism. The Jain religion was perhaps the biggest influence on him because of the dominance of that religion in his home state of Gujarat. Two very important works on this aspect are, M.K. GANDHI, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, and Sheila MCDONOUGH, *Gandhi's Responses to Islam*. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1994.

and remaining apolitical – i.e., a struggle to achieve from *what is given* rather than *what is desired*. Khan is advocating a radical pacifis   in response to outside violence and injustice while remaining ac   .ly focused on potentially positive avenues emerging out of seemingly hopeless situations. This to him is a coherent, postmodern, and religiously sanctioned version of active nonviolence.[26]

Wahiduddin Khan resonates with Gandhi in implicating his own community's role in giving rise to their misfortunes. He assumes a dangerous position, like Gandhi, with respect to collective self-criticism, showing remorse for Muslim behaviour while at the same time ignoring majority Muslim sentiment and their view of themselves as victims. He places a much harsher blame on Muslim religious, secular and political leadership for "inciting" violence and creating tensions between Hindus and Muslims.[27] Khan's social mission begins by rejecting the popular perception of the problem. He rejects a dichotomous notion that Hindus are aggressors and Muslims are victims. In fact he blames Muslims even though they have almost always suffered a greater loss of life and property, because, as he says, it was the Muslims who did nothing to prevent the other party from becoming hostile and ultimately violent. His conclusion is that many of the problems that Muslims have faced as a minority in India since independence from the British are primarily due to their own attitudes towards, and mistrust of, Hindus.[28]

From his exposition of the notion of peace to his views on nonviolence, Wahiduddin Khan has tried to present Islam as a religion which primarily seeks to cultivate a moral rather than a political ethos. He builds a case for such ethos through his methodical interpretation of Islamic textual sources. In this he challenges several dominant views dealing with political and cultural traditions found in history as well as those in the contemporary period. Through his understanding of the core message of Islam, he calls for a revival of a form of Islamic activism, or *jihad* (in the sense of inner spiritual/moral struggle), which is seen as controversial by many Muslims.   *(to be concluded)*

---

[26] For more on Khan's appraisal of Gandhi's views on Islam and nonviolence, see Irfan A. OMAR, "Mahatma Gandhi and Wahiduddin Khan on Nonviolence and Jihad," in *Justice and Mercy Shall Embrace: Pathways to Peace in World Religions*, eds. Michael Duffey and Deborah Peterson. Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 2008, forthcoming.

[27] KHAN, "Non-Violence and Islam," unpublished paper, 12.

[28] Irfan A. OMAR, "Islam and the Other: The Ideal Vision of Mawlana Wahiduddin Khan," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, 3-4 (Summer-Fall 1999): 423-38.