

Perspectives on the Expansion of Islám¹

by Colin Dibdin

1. Introduction

It is often asserted that Islám is, and has from its beginnings been, spread by violence. Those who promote this view point to an abundance of supposed proof. The evidence they present includes verses from the Qur'án, actions by Muḥammad, conquests by Arabic armies, and modern acts of terrorism in the name of Islám. Only occasionally does their reasoning include thoughtful assessment of source material. Reputable current scholarship points to a different conclusion: that the spread of Islám has generally been by voluntary acceptance. My aims are to 1) collect some examples of writing on this subject, 2) suggest reasons why some writers make little or no reference to academic scholarship yet confidently assert that Islám is inherently violent, and 3) share some Bahá'í perspectives and personal opinions.

2. Scholarship on violence and the spread of Islám

The use of violence in the history of Islám may be considered from a number of reference points. Four are considered here: The teachings of the Qur'án; the example of the Prophet Muḥammad; the historical records; and contemporary reports.

2.1. Teachings from the Qur'án

In a chapter titled “Jihad” in his book *The Religion of Islam* Maulana Muhammad Ali argues that the term jihad is not synonymous with war. Throughout the Qur'án “even in the Madinah chapters the word [jihad] is used in the wider sense of a struggle carried on by words or deeds of any kind”². However, he explains, this wider sense of the word jihad, which involved matters of free individual choice, was lost when the Muslim law was codified because jurists only found it necessary to write about subjects that the law dealt with, such as fighting³.

Maulana Muhammad Ali, writing in 1936, addresses the conception that there is a doctrine of “the spread of Islam by force” with the following statement:

...”the spread of Islam by force”, is a thing of which no trace can be found in the Holy Qur'án. On the other hand, the Holy Book lays down the opposite doctrine in clear words. “There is no compulsion in religion”, and the reason is added: “The right way is clearly distinct from error” (2:256). This verse was revealed after the permission for war had been given, and it is therefore certain that the permission to fight has no connection with the preaching of religion. That the Holy Qur'án never taught such a doctrine, nor did the Holy Prophet ever think of it, is a fact which is now being gradually appreciated by the Western mind⁴.

Permission for war refers to the following Qur'anic verse:

Permission (to fight) is given to those on whom war is made, because they are oppressed. And surely Allah is able to assist them – Those who are driven from their homes without a just

¹ An earlier version of this paper was submitted on 14 August 2019 by Colin Dibdin as part of the course “Introduction to Islam 2019” offered by the Wilmette Institute [<https://courses.wilmetteinstitute.org/>]

² Muhammad Ali, Maulana, *The Religion of Islam: A Comprehensive Discussion of the Sources, Principles and Practices of Islam*, p386].

³ *ibid* p388.

⁴ *ibid* p388.

cause except that they say: Our Lord is Allah. And if Allah did not repel some people by others, cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques, in which Allah's name is much remembered would have been pulled down. And surely Allah will help him who helps His cause" (22:39,40)⁵

In Maulana Muhammad Ali's analysis fighting is permitted for defensive reasons only. It is not only for the religious liberty of Muslims but for the principle of religious liberty itself.

2.2. Actions of Muḥammad

Not all contemporary scholars of Islāmic history regard Muḥammad's role in warfare as purely self-defensive. Ira M. Lapidus, in *A History of Islāmic Societies*, has a chapter on "The Life of the Prophet" from which a reader might conclude that, after the Hijra in 622CE, any ongoing opposition from Mecca appears to have been hardly worthy of mention. Rather the opposite is asserted. Lapidus refers to Muḥammad's "unremitting hostility" towards Mecca, and states that Muḥammad's object was "to convert her people to Islām"⁶. Hugh Kennedy's account of the life of Muḥammad in *The Great Arab Conquests* is even more brief, but at least recognises that after the Hijra "the Quraysh of Mecca were determined to crush him". Kennedy writes:

Muḥammad's military campaigns were, in one sense, the beginning of the Muslim conquests. His example showed that armed force was going to be an acceptable and important element first in the defence of the new religion and then in its expansion...At the same time, diplomacy was certainly more important than military conquest in the spread of Muḥammad's influence in the Arabian peninsula⁷.

While Lapidus and Kennedy paid minimal attention to the life of Muḥammad, mentioning it as merely a preliminary to their explorations of the Islāmic conquests that followed, H. M. Balyuzi in *Muḥammad and the Course of Islām* attempts to do justice to both subjects. Balyuzi explains the use of force during Muḥammad's life in the following way:

As long as he bore no responsibility for presiding over the fortunes of men, Muḥammad, in the face of constant abuse, vilification, physical assault and injury, did not raise a finger to defend Himself. But as soon as the destinies and the security of His followers and indeed of a whole town came to rest in His hands, he acted as a ruler should, with tact and forbearance, with wisdom and justice. It was His duty to halt the aggressor, to counter the moves of the adversary, to neutralize the efforts of the enemy, and if need be to order his elimination. He had no other choice in a largely lawless land...⁸

Syed Ameer Ali in *The Spirit of Islam* provides a similar account of the actions of Muḥammad:

He who never in his life had wielded a weapon, to whom the sight of human suffering caused intense pain and pity, and who, against all the canons of Arab manliness, wept bitterly at the loss of his children or disciples, whose character ever remained so tender and so pathetic as to cause his enemies to call him womanish, - this man was now compelled, from the necessities of the situation, and against his own inclination, to repel the attacks of the enemy by force of arms, to organise his followers for purposes of self-defence, and often to send out expeditions to anticipate the treacherous and sudden onslaughts. Hitherto, Arab warfare consisted of sudden and murderous forays, often made in the night or in the early morn; isolated combats or a general melee, when the attacked were aware of the designs of the attacking party. Mohammed, with a thorough

⁵ *The Holy Qur'ān*, translated by Maulana Muhammad Ali, accessible online at <https://www.muslim.org/english-quran/quran-intro.htm> Surah 22 verses 39,40.

⁶ Lapidus, Ira M., *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁷ Kennedy, Hugh, *The Great Arab Conquests*, Phoenix, London, 2008, p48.

⁸ Balyuzi, H.M, *Muhammad and the Course of Islam*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1976, p160.

knowledge of the habits of his people, had frequently to guard against these sudden onslaughts by sending forth reconnoitring parties⁹.

When historical context is given due consideration the actions of Muḥammad can be seen as reasonable and seem to have involved the minimum level of force needed for security and future peace and progress.

2.3. The spread of Islám

The extraordinary Arabian conquests, under the early Islámic Caliphs who succeeded Muḥammad, reveal a paradox. On the one hand many of the Caliphs seemed to lack interest in religion except to the extent that the unity and energy of the religious community could be exploited to expand a new empire. On the other hand the religion of the invaders (or ‘migrants’ if understood as motivated by need rather than greed) did attract converts.

The following extracts, from a selection of academic writers including specialists in Arabic and Islámic history, are representative of the view that Islám was not spread by violence. The selection focusses on the earliest years of Islámic expansion when one might expect the teachings in the Qur’án and the example of Muḥammad to have guided the actions of those who claimed to follow Him.

Robert Louis Wilken:

And the early spread of Islám was an affair of deeds: vigorous, venturesome, irresistible deeds. In the span of less than a hundred years, Arab commanders made their way from the edge of Egypt along the North African littoral until they reached the Atlantic Ocean. From the Arabian Peninsula they also advanced northeast through Persia and across the Asian steppes to India. The Arabs reached Sind, today a province in Pakistan, in 711. And within the same decade, after crossing the Strait of Gibraltar into Christian Spain, they crossed the Pyrenees and penetrated southern France, to be halted finally at the battle of Poitiers in 732.

...

Soon Islám began to take hold among the conquered peoples – and one reason was that they were already familiar with the biblical tradition on which the Qur’án drew...¹⁰

T. W. Arnold:

These stupendous conquests which laid the foundations of the Arab empire, were certainly not the outcome of a holy war, waged for the propagation of Islám, but they were followed by such a vast defection from the Christian faith that this result has often been supposed to have been their aim. Thus, the sword came to be looked upon by Christian historians as the instrument of Muslim Propaganda, and in the light of the success attributed to it the evidences of the genuine missionary activity of Islám were obscured. But the **spirit spirit** which animated the invading hosts of Arabs who poured over the confines of the Byzantine and Persian empires, was no proselytising zeal for the conversion of souls. On the contrary, religious interests appear to have entered but little into the consciousness of the protagonists of the Arab armies. This expansion of the Arab race is more rightly envisaged as the migration of a vigorous and energetic people driven by hunger and want, to leave their inhospitable deserts and overrun the richer lands of their more fortunate neighbours.

⁹ Ali, Syed Ameer, *The Life and Teachings of Mohammed, or, the Spirit of Islam*, W.H. Allen and Co, London, 1891, p144.

¹⁰ Wilken, Robert Louis, “Christianity Face to Face with Islam”, in Zaleski, Philip (Editor), 2011: *The Best Spiritual Writing*, Penguin, New York 2010, pp180-181.

...It is not, therefore, in the annals of the conquering armies that we must look for the reasons which lead to the so rapid spread of the Muslim faith, but rather in the conditions prevailing among the conquered peoples.

...That force was not the determining factor in these conversions may be judged from the amicable relations that existed between the Christians and the Muslim Arabs¹¹.

Katherine Watt:

The second edition [of *The Preaching of Islam* by Thomas Walker Arnold] proposed a more nuanced understanding of Islám's propagation. Arnold maintained his original argument that the spread of Islám relied primarily on missionary rather than military efforts, but now conceded that pressure and force played a greater role than he had recognized in 1896...¹²

Sabrina Lei:

To put in the classical Orientalist parlance, Islám offered only two choices, either the sword or conversion to non-Muslims, and the Orientalists, looking retrospectively from this binary worldview at one of the verses of the Qur'án, which talks about a specific historical contest [which] existed in the light of the complicated situation between the Arab pagans and early Muslim, describe it as the verse of the sword.

However nothing is far from the truth than this portrayal of Islám as a violent religion that carried on converting people by force. The question, however, remains: how and when and why did such hateful vision of Islám emerge and how is that it still persists in many circles of Western thinkers and scholars? In fact, the Western non-Muslim scholars have themselves documented the historical prejudices against Islám and discussed the reasons for the origins of such prejudices.

At the core of this hostile vision lies the prejudice generated in the Western mind during the Crusades. ...

...

Even though the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, North Africa and Spain had been very fast, occurred [sic] from within the early decades after the death of the Prophet to a century, the conversion of the population, living in those territories, has been a long and gradual process, without any active involvement of the political power in the process, and it was undertaken by peaceful missionaries.¹³

Bernard Lewis – *The Middle East*:

It is sometimes said that the Islámic religion was spread by conquest. The statement is misleading, though the spread of Islám was to a large extent made possible by the parallel processes of conquest and colonization. The primary war aim of the conquerors was not to impose the Islámic faith by force. The Qur'án is explicit on this point: 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256)... The conquered peoples were given various inducements, such as lower rates of taxation, to adopt Islám, but they were not compelled to do so¹⁴.

¹¹ T. W. Arnold *The Preaching of Islam* chapter 2 "The Spread of Islam Among the Christian Nations of Western Asia".

¹² Watt, Katherine, "Thomas Arnold and the Re-Evaluation of Islam 1864-1930", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 36. No. 1 (Feb. 2002), p18.

¹³ Lei, Sabrina, *Introduction to Thomas Arnold's Preaching of Islam*, Tawasul, undated, https://www.academia.edu/8254673/Introduction_to_Thomas_Arnolds_Preaching_of_Islam, downloaded 13 August 2019. Also found in the Tawasul online edition of Arnold, T.W, *The Preaching of Islam*, vol 1, undated, Edited by Sabrina Lei "according to the 1986 and 1913, pp 1,7.

¹⁴ Lewis, Bernard– *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 years*, Scribner, New York, 1995, p57.

Ira Lapidus:

The expansion of Islám involved different forces. In North Africa, Anatolia, the Balkans, and India, it was carried by nomadic Arab or Turkish conquerors. In the Indian Ocean and West Africa it spread by peaceful contacts among merchants or through the preaching of missionaries. In some cases the diffusion of Islám depended upon its adoption by local ruling families; in others, it appealed to urban classes of the population or tribal communities. Its appeal was couched in interwoven terms of political and economic benefits and of a sophisticated culture and religion.

The question of why people convert to Islám has always generated intense feeling. Earlier generations of European scholars believed that conversions to Islám were made at the point of the sword, and that conquered peoples were given the choice of conversion or death. It is now apparent that conversion by force, while not unknown in Muslim countries, was, in fact, rare. Muslim conquerors ordinarily wished to dominate rather than convert, and most conversions to Islám were voluntary.

Even voluntary conversions are suspect to European observers. Were they made out of true belief, or for opportunistic political or social reasons? Surely there are innumerable cases of conversion to Islám by the illumination of faith or by virtue of the perceived sanctity of Muslim scholars and holy men, as well as by calculation of political and economic advantage. In most cases worldly and spiritual motives for conversion blended together...¹⁵

H.M. Balyuzi:

It is untrue to say (as it has been said again and again by those who would denigrate Muḥammad) that Islám was the religion of the sword¹⁶.

Peter Frankopan:

In fact, it appears that the Arab conquests were neither as brutal nor as shocking as the commentators make out. Across Syria and Palestine, for example, there is little evidence of violent conquest in the archaeological record. Damascus, for instance, the most important city in northern Syria, surrendered quickly after terms were agreed between the local bishop and the attacking Arab commander. Even allowing for some poetic licence, the compromise was both reasonable and realistic: in exchange for allowing churches to remain open and untouched and for the Christian population to remain unmolested, the inhabitants agree to recognise the overlordship of new masters. In practice what this meant was paying tax not to Constantinople and to the imperial authorities, but to representatives of 'the prophet, the caliphs and the believers'.

It was a process that was replicated time and again as the Arabs began to fan out in every direction, racing down the trade and communications routes...¹⁷

C. H. Becker:

It may seem paradoxical to assert that it was Christian influence which first stirred Islám to religious animosity and armed it with the sword against Christianity, but the hypothesis

¹⁵ Lapidus, Ira M., *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p198.

¹⁶ Balyuzi, H.M., *Muhammad and the Course of Islam*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1976, pp160-161.

¹⁷ Frankopan, Peter, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015, pp85-86.

becomes highly probable when we have realised the indifferentism of the Muhammedan conquerors¹⁸.

Harry Rosenberg:

Within a century of the prophet's death, Islám had reached the Atlantic (Morocco) and the River Indus (Pakistan). Within this vast area, there was created a theocratic empire led by the caliphs...

...Islám influenced a vast array of ethnic groups, cultures and religions. Contrary to the generally accepted view in the West, forced conversions were the exception...¹⁹

Richard Overy:

Initially, Islám did not particularly encourage, far less insist upon, conversion. The Koran enjoins Muslims to respect the "people of the book", that is, members of the other monotheistic religions with written scriptures. The peaceful co-existence of substantial Christian (and, until comparatively recently, Jewish) communities throughout the Muslim world is ample evidence that this injunction was heeded. Under the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258), however, large-scale conversion to Islám became common.²⁰

Maulana Muhammad Ali:

Not once in the wars of the early Caliphate did the Muslims send a message to a peaceful neighbour that, if it did not accept Islam, the Muslim forces would carry fire and sword into its territory. Wars they had to wage, but these wars were due to reasons other than zeal for the propagation of Islam. And they could not do a thing which their Master never did, and which their only guide in life, the Holy Qur'án, never taught them²¹.

William Montgomery Watt:

Some modern Muslim writers claim that these conquering Muslim armies went, as it were, with the sword in one hand and the Qur'án in the other, but this is not borne out by the historical records. The ordinary Arabs, and later the other peoples who took part in the wars of expansion, seem to have been chiefly interested in obtaining booty. What the military campaigns secured was the expansion of a political Islámic empire. It is also true, of course, that once non-Muslims had been accepted as 'protected minorities' within the empire, there were certain social pressures on them to become Muslims. Though relatively few Jews and Christians yielded to the pressures, in Iran the majority of the Zoroastrians did, because the Zoroastrian religion had lost much of its religious meaning and had become little more than a department of state²².

Bernard Lewis *The Crisis of Islám:*

Under the caliphs, the community of Medina, where the Prophet had held sway, grew in barely a century into a vast empire, and Islám became a world religion. In the experience of the first Muslims, as preserved and recorded for later generations, religious truth and political

¹⁸ Becker, C. H., *Christianity and Islam*, 1909, transl by H. J. Chaytor, The Project Gutenberg EBook.

¹⁹ Rosenberg, Harry, "The West in Crisis", in *A Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity*, Lion, 1990, p236.

²⁰ Richard Overy, *The Times Complete History of the World*, HarperCollins, 2015, p112.

²¹ Maulana Muhammad Ali, op.cit, p409.

²² Watt, William Montgomery, *Religious Truth For Our Time*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1995, p80-81.

power were indissolubly associated: the first sanctified the second, the second sustained the first²³.

It can be seen from these passages that the reasons for converting to Islám have been complex, involving a blend of “worldly and spiritual motives”, but the belief that the conquered peoples in the expansion of Islám were given only a stark choice to convert or die finds no support in the historical records. The means of expansion of the Islámic community of believers involved being “led” not so much by the Caliphs and military commanders than by the spiritual and practical guidance they found in the Qur’án. As followers of its teachings they practiced what they preached, and this was effective in attracting converts.

2.4. Modern Islám

Islám, in common with most religions, is struggling to adapt to new global problems. One of those problems is terrorism. Another is the perception that Islám is itself a major cause of terrorism. In *The Crisis of Islám* Bernard Lewis explained the link between Islám and terrorism in this way:

The Qur’án speaks of peace as well as war. The hundreds of thousands of traditions attributed, with varying reliability, to the Prophet and interpreted in sometimes very diverse ways, offer a wide range of guidance, of which the militant and violent interpretation of religion is one among many.

Meanwhile, significant numbers of Muslims are ready to approve, and a few of them to apply, this interpretation of their religion. Terrorism requires only a few.²⁴

It is not possible to adequately summarise contemporary global problems, religious challenges or the causes of terrorism in this brief overview of whether the spread of Islám was attributable to violent attempts to coerce belief. Certainly some Islámic governments and religious leaders have offered members of religious minorities the choice of converting to Islám or the death penalty. The situation of the Bahá’ís in Iran is an example and is well documented at the web site <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais>. On 15 March 2017 the Bahá’í International Community reported to the UN Human Rights Council as follows:

For nearly four decades, the Iranian government has tried to eliminate the Bahá’í community as a viable entity. In the process, it has committed large-scale human rights violations. Today, arrests, arbitrary detention, long term imprisonments, unfair or mock trials, home raids, confiscation of belongings, harassment, physical and verbal abuse and pressure to recant their faith remain the day-to-day lot of thousands of Iranian Bahá’ís. Moreover, a campaign of incitement to hatred has led to a rise in the number of suspicious killings of Bahá’ís, in which the perpetrators have yet to face justice, let alone to be condemned²⁵.

Referring to another kind of organised violence, by a particular terrorist group describing itself as “Islámic”, Wikipedia quotes a 2013 article stating that:

There have been many reports of the group’s use of death threats, torture and mutilation to compel conversion to Islam²⁶.

²³ Lewis, Bernard *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Random House, New York 2003, p7.

²⁴ Lewis, Bernard *The Crisis of Islam*, *op.cit*, p xxxii.

²⁵ Extract from the 15 March 2017 Bahá’í International Community report to the UN Human Rights Council, reported online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/irans-persecution-bahais-has-become-more-covert>.

²⁶ McCoy, Terrence (13 June 2013). “ISIL, beheadings and the success of horrifying violence”. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved 23 June 2014, referenced in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant, accessed 11 August 2019.

However, it would be unfair to blame the Qur'án or the Islámic community generally for violent behaviour by Muslim terrorists. William McCants supports this opinion:

Muslim political behavior has varied greatly throughout history. Some Muslims have cited Scripture to justify violence, and some have cited it to justify peace. If Scripture is a constant but the behavior of its followers is not, then one should look elsewhere to explain why some Muslims engage in terrorism²⁷.

In a similar vein Montgomery Watt observes that in all religions there are groups which have gone in the opposite direction to the majority, and concludes:

Despite the existence of extremists in the various religions, my personal view is that in the world of today the religions are no longer rivals or enemies, but should learn to see themselves as partners who have to deal with common problems²⁸.

3. Alternative views

It is not difficult to find writers who would like to popularise the view that Islám was spread by forced conversion. The views of three of those, and their relationships with reputable scholarship, are considered below.

3.1. Before modern scholarship

Edward Gibbon in chapter L of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* provides a history of “Mahomet” and concludes that after the Prophet moved to Medina “the means of persuasion had been tried, the season of forbearance was elapsed, and he was now commanded to propagate his religion by the sword, to destroy the monuments of idolatry, and, without regarding the sanctity of days or months, to pursue the unbelieving nations of the earth... “²⁹.

According to Bernard Lewis “Gibbon’s influence on the Western perception of the Prophet, Islám, and their place in history was enormous.”³⁰

Lewis observes, however, that Gibbon was over-reliant on the deficient scholarship of others:

Gibbon recognized the late and legendary character of much of the Arabic material made available to him in Latin translations and attempted some critical analysis of its content. However, his own imperfect knowledge and the defective state of European scholarship at the time hampered his work and sometimes blunted the scepticism which he usually brought to the sources and subjects of his historical inquiries³¹.

²⁷ McCants, William, “Islamic Scripture Is Not the Problem” in *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-16/islamic-scripture-not-problem>

²⁸ Montgomery Watt, op.cit., pp90-91.

²⁹ Gibbon, Edward, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Abridged Edition*. (Ed. & Abridged by Womersley, David), Penguin, London, 2000 (Full edition first published 1776), Chapter L.

³⁰ Lewis, Bernard, “Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” in *Daedalus*, vol. 105, No.3, Summer 1976, MIT Press. pp89-101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

Gibbon wrote in the 18th century, relying on the secondary sources available to him at that time. He could not have anticipated the scholarship of the late 19th and early 20th centuries which opened the door to a more accurate understanding of the history of early Islám.

3.2. Views not tested by modern scholarship

In *The History of Jihad: from Muhammad to Isis*, Robert Spencer begins by stating that “The beginnings of Islám are shrouded in mystery. There are thousands upon thousands of reports (hadith) of the words and deeds of Islám’s Prophet Muhammad, but... There is considerable reason to believe that the origins of Islám and the lives of its founding figures are quite different from how they’re represented in Islámic sacred history.”³² Nevertheless Spencer selects from those hadith in a way that portrays Muḥammad quite unfavourably to his readers. He justifies this approach by explaining that many Muslims today act upon beliefs which are based on the hadith regardless of their truth value.

Yet in selecting which stories about Muḥammad to recount in his book, Spencer seems to lack an interest in the circumstances. An example is the account of the punishment imposed on a Jewish tribe, the Banu Qurayza. Spencer does not mention that they imperilled the lives of the inhabitants of Medina by breaking a treaty and siding with the attacking Meccan army. The relentless hostility of Muḥammad’s enemies is apparently not worth mentioning in this “history of Jihad”. Nor does Spencer imagine the consequences if the nascent Muslim community had decided to forgive the aforementioned breach. This historical context is well known to those who care to research the incident. It can be read, for example, in *The Beliefnet Guide to Islám* by Hesham A Hassaballa and Kabir Helminski³³.

One wonders why Spencer would have bypassed the peer-review and academic scrutiny that scholars normally welcome. He answered this question himself in an interview. When invited to respond to the possibility that, had he been an academic, he would not have been able to write his book and espouse his positions Spencer replied as follows:

Oh yes, there’s no chance whatsoever. I saw that in the 80s when I was getting my Masters and I wanted to continue and to get a Doctorate, but, I thought, ‘If I do this I’m going to be constantly coming against these people who state dogmatically things that I believe are false, and assume that they’re true, and make you assume they’re true’, so I thought ‘I’m just going to go out on my own and try to do this in the court of public opinion rather than in the academic world’³⁴.

Essentially Spencer is admitting that he does not want to subject his views to expert scrutiny, but is happy to have them published and consumed by a less critical audience.

3.3. Partiality to a preconceived view.

Dr Bernie Power holds degrees in science, education and theology and has lived in Muslim majority countries in Asia and the Middle East for more than 20 years. His doctorate focused on the hadith. He lectures in Islámic Studies at the Melbourne School of Theology, Australia, where he is a missiologist (one who studies the church’s mission especially with respect to missionary activity). His book *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad: What the ancient texts say about them* [Acorn Press, 2016] includes a chapter called “Muhammad and Violence”. That chapter consists mostly of lists such as a list of Muslim military encounters led by Muḥammad, a list of assassinations or executions ordered by

³² Spencer, Robert *The History of Jihad: from Muhammad to Isis*, Bombarier, New York, 2018

³³ Hassaballa, Hesham A and Helminski, Kabir, *The Beliefnet Guide to Islam* (2006) by publisher: Harmony. Also accessible online via <https://www.jstor.org/>

³⁴ Spencer, Robert in “My Latest Chat with Robert Spencer (THE SAAD TRUTH_707)”, YouTube, [Gad Saad](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIPmdndVEKY), Published on Jul 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIPmdndVEKY>, 26.45 - 27.33 minutes, transcribed by Colin Dibdin].

Muhammad, tables of killings, executions and amputations ordered by Muhammad, and finally a list of people who were forgiven or excused if they converted to Islam.

The aforementioned lists are apparently intended to speak for themselves, however Dr Power does offer a brief introduction which states that after emigrating to Medina in 622AD “Muhammad and his followers began attacking other communities” with the goals of stealing, seizing men for slavery, capturing women for sex, avenging insults and perceived injustices and seeking to spread Islam³⁵.

A perusal of Dr Power’s lists by someone with even a basic knowledge of the context of those events might lead one to conclude that his purpose was not to increase understanding of, and appreciation for, Muhammad’s mission and achievements. Indeed his aim seems to be the opposite. For an **uncritical uninformed** reader Power’s presentation could only reduce respect for Muhammad. His purpose becomes clear in the first four chapters which present the argument that Jesus is God and that the doctrine of the Trinity, which is not accepted by Moslems, is “a consistent teaching of the whole Bible”³⁶.

It is worth considering the possibility that Dr Power’s commitment to a particular Christian perspective, reinforced by his position at a Bible college with a strong focus on preparing and equipping Christian leaders for mission, might have led to him holding a preconceived bias against Muhammad which is evident in the way information is presented in his book.

Perhaps the roles of missiologist and objective historian can be compatible, however it would not be easy to combine the two. A missiologist can be expected to have sympathy with Christian missionaries, and perhaps to be driven by a sense of gospel mission and even to have had experience in the mission field. The challenge for a Christian writer with this orientation, when attempting to present the history of a religion that he or she believes to be false and dangerous, was described by Douglas Martin in an article “The Missionary as Historian”. Martin describes the deleterious influence of a partisan attitude on Rev. William M. Miller’s book, *The Bahá’í Faith: Its History and Teachings*, **[check title and add to references]** which purports to introduce the history and teaching of the Bahá’í Faith. Martin noted that “When Rev. Miller’s work is examined at closer range the carefully constructed scholarly illusion begins to rapidly fall apart.”³⁷ Martin concluded as follows:

Conceptual weaknesses of such dimensions are difficult to understand in a writer whose professional training is in the field of theology and who holds distinguished credentials in this highly specialized discipline. Questions of prejudice aside, they arise presumably from a failure to take seriously the intellectual foundations of the Faith being studied. There is no more risky lapse in the examination of beliefs other than one’s own.³⁸

The caution expressed by Martin would be useful to writers and readers of Islamic history, and appears to be relevant to the credibility of the book written by Dr Power with the ostensible aim of promoting an understanding of Jesus and Muhammad.

4. Bahá’í perspectives

The scholarly consensus that conversion to Islam was usually a voluntary process echoes the view expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* written in 1875. He wrote:

³⁵ Power, Bernie, *Understanding Jesus and Muhammad: What the ancient texts say about them*. Acorn Press, 2016, chapter called “Muhammad and Violence”.

³⁶ *ibid*, p.30.

³⁷ Martin, Douglas, “The Missionary as Historian”, *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, <https://bahai-studies.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/BS4.Martin.pdf>

³⁸ *Ibid*.

A few, who are unaware of the reality below the surface of events, who cannot feel the pulse of the world under their fingers, who do not know what a massive dose of truth must be administered to heal this chronic old disease of falsehood, believe that the Faith can only be spread by the sword, and bolster their opinion with the Tradition, “I am a Prophet by the sword.” If, however, they would carefully examine this question, they would see that in this day and age the sword is not a suitable means for promulgating the Faith, for it would only fill peoples’ hearts with revulsion and terror. According to the divine law of Muḥammad, it is not permissible to compel the People of the Book to acknowledge and accept the Faith. While it is a sacred obligation devolving on every conscientious believer in the unity of God to guide mankind to the truth, the Traditions “I am a Prophet by the sword” and “I am commanded to threaten the lives of the people until they say, ‘There is none other God but God’” referred to the idolaters of the Days of Ignorance, who in their blindness and bestiality had sunk below the level of human beings. A faith born of sword thrusts could hardly be relied upon, and would for any trifling cause revert to error and unbelief. After the ascension of Muḥammad, and His passing to “the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent King,” (Qur’án 54:55) the tribes around Medina apostatized from their Faith, turning back to the idolatry of pagan times³⁹.

The traditions quoted above, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation, might seem to imply that the traditions are considered to be true and that Muḥammad therefore attempted to coerce, from the tribes around Medina, an outward statement of belief in Islám. However ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s overall argument in this paragraph, and his clear view, expressed elsewhere⁴⁰, that Muḥammad’s battles were always defensive, indicate that he is using those traditions to make a particular point – that true religious conversion cannot be achieved by threat of violence. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes on to write...

..that the Faith of God must be propagated through human perfections, through qualities that are excellent and pleasing, and spiritual behavior. If a soul of his own accord advances toward God he will be accepted at the Threshold of Oneness, for such a one is free of personal considerations, of greed and selfish interests, and he has taken refuge within the sheltering protection of his Lord. He will become known among men as trustworthy and truthful, temperate and scrupulous, high-minded and loyal, incorruptible and God-fearing. In this way the primary purpose in revealing the divine law—which is to bring about happiness in the after life and civilization and the refinement of character in this—will be realized. As for the sword, it will only produce a man who is outwardly a believer, and inwardly a traitor and apostate⁴¹.

Thus does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describe the ideal method of religious propagation and the quality of response that leads to a genuine conversion.

There is much in the authoritative Bahá’í scriptures – those of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi – that elucidates on the subjects of Muḥammad and Islám, explains why religions differ in their social prescriptions from age to age, and points to a future where violence will have no place in personal and community struggles for religious faith. The following announcement by Bahá’u’lláh is, for Bahá’ís, a spiritual truth, a prediction and a core guiding principle:

O people of the earth! *The first Glad-Tidings* which the Mother Book hath, in this Most Great Revelation, imparted unto all the peoples of the world is that the law of holy war hath been blotted out from the Book. Glorified be the All-Merciful, the Lord of grace abounding,

³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1957. (written in 1875.

⁴⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Chapter 7 “Muhammad” in *Some Answered Questions*, US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990. Accessible online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/4#049820925>

⁴¹ Ibid.

through Whom the door of heavenly bounty hath been flung open in the face of all that are in heaven and on earth⁴².

And yet Bahá'ís, although regarding themselves as being privileged to have recognised a new Revelation from God, do not consider themselves to be above the need to overcome personal prejudices shaped by received falsehoods, over-simplifications of history and narrow-minded public discourse about Islám. On the contrary to be a Bahá'í entails acceptance of the need to overcome that kind of weakness and to independently search for the truth. In practical terms, with regard to understanding Islám, this requires observing the following advice by Shoghi Effendi:

There is so much misunderstanding about Islám in the West in general that you have to dispel. Your task is rather difficult and requires a good deal of erudition. Your chief task is to acquaint the friends with the pure teachings of the Prophet as recorded in the Qur'án, and then to point out how these teachings have, throughout succeeding ages, influenced nay guided the course of human development. In other words you have to show the position and significance of Islám in the history of civilization.⁴³

5. Conclusion

How may one contribute most effectively to discussions about the nature of the spread of Islám and help resolve the clash of views? A fair examination of historical evidence is a necessary but, I would say, not enough. The rumour that Islám was mostly “spread by the sword” has persisted since the Crusades and, as we have seen, indirectly shaped the views of such eminent historians as Edward Gibbon. That false belief has survived the 19th century developments in historical understanding resulting from the efforts of T. W. Arnold, Syed Ameer Ali, and others. Something more influential than historical enquiry alone seems to be needed.

Humanity's exploration of reality is assisted, in the Bahá'í perspective, not only by the diligent and collaborative scholarship of specialists but also, from time to time, by a general transformation of educational values. The founders of religions, including Muḥammad, achieved this. A renewal of the religious spirit can motivate ordinary people, regardless of their training and analytical capacity, to seek to identify and address fears and prejudices, assess information justly, and to see themselves as humble collaborators in the search for truth and solutions to problems. We can all participate in this enterprise and thereby improve the quality of discourse on subjects of contemporary relevance not least being discussions about Islám. Change for the better is not unknown.

Colin Dibdin
colin.dibdin@gmail.com
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⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, “Bisharat (Glad-Tidings)” in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978 (written circa 1891).

⁴³ Shoghi Effendi quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd rev. and enlarged edition, 1988, #1664. Online at http://bahai-library.com/hornby_lights_guidance

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