

## Book Reviews

### God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam

By Peter Partner. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998, 364pp.

This is a study of warfare fought in the name of God by Jews, Christians, and Muslims from biblical until modern times. The book is impressive in its scope and in the wide range of authorities consulted; the author has gone out of his way to be neutral and impartial. In his introduction, for example, Partner recognizes that "less than half a century ago, unconscious of their own arrogance and inaccuracy, Westerners used to write confidently about something they called the Arab mind" (p. xix). The book's critical apparatus is nearly perfect: there is a glossary, a chronological table, and an index; and, in addition to a short bibliography with the notes to each chapter, there is a brief reading list on different topics. This means that students will find the book easy to use.

Having said this, readers should be warned that, like most academic research, the general tone is dogmatically secular and cynical about spiritual motives. Although the author criticizes the prejudices of earlier historians, he himself speaks of Islam as "a program of conquest" and states that "Muslims set themselves almost from the outset the task of Islamizing the whole world by force of arms" (p. 38). Despite his remarks on the greater jihad, referring to the inner spiritual struggle against evil, there is little recognition of Islam as a spiritual message; he says that Muhammad "came to warn, perhaps also to conquer" (p. 42). Indeed, the striving denoted by the verb *jahada* is primarily spiritual or moral as in the admonition to the Prophet: "Strive hard against the deniers of the truth and the hypocrites" (9:73). Other passages indicate that the Qur'an itself is the instrument with which believers must strive against unbelievers (25:52; 66:9). As Seyyed Hossein Nasr says, concerning the concept of jihad, "Its translation into 'holy war,' combined with the erroneous notion of Islam prevalent in the West as the 'religion of the sword,' has helped to eclipse its inner and spiritual significance."<sup>1</sup> All external forms of struggle, such as fighting ignorance and injustice, are incomplete without the inner struggle, and the result of that struggle will be peace and love: "Repel evil with that which is better. Then he between whom and thee there was enmity will become as though he had always been a bosom friend" (41:34).

Partner also fails to explain that the purpose of jihad is defensive and that all forms of aggression are condemned in Islam: "And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression —for, verily, God does not love aggressors" (Qur'an, 2:190). Sayings of the Prophet about warfare might also have been cited. For example: "If a man engaged in battle entertains in his heart the desire to obtain out of the war only a rope to tie his camel, his reward will be forfeited." Only self-defense, in the widest sense, and, in particular, the defense of religious freedom, makes force permissible for Muslims: "Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is wrongfully waged, those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' For if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, monasteries and synagogues and mosques — in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled — would certainly have been destroyed" (22:39–40). It is also written, "whoever pardons [his foe] and makes peace, his reward rests with God" (42:40). Indeed the Qur'an is full of advice on how bloodshed may be averted by showing forgiveness and using diplomacy, arbitration, and compromise. It is a pity that Partner fails even to touch on this aspect of Islam, but instead perpetuates the old prejudices and misconceptions beneath the cloak of dispassionate scholarship.

Moreover, the author gives us a most unflattering and inaccurate idea of Islamic penal laws: he states that crucifixion and mutilation were "the normal police [sic] measures"<sup>(3)</sup> in ancient Arabia against banditry (p. 34) and gives the impression that these measures are prescribed in the Qur'an. While it is true that the passage to which Partner alludes (5:33) has been interpreted by many commentators, both ancient and modern, as a legal injunction, strong arguments for refuting such interpretation are listed by Muhammad Asad in a footnote to his rendering of the text.

The release of prisoners as a pious act is mentioned with reference to Christianity (p. 148), but not with reference to Islam. In discussing the beginnings of colonialism in Elizabethan England, the author betrays his true feelings about Islam: "In some of its colonial aspects it [Christianity] was becoming, like Islam, a religion of power, in which the sword preceded the word of God" (p. 183).

It would perhaps have been wiser to devote more space to the scriptural basis for theories of a just or holy war in Christianity and Islam, followed by a fuller discussion of how these theories developed. In particular, Partner could have mentioned the religious arguments used to justify the conquest of Granada in 1492 and the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain in the early seventeenth

century. It is also regrettable that, in the recommended reading list, no Muslim authorities are cited on "Muhammad and Islam," "Islamic Culture and Society," and "Islamic History and Modern History." On the Crusades, he might have mentioned *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, edited by Francesco Gabrieli, or *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* by Amin Maalouf. On the general topic of the crusading mentality, he must surely have read Karen Armstrong's *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*. However, despite these quibbles, I would still recommend this book as an important summary of research on the subject, especially on the modern period.

Note:

1. S.H. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: KPI, 1990), 28.

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