

Striving in the Path of God: Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought.

By Asma Afsaruddin. Oxford University Press, 2013. \$69, ISBN: 978-0-19-973093-3.

Asma Afsaruddin's *Striving in the Path of God* is a major accomplishment in the study of non-legal *jihād* literature. Afsaruddin's main thesis is "that the conceptualizations of *jihād* as primarily armed combat and of *shahāda* as *primarily* military martyrdom are relatively late and contested ones, and deviate considerably from the Qur'anic significations of these terms" (5). To illustrate this thesis, Afsaruddin gathers and carefully interprets an impressive array of evidence—from Quran, to *tafsīr* works, *ḥadīth*, and treatises on *jihād*. The material surveyed is wide-ranging in genre, theological orientation and temporal scope, from the pre-modern to the present.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to Quranic verses that contain the root *jhd* and its related terms *qitāl* (fighting) and *ṣabr* (patience). It then briefly outlines the biographies of the pre-modern exegetes whom Afsaruddin reads to interpret these verses. These exegetes are diverse not only in religious orientation, but also in geographical location—Afsaruddin examines well-known *tafsīr* works produced, for instance, by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and al-Zamaksharī (d. 1144), but also by lesser-known exegetes such as the Ibadī exegete al-Huwwārī (d. 903) and the Andalusian al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273). Afsaruddin examines how these exegetes interpret Quranic verses that accord a mostly non-combative meaning to *jihād* (verses 22:78, 29:69, 25:52, and 3:200). Her method allows her to, importantly, pinpoint when and by whom differing notions of these terms entered the interpretive canon. So, for instance, we learn that al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* accords a new meaning to a phrase in 22:78 vis-a-vis earlier exegetes (22–23), and we come to understand how groups of exegetes also differed on the interpretation of the same verse (3:200, pp. 26–27). The specificity with which Afsaruddin is able to chart these interpretive shifts powerfully illustrates how a single verse can be interpreted in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways from its seemingly original meaning.

Chapter 2 examines the multiplicity of interpretations exegetes have given for a specific aspect of *jihād*, *qitāl* (fighting), as found in a selection of the fifty-four Quranic verses in which this term exists. It is also in this chapter that Afsaruddin first discusses the concept of *naskh*, or abrogation, as a hermeneutic tool allowing exegetes to privilege a singular interpretation of a particular verse over others. Throughout this book Afsaruddin traces how interpretations are tethered to certain historical contexts—a point amply demonstrated by her fine discussion of al-Qurṭubī (41–43), for instance. Chapter 3 discusses how certain exegetes interpret verses related to the ethics

of fighting, including peacemaking; it is in this chapter that Afsaruddin also discusses the variety of interpretations surrounding verses that putatively advocate for fighting as a religious obligation.

Chapter 4 illustrates in detail the variegated nature of the Quran's construction of martyrdom, while chapter 5 deals with later interpretations of *jihād* and martyrdom in a wide range of early and later *ḥadīth* literature. In chapter 6, Afsaruddin examines treatises on the merits of *jihād*, showing, critically, how in some cases dubious reports advocating for military *jihād* entered circulation to help dissipate resistance among those who harbored moral concerns about fighting with the Umayyads or Abbasids. On this subject, Afsaruddin writes, "The intensity of the polemics directed against those sections of the population who considered a legitimate *jihād* to be impossible under such reprobate rulers indicates to us—once again paradoxically—the strength and continuity of this oppositional, pious contingent and the cogency of its position" (168–169).

Arguing that the Quranic concept of *ṣabr* is in fact fused to the concept of *jihād* as humanity's ongoing earthly struggle (179), Afsaruddin begins chapter 7 with an examination of various exegetes' treatments of 39:10, and then two verses that conjoin *ṣabr* and *jihād*, 16:110 and 3:142. She then discusses examples of *faḍā'il al-ṣabr* literature, literature extolling the excellences of patient forbearance, to establish more comprehensively how *ṣabr* was understood in relation to *jihād*. She argues that this body of literature in part reflected a counterpoint to the predominantly legal understanding of *jihād* as military activity in support of the state. Her discussion of al-Ghazālī's treatment of *ṣabr* as found in his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* is particularly fascinating, as Afsaruddin shows how this text—in contrast to other authors of al-Ghazālī's time—elides the meaning of *jihād* with *ṣabr*, shifting the primary locus of *jihād* from the battleground to the heart/soul (199).

Chapters 8 through 10 take us to the modern period, where Afsaruddin discusses a similarly wide range of exegetes' interpretations of various elements of *jihād* and martyrdom, showing importantly, the radical changes these concepts have gone through in response to the advent of the nation-state. The book's robust conclusion summarizes major hermeneutical and semantic shifts around both *jihād* and martyrdom over the period of Islamic history she examines.

There is much to admire about Afsaruddin's study. First, and perhaps most obviously, it its breadth: Afsaruddin is able to write about an astonishing range of material over centuries with subtlety and erudition, taking great care to contextualize historically semantic shifts in the terms she studies. Such careful treatment of this material will, hopefully, push scholarly discourse on *jihād* and martyrdom beyond such concerns as just war theory, opening

up new trajectories for more detailed study of some of the texts and thinkers Afsaruddin examines. Second, this book's scope makes it an ideal introduction to the literature for graduate students or advanced undergraduates. And third is Afsaruddin's writing style—complex, elegant and yet balanced in the material she presents.

As with any study covering so many thinkers over such a wide historical period, there are places in which one wishes that the author could develop her analysis and discussion further. I would have liked to see, for instance, a fuller discussion of the concept of abrogation, and how it was that certain exegetes justified reliance upon that hermeneutical method to arrive at their interpretations. Second, female interpreters and interpretations that affect the female body are all but absent in this study. This absence could give the impression that *jihād* and martyrdom are and historically have been the exclusive purview of men. I would have appreciated the author addressing this issue, even if only briefly. Third, and mirroring so many studies in Islamic intellectual history, is an analysis that covers in great detail texts from the early and classical period, and then skips to works penned in the modern period (though there are some exceptions, such as the work studied by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya [d. 1350] and Ibn Kathīr [d. 1373]). Once again, a brief discussion of this lacuna would have been helpful to the reader. Yet these issues are quite small in light of the tremendous contribution this book brings to scholarship on *jihād* and martyrdom.

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