

BOOK REVIEW RESPONSE

Interpreting Jihad: Asma Afsaruddin responds to Christopher Melchert

In his *RoMES* 49(2) review of my *Striving in the Path of God*, Christopher Melchert significantly misrepresents some of my arguments and omits reference to other key arguments that would undermine some of his assertions. I refer below to some of the more egregious instances.

In his reference to my discussion of Qur'an 22:39 and especially of the passive verb *yuqātalūna* (as is rendered in most *muṣḥafs*) occurring in this verse, he points out that the verb can be read in the active form as well (*yuqātilūna*). Indeed—my discussion does not contest that and in fact specifically points out that al-Ṭabarī was aware of the alternate reading of the verb as active but that he disingenuously maintains there is no difference in meaning. Melchert does not understand the larger implications of this contested reading—that it indicates that scholars debated among themselves as to whether fighting in the Qur'an was to be understood as primarily fighting in self-defense or fighting to promote religious hegemony. One of the main purposes of the book is to highlight these internal contestations among scholars: there is a world of difference, after all, for the rules of war when the verse is understood to mean “permission is given to fight for those against whom fighting has been initiated” —clearly implying that fighting should be undertaken in self-defense—as opposed to “permission is given to those who fight,” which leaves it open-ended. Since the Ḥafs from 'Aṣim reading the verb as passive is more common in printed editions, when translators render the verb as active in English, they are in fact mistranslating the original.

In a number of places, Melchert shows that he has read the book less than carefully. For example, I state at the very outset that I am *not* taking the legal literature into consideration because it has already received considerable attention and because this literature is often predictably belligerent (here the reviewer and I are in agreement). The express purpose of the book is to retrieve non-legal perspectives from nonlegal genres—therefore, I am

puzzled as to why Melchert acts surprised when the book does precisely that. Melchert goes on to group ‘Alī Jum‘a with Mawdudi and Quṭb as examples of modern scholars who espouse bellicose views; actually I specifically invoke Jum‘a as an example of someone who has firmly taken issue with radical understandings of jihād and who is as far removed from Quṭb as one can get. They are even placed in separate chapters indicating that they are categorized differently! Melchert similarly misrepresents what I say in regard to Ibn Kathīr’s exegesis of Qur’an 9:5. I do not state that Ibn Kathīr is the very first to have coined the term *āyat al-sayf* in regard to Qur’an 9:5. Instead, I say that “We encounter this designation first in our survey of exegetical works in the *tafsīr* of the eighth/fourteenth century exegete Ibn Kathīr” (75). That is to say Ibn Kathīr is the first *in my survey* to expressly use the term *āyat al-sayf* in connection with the verse. If Melchert had paid closer attention to the text, he would have been aware that I mention on page 83 that Muqātil ibn Sulaymān had already used this term in the eighth century in his *tafsīr*, although not in the section where he discusses Qur’an 9:5. The fact that some jurists are already using the term, as the reviewer points out, simply proves my larger point—that in contradistinction to jurists, other scholars such as Qur’an exegetes (some of whom were also jurists) are not deploying this term for Qur’an 9:5. Therefore we should reflect on the importance of these competing perspectives for reconstructing a more holistic understanding of jihad in the premodern period.

With regard to the ḥadīth distinguishing between the greater and lesser jihad (the lesser jihad is not to be glossed as “carnal warfare” as the reviewer does!), I do state that this is a later prophetic report on page 18, a comment which Melchert overlooks. My reference to Quṭb’s inversion of the traditional hierarchy between the greater and lesser jihad does not suggest that I am positing an early genealogy for this report as he implies—an inference that I find mystifying! Significantly, Melchert fails to refer to my detailed discussion of the Qur’anic trait of *ṣabr*, which clearly refers to an internal, noncombative form of jihad, and which is to be linked to what is named in the later literature as *al-jihād al-akbar* (also *jihād al-naḥs*). Nowhere do I suggest however that this terminology is already available in the earliest period, although the concept certainly is.

With regard to early authorities who rejected aggressive jihad, there were others beside Sufyān al-Thawrī who subscribed to this position: Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ, ‘Amr b. Dinār, and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar are also referenced in this context. Furthermore, in my discussion of Qur’an 2:190, it becomes evident that influential exegetes like Mujāhid b. Jabr, al-Wāḥidī, and al-Rāzī were of the opinion that based on this Qur’anic verse, Muslims could not

initiate aggression. These views cannot simply be wished away, as Melchert would probably prefer. Their documentation in these sources present to us a historical reality—at considerable odds with the historical reality constructed in most legal texts—that must be taken seriously and factored into our understanding of the past. Melchert’s dismissive remark that these discussions represent an attempt on my part to present Islam “as it ought to be like” rather than what “Islam has been like” willfully disregards the textual evidence provided. The view “that the Islamic tradition is very unmonolithic, historically characterized by vigorous debate, with sometimes a wider range of opinions entertained” is not only problematic for “some Muslim-majority countries today,” as Melchert states, but is also clearly a source of anxiety for the reviewer himself, especially on the subject of jihad. ✂