

The Demystification of Jihad and Islamic Capitalism: Comparative Analysis of Max Weber’s Thesis on the Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the value of ‘jihad’, which has constantly been misappropriated, misunderstood and lopsidedly defined as ‘holy war’ by the Western scholarship, as an impulse to the economic advancement of Muslims in South Asia and Southeast Asia where they are economically backward in comparison with other communities. Unlike Christianity, Islam is traditionally viewed as a religion which does not propagate progress and restricts capitalistic development. As such, Islam is characterized as a religion which propagates fatalism and thus has constantly been used as a tool by the West to reaffirm the backwardness of Muslim nations. In this paper, I debunk such a view and assert that Islam not only does it contain a value which propagates capitalism, but at the same time a value that, if understood and internalized, would create a change within Muslims in not only a better understanding of their religion but at the same time truly be a blessing (rahmah) to all mankind. This paper has also dealt with ‘jihad’ not only as an economic value that Islam inherits in parallel to Weber’s thesis about Protestantism, but also as the value of advancement in different levels of intellect, religious practice, politics and leadership.

Keywords: Holy war, fatalism, capitalistic development, Protestantism

Introduction

The state of Muslims and Islam in the last decade has been one rife with trials and tribulations. Post September 11, Muslims and ultimately Islam have constantly been painted as and/or associated with a religion of violence, gun-loving, Jewish hating and mainly Anti-West. Muslims have been attacked and abused not just physically but at the same time ideologically. The rise of the West in the early twentieth century that coincided with the fall of the Uthmaniyyah Empire spelled the future of Muslims in the years to come; being ‘subjected’ to the West in terms of ideology, politics and economics. Muslims are associated with terrorism and breeds terrorists and Muslims find themselves constantly having to defend the religion. Islam to the Western world has always been seen as a religion that fails to keep up with time, partly due to some *Ulama*’ who remain traditionalistic in thought.

In South Asia and Southeast Asia, Muslims are portrayed as no better, and since being in a region culturally different from the West,

Southeast Asian Muslims are portrayed by the West as indolent, lazy and backward (Alatas, 1977:147). Muslims are seen as always occupying the lower strata of society while Bangladesh and Indonesia is always seen as being a poverty ridden country which is economically backward. Extrapolating further, Muslims all over the world are constantly seen as being backward, lagging and are constantly occupying the lower strata of societies.

With development being ‘dictated’ by the West as being economically advanced, most Muslim countries especially the ones within the South Asia and Southeast Asian region fall into the category of ‘Third World Countries’ or are economically backward. Islam thus is seen as a religion which does not propagate progress, restricts capitalistic development and does not keep up with time.

In this paper, I would like to challenge such a view and assert that Islam not only does it contain a value which propagates capitalism, but at the same time a value that, if understood and internalized, would create a

change within Muslims in not only a better understanding of their religion but at the same time truly be a *rahmah* to all mankind. In this paper I would like to focus on the value of '*jihad*' which has constantly been misappropriated, misunderstood and lopsidedly defined. *Jihad* has constantly been defined as 'holy war' either in the mediaeval or modern times (Marancci, 2006:18). Unfortunately, *jihad* has been constantly tampered within scholarly writings to invoke a negative connotation. In actual fact, *jihad* is never used to mean warfare in the Quran but its connotation with *qital* (fighting) in early Muslim history was used to legitimize warfare (Martinez, 2003:25). What is important to note that when one goes for an online search of works or publications on *jihad*, the negative portrayal of *jihad* as a 'radical' ideology, as a divine sanctioned idea, as part of Islam far outweighs the explanation of *jihad* in its actual meaning.

Jihad: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of a Value

Jihad is the Arabic word for "struggle" or "effort". In the context of the Holy Qur'an, *jihad* is a struggle or effort to strive "in the path of God" (Holy Qur'an, 22:78). Scholar James Turner Johnson says it this way: "the concept of *jihad*...fundamentally denotes striving or effort expended by the individual Muslim to walk in the path of God" (Johnson, 2002:19; Feldman, 2003:232-233). *Jihad* is a beautiful concept rarely understood in its entirety. According to one tradition of the hadith (the sayings and life of the Prophet Muhammad), "Muhammad tells his followers returning from battle that they have now returned from the 'lesser *jihad*' (battle) and must turn to the 'greater *jihad*' (inner struggle for true submission to God)" (Johnson, 2002: 35; Feldman, 2003:232). This is the first differentiation of the "lesser *jihad*", the physical holy war, and the "greater *jihad*", the inner struggle to submit to God. The greater *jihad* is further divided into three types of struggle:

- 1) Jihad of the Heart (the struggle for moral reformation and faith)
- 2) Jihad of the Tongue (the struggle to proclaim God's word abroad; right speech)
- 3) Jihad of the Hand (doing good works in accord with the will of God)

Some contemporary Islamists have succeeded in replacing the greater *jihad*, the fight against desires, with the lesser *jihad*, the holy war to establish, defend and extend the Islamic state.¹ In modern times, the term has been used by Pakistani scholar to describe the struggle to establish "just moral-social order" (Rahman, 1980, 63-64), while President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia has used it to describe the struggle for economic development in the country (Peters, 1996: 116-117)

Unfortunately *jihad* as a 'pop culture' definition has constantly been understood as 'holy war' by some Muslims and especially so by non-Muslims. Though there is no denial in understanding *jihad* as fighting a holy war, to only define *jihad* as such is purely reductionist in nature.

One must first begin to understand that a Western defined notion of *jihad* stems mainly out of perceived reality. While Muslims constantly defend the concept by sanctioning its use as defined by the Quran, there is a pertinent need to distinguish between ideal and reality. In the Western world the concept of *jihad* was and continues to be seen as one which legitimizes the use of violent means and warfare to achieve a certain political agenda. Without a shadow of doubt, groups with vested interest legitimize such acts against the Western world to achieve their political agenda by claiming it as acts of *jihad*. Thus, these formed the basis of the Western understanding of the concept of *jihad*. In reality, Muslims need to understand that a reality defined concept, especially one that stems from a hegemonic power like the West,

¹See <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3431076.html>

seemingly holds better ground as opposed to one that is ideally defined by the Muslims thereby leading to a constant struggle of Muslims to defend their religion, either intellectually, politically, religiously or otherwise.

In stark contrast, the Muslims in their fervor to defend Islam fail to grasp and understand the basis of the conceptualization of a Western defined *jihad*. As such the rhetoric of the ideal notion of *jihad* prevails in their discourse of *jihad* in Islam. While it is pertinent to clearly define *jihad* as understood by the Muslims, one needs to also understand the reality faced by the West in light of terrorists movements working under the banner of Islam. Such realities are incongruent with the claims of the Muslims about an ideal Islam. Sadly, with the power and influence of the Western media and scholarship, Muslims buy into this concept believing in concepts of ‘political Islam’, Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘extremist Islam’ to name a few. I would then like to define *jihad*, beyond one that is predominantly understood in the Western media and scholarship and used fashionably as a ‘pop culture’ but rather looking at it critically as a value which promotes progress and development in all aspects of Muslim life. *Jihad* then would be defined as the ‘struggle for Muslims to be better in all aspects including social, economic and political sphere and thus to put Islam at a better place beyond the literal and ‘supposed’ meaning of a Western defined *jihad* and at the same time a proper understanding and internalization of the concept of *jihad* as a Muslim based on an Islamic worldview’. However, I intend to confine this article that the *jihad* as a value can be exploited on the advancement of economic development of Muslim majority countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is true that although *jihad* as a concept or value transcends the sphere of economy, this article juxtaposes it as a value of economic or capitalistic development in these countries with the Max Weber thesis on ‘Protestant ethics and spirit of capitalism’. Much as Weber, Peters (1996) also argues

that *jihad* can be used as an incentive for the economic development of a country(Peters, 1996: 116-117). In the similar vein, my argument also falls in line with exploiting *jihad* as a value for the capitalistic development.

Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Parallel within Islam

Islam has always been faulted by the West as being restrictive, anti-developmental and, unlike Christianity, does not have a value which propagates capitalism. To understand this, let us take a look at Weber’s ‘Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism’ in which Weber argues that a sect of Protestantism known as Calvinism, has an inherent value in which it promotes ‘capitalism’ in which Calvinism propagates the accumulation of wealth yet forbids against spending it for frivolous activities or to satiate one’s desires. According to Weber, this laid the basis for capitalism to occur when striving to accumulate wealth became a ‘measure to ensure one was saved and not damned’ (Weber, 2005: 185-187). Juxtaposing this with the current state of Muslim nations, we see how Muslim nations occupy the lower rungs of this list. Though the list itself is debatable stemming from a myopic understanding of how a ‘developed’ nation should be, to not complicate matters, the list would be accepted at face value. Thus, I would argue that despite the fact that Muslim nations occupy the lower rungs in terms of economic development, *jihad* as a concept, if internalized, brings about the same consequence as Calvinism has towards capitalism.

The internalization of the concept of *jihad* should firstly be understood by Muslims. It is to strive to be better in all aspects of life. It is a universal concept which could be understood by all to better the state of one’s self and ultimately the religion. To qualify, Islam as a religion is at the highest order of all things and is deemed as perfect. This is in congruence with Allah’s exaltation:

“This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion” (Holy Qur’an, 5: 3)

What is in contention here is the understanding of Islam amongst Muslims and how Muslims internalise the values within Islam to better their lives. Thus, I argue that *jihad* should be seen as constantly projecting an image of Muslims that fully understand and internalise the religion and to put Muslims at a better place and ultimately Islam as the religion be seen by others in a better light.

***Jihad* as Understood in History and its Evolution**

Scholars, writers, political commentators have written a vast amount of work pertaining to *jihad*. While some maintain an academic tradition in the writing of this topic, there are many others who are emotive, defensive and/or scathing in their attack or defence of *jihad*. It is necessary therefore to understand the origins of *jihad* and how such a value has been put to practise and evolved as we know it today. Since the dawn of Islam under Prophet Muhammad, Islam as a religion has seen itself survived with wars and battles. Such battles according to Cook (2005) though was never “formally declared a jihad- not, at least, using that term- yet the many campaigns that he (Muhammad) undertook on behalf of his faith are the prototypical jihad wars”(Cook, 2005: 2). Also, as understood by the classical jurists, jihad was clearly defined as a military conquest(*ibid*: 13-16). Thus, given the vast writing on *jihad* by the West, it is no wonder as to why this concept has been closely associated with military advocacy.

Bukay (2008) in his writing of *jihad* tends to be sweeping in his statements and analysis. Unable to discern what continues to be relevant in the discussion of *jihad* or otherwise, his writings contain errors that are hardly forgivable. He writes, “Muhammad was determined to bring mass mobilization with universal conscription of the Arabs, and

the hypocrites were the worst barriers. All able bodied Muslim males were conscripted to participate in the *jihad* wars of Islam, and those who did not were punished” (Bukay, 2008: 58). Clearly he misunderstood the call to *jihad*. While the masses thronged to participate, there hardly was anything that constituted conscription and above and beyond that, the Prophet spelled clearly those he allowed to join in battles and those who he did not especially the ones with other obligations at home. Furthermore, Bukay fails to discern obsolete ideas that no longer remain relevant in the understanding of *jihad*. He writes,

“It is the *jihad* that divides the world into two irreconcilable groups: the *Dar al-Islam* region, subject to Islamic law, and *Dar al-Harb* region destined to come under Islamic rule and jurisdiction, as a universal mission. *Jihad* is the link between the two, the Islamic permanent state of war instrument. It is executed by developing a two-staged strategy for achieving its objectives: It starts from the domestic circle, in *Dar al-Islam*. The target is to purge the Arab and Islamic societies of all the non-pure Islamic values and institutions, just as Muhammad purged the Kaabah in Mecca before the Islamic conquest. This activity is not reform (*islah*), or renewal (*tajdid*) or awakening (*nahdah*), but a total Islamic revolution to go back to basics (*usuliyah*) of the Islamic conceptions and values.

Jihad also regulates the conditions of the treaties the Muslims impose on the people in the *Dar al-Harb*.

The key elements of the idea of *jihad* are all religious: religious justification, the commandments of the *Quran* and the behaviour-example of Muhammad; religious authority, by an *Imam*, including the disposition of the spoils of war; and religious rules for conduct of the participants, by regarding the enemies' religious belief. Yet the main differentiation is by delineating two main targets of *jihad*: against polytheism and against apostasy. After Muhammad's death, it can be (re)constructed accordingly towards outsiders in *Dar al-Harb*, and insiders in *Dar al-Islam*" (Bukay, 2008: 59).

Accounts such as the one above are not only erroneous but are perpetuated in most scholarship in the Western world. This is a classic example of a misguided and misinformed one, while others may be slightly more refined in their ideas and language. Bukay fails to realise that the dichotomy known as *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* has been denounced by most religious scholars as redundant and irrelevant. He does not seem to understand *jihad* beyond that of a military conquest. While there is no denial that wars were waged during the time of the Prophet, to maintain such as an Islamic tradition is highly erroneous and worst, creates animosity and alienation of the Muslims.

The complexity of this issue lies in the wide spectrum of interpretations and understanding which are encompassed by the term *jihad*. What we can certify however is that acts of violence and terrorism does not fall within the category of *jihad* and should not be sanctified by it. Unfortunately, the Muslim response unto *jihad* fails to move away from the scope of defending the concept and being pacifists to the concept. The rhetoric of Islam as a religion of peace and non-violence is mainly seen by the West as an ideal and not reality. Muslims need to begin a serious discourse in defining the true meaning of *jihad* relevant to the contemporary world that seeks to better Muslims in all areas as well as ensuring that the religion is not defined by others. The failure to do so would create a system of patronage where Muslims continue to be indebted not only economically but intellectually and culturally to the West and in such instances, it would then be obligatory for Muslims to provide an alternative and credible discourse that aims to correct the erroneous view propagated by certain sections in the Western world.

The Need of *Jihad* in Economics

The root meaning of *jihad* is understood as 'struggle' and this clearly encompasses more than just a physical war. *Jihad* should be seen as a struggle to better one's life in any way possible in terms of economy. Hence, all Muslims should 'struggle' to be rich and accumulate wealth. The underlying principle of *Jihad* is to not only perform one's ritualistic obligation but at the same time to work and strive constantly. As such, the world would witness the Muslim society in South Asia and Southeast Asia possessing economic advancement or development, if the value of *jihad* were to be well-internalized.

However, Islam keeps wealth accumulation in check by making the paying of *zakat* obligatory to ensure wealth is distributed and that the underprivileged is taken care of. Also the giving of alms to charity is a highly enjoined act constantly reminded of in the

Quran. Unlike secular capitalism which becomes unchecked and highly punitive to the less rich, capitalism in Islam has a system of checks and balance within it. Personally I believe that the basis of *muamalat* is the value of *adl*² or justice to ensure that no one is taken advantage of. There is a pertinent need for Muslims to empower themselves with wealth so as to ensure that Muslims are not taken advantage of. Muslims are under siege physically and ideologically because primarily Muslims are seen to be unable to keep up with the current pace of economic life. Thus, it is always easy to fall prey to the economically mightier Western countries. If Muslims are strong economically and do not bow down to the pressure of Western countries, Muslims and interminably Islam will be looked at as a religion which is all truly encompassing being able to balance between the secular and religious life². The development in economies and a surge forward in capitalism must be guided and Muslims must not forget our Islamic principles and values. The fact that economic *jihad* is not spearheaded for the advancement of Muslims in South Asia and Southeast Asia resulted in their backwardness. Thus, it is imperative for the Muslims in these regions to undertake economic *jihad* for their future development and prosperity.

In South Asia and Southeast Asia, the majority of Muslims continue to occupy the lower rungs of the economic strata. For example, the Malays in Singapore continue to be the bulk of the blue collared industry workers and are over represented in the clerical, sales and services and the production sectors of the economy³. Likewise, they are

under-represented in the administrative and managerial and professional sectors⁴. In Malaysia, the economy is Chinese dominated and Malays hold on to less than 30% of the economy. It was due to the low Malay participation and ownership in the Malaysian economy that prompted the NEP of Mahathir with the vision of ensuring that by 2020, Malays hold on to at least 30% of the economy in Malaysia. Thus, with such statistics and perpetuation of economies in Southeast Asia as being Chinese dominated, the erroneous view of Islam as an impediment to economic development holds true. As such, it is the duty of Muslims to ensure that this tainted image of Islam is corrected. The internalization of the concept of *jihad* in economic terms would then mean that those participating in the economic industries and sectors continue to emerge tops in the areas that they are working in. There is a need to break into niche market areas dominated by the Chinese such as the wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants and financial services sectors⁵. In this way, Malays can continue to be competitive in the capitalist economy while at the same time proving that religion is not an impediment to economic success. In Weber's work mentioned earlier, Calvinism propagates the accumulation of wealth and not spending on frivolous activities that is not beneficial to the owner. Drawing a parallel, *jihad* here would then move further to mean not just the accumulation of wealth but at the same time redistributing wealth in the form of *zakat* to ensure that the underclass and the less privileged is taken care of. This concept of 'social justice' is not seen or explained in Weber's thesis. As such, instead of breeding an individualistic capitalist, the concept of *jihad* would thereby promote the development of a 'social capitalist' and in this case one who not only excels in the capitalist economy as understood by most people but at the same

²I am of the opinion that this dichotomy between religious and secular domains does not exist within the folds of Islam. This dichotomy is a result of secular ideology which aims to alienate religion from the 'worldly' life. For the sake of argument I will utilize this dichotomy for now.

³Singapore Department of Statistics, *Singapore Census of Population, 2000 Advance Data Release No. 4: Economic Characteristics of Singapor, Resident Population (2000)* Singapore p5
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⁴ibid

⁵Ibidp 6

time, being socially responsible for the uplifting of his community.

The stark difference between a secular capitalist economy and an Islamic one is that the former creates individual wealth along with excessive wants and desires that breed a highly individualistic, competitive and wealth amassing individual while the latter though propagates similar values keeps the individualistic expansion in check as there is a constant reminder to redistribute wealth to society. Beyond the rhetoric of ‘corporate social responsibility (CSR)’ the *zakat* and *waqf* system ensures that a capitalistic system does not oppress the weak and lesser to do and is not merely a show for companies or individuals to ‘return back to society’ in one off events but rather a sustainable system to help the lower strata. History has shown how Malays and Chinese were exploited in the mining fields and farms under the feudal system (Burns, 1982:159-178). While the latter managed to overturn their fortunes, the former find themselves continue to be of the lower strata till now. Unfortunately with the current economic system, the *zakat* and *waqf* systems become resource pools to further capitalist ventures.

Conclusion

As discussed above, this paper has dealt with *jihad* as an economic value that Islam inherits, in parallel to Weber’s thesis on Protestantism, for the economic or capitalistic development of Muslim majority countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is indubitably clear that these countries would prosper in economy within certain period of time, if this value is fully internalized and subsequent effort is taken to attain it by the Muslim *Ummah*. To the best of my capability, I have yet to see a deconstruction of *jihad* away from the common popular notion of “*jihad as a holy war*”. The common arguments presented on *jihad* delve only into the different breakdowns of what *jihad* is without juxtaposing it with ‘real time’. However since this is a preliminary paper and due to the constraints of

space, there still are areas of methodology, focus, theoretical concepts, epistemology etc that needs to be developed further. That aside, this paper has given inkling to a value within Islam that has yet to be researched further. The problems that the Muslims face currently; and in this case Muslims in South Asia and Southeast Asia, concerns not only political and economic problems, but on the wider context the lack of understanding of knowledge and Islam in its actual meaning. If such a state was to be left as it is, the decline of the Muslims further and further into the depth of mediocrity is inevitable.

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