Jewish communities in and out of Israel, as well as the ideas behind radical messianic actions taken in the name of holy war.

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Sohail Hashmi has edited a fine collection of essays that attempt to explore the interaction between Christian (mainly) and Jewish just war thinking and Muslim jihad thinking from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the present day. Each essay aims to help the reader answer two questions. First, what historical evidence exists that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim writers of just, holy, and jihad conflicts respectively knew of each other’s tradition of moral and theological reflection on the topics? Second, did they influence one another in any way? After reading all the essays, one comes away with the impression that the answer to the first question is yes, a little, and to the second, no, not much. Since the questions appear to be answered largely in the negative, we might be tempted to question the reasons behind the collection. However, the book is clearly intended as a kind of prolegomena of comparative study to just war and, therefore, not so much an attempt to provide definitive answers, as it is an attempt to stimulate further scholarly exploration and study.

We do learn much that is useful if we are seeking ways to bridge cross-cultural divides. One of the main achievements of the volume that comes through in many of the essays is that it should finally put an end to equating Muslim jihad with Western holy war ideas, which has created false impressions about the supposed lack of ethical restraints upon Muslim fighting. Many more nuggets can be gleaned from the collection. Space limits discussion to but a few. The essay by Asma Afsaruddin, “In Defense of All Houses of Worship?” helpfully explores the debate in the early centuries of Islam about whether or not all houses of worship ought to be defended. Western readers just arriving at Muslim moral thinking on war may be surprised to learn that the trajectory of scholarly opinions on the matter can be very
liberal indeed, with some even arguing that all houses of worship ought to be defended.

Joshua Kirk’s “Imagining the Enemy” explores the kinds of cooperation that existed between Muslim and Christian political leaders in fighting common enemies. He reveals what has not always been made clear: namely, that both Christians and Muslims had moral ideas about the use of force that had little to do with religion per se as much as with the temporal ruler’s obligation to protect the common good by providing a just and peaceful order in which the community could flourish. Thus, both Muslims and Christians possessed a notion of a just war separate from any idea of a holy war that could be fought on behalf of people regardless of their religion. We should keep in mind that, although the Christian theologians who first formulated just war concerns did so for theological reasons (in the sense that love of God and neighbor compels them to aid their neighbors), the idea of the just war itself was conceived as one fought for mainly temporal reasons. True, Augustine held that a war to protect the church was a just cause for war and the idea is reinforced by Thomas Aquinas, but for both theologians, the majority of causes of war that one may count as just are temporal in nature: self-defense against an unjust aggressor, restoring what has unlawfully been seized by an unjust enemy, avenging wrongs, and punishing an unjust enemy. We see these same concerns reflected in many of the Islamic sources.

We find that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars share the idea of a kind of natural law in which God provides all human beings with enough moral sense to achieve a relatively just sort of political order. The just war tradition in Christianity was treated as part of that baseline moral knowledge, which is why it is so amenable to “cross-pollination” between contributors from different religious traditions. Put differently, the just war tradition is ethics for everyone, for all human beings desire justice. All human beings can benefit from moral knowledge that helps us to identify when circumstances occur that call for the use of force and that place useful strictures on what can count as a just use of force. The just war tradition helps us to recognize those circumstances and to place limits on what may be done to protect us and achieve justice within those circumstances, and this sort of thinking can be found in Muslim ideas about the morality of war. Thus we are not surprised to find Hashmi arguing in his excellent essay, “Jihad and the Geneva Conventions,” that the majority of Muslim moral theorists adopt either an assimilation or accommodationist view of the relationship between Muslim siyar and international law, for international law is itself an attempt to define the boundaries of acceptable action in the international arena regardless of religion. All of this suggests possible areas of cooperation between Western and Muslim political

This book will likely attract readers from a variety of disciplines. Indeed, the author expressly hopes to engage not just the usual and even unusual fellow travelers in the academy, but also the “intellectually curious readers outside the academy, the kinds of individuals who, given the current state of world affairs, desire to know more of the Islamic Near East” (vii). This review is written primarily for the benefit of nonspecialists who are likely to lack a critical perspective on much of what the author writes. Although the book itself exhibits a kind of nostalgia for a time when it was possible to engage in the study of the Islamic world without the messiness of politics, what his narrative confirms at every turn is the impossibility of studying the Muslim world without some political agenda playing a framing, if not, dominating role.

The politicized nature of scholarship on the Islamic world emerges most clearly in Part One of his book, which provides a very informative account of the rise of “Oriental Studies” in the West, first in the Middle Ages as an expressly polemical discipline (with the exception of translations of Arabic philosophical and scientific works) and then, beginning in the late eighteenth century and under the influence of the Enlightenment, as a scientific and humanistic endeavor, relying primarily on rigorous training in Arabic and other Near Eastern languages. This part concludes with an unsatisfying account of Arab and Muslim reaction to modern Oriental Studies. The most interesting part of this historical discussion is the foundational role he attributes to European Jewish scholars in the origins of the “scientific” study of the Near East and how their discovery of Islam played an important role in their own struggles against European anti-Semitism by providing an alternative and more hopeful model of religious coexistence, even if that alternative, as a historical reality, was imaginary in important respects.