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### AN ESSENCIST EXAMINATION OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF "THE KINGDOM OF GOD SUFFERETH VIOLENCE, AND THE VIOLENT TAKETH IT BY FORCE" AND THE JIHADIST MOTIVATION

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#### Abstract

Religious language is among humanity's most powerful instruments for articulating transcendence, morality, identity, destiny, and the meaning of existence. Yet the same language that can inspire sacrifice, compassion, justice, and peace may, when detached from context and philosophical scrutiny, become an instrument of exclusion and violence. This paper adopted a comparative philosophical examination of Matthew 11:12 "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" and the Islamic concept of jihad as appropriated within contemporary jihadist ideology. It argued that the central problem is not the mere presence of difficult religious expressions but the hermeneutical structures through which they are interpreted. Drawing upon philosophical hermeneutics, philosophy of language, logic, Christian theology, Islamic thought, and Essencism, the paper distinguishes sacred meaning from ideological appropriation. It examined the historical and linguistic context of Matthew 11:12, the semantic and theological development of jihad, the distinction between Qur'anic jihad and modern jihadism, and the philosophical dangers of literalist and violent hermeneutics. The paper proposed Essencism, associated with Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, as a hermeneutical criterion based upon the distinction between essence and accidental historical manifestations. On this account, religious interpretation must proceed from linguistic appearance through historical context toward the essential moral and ontological orientation of revelation. The paper concluded that neither Matthew 11:12 nor the Qur'anic concept of jihad can philosophically sustain indiscriminate violence when interpreted within the comprehensive ethical horizons of their respective traditions. The

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recovery of essence therefore becomes an important philosophical resource for peace, interreligious understanding, and human flourishing.

**Keywords:** Essencism, Religious Language, Hermeneutics, Kingdom of God, Jihad, Jihadism, Violence, Philosophy of Religion, Religious Symbolism, Human Flourishing.

### **Introduction**

Few questions in the philosophy of religion are more consequential than the question of how sacred language acquires meaning. Human beings speak of God through human words; they describe eternity through temporal concepts; they articulate transcendence through the grammar of history. The paradox is profound: the finite attempts to speak about the Infinite, and the historical interpreter attempts to understand a revelation that claims to transcend history. Religious language therefore stands at the frontier between language and ontology, between the visible world of human experience and the invisible horizon of ultimate reality. It is precisely at this frontier that the problem of religious violence emerges. Sacred texts contain narratives, symbols, commands, metaphors, prophecies, legal formulations, descriptions of historical conflict, and eschatological visions. When these linguistic forms are isolated from their literary, historical, theological, and philosophical contexts, they may be transformed from vehicles of meaning into weapons of ideology. A sentence becomes a slogan; a metaphor becomes a command; a historical episode becomes a universal prescription; and an interpretation becomes an unquestionable dogma. The violence is consequently not always located in the text itself but in the hermeneutical process through which the text is appropriated. The present paper focuses on two particularly contested cases. The first is Jesus' declaration in Matthew 11:12: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11.12). The second is the Islamic concept of jihad, particularly its appropriation by modern jihadist movements as a vocabulary of revolutionary violence. The juxtaposition is philosophically significant because both cases demonstrate how religious expressions can be separated from their larger theological horizons and converted into ideological instruments. The paper does not seek to establish a facile equivalence between Christian and Islamic traditions, nor does it deny the real historical occurrence of religious violence. Rather, it asks a more fundamental philosophical question: What happens to religious meaning when language is detached from its essential moral and ontological horizon?

The paper advances three principal arguments. First, religious language cannot be adequately interpreted through lexical literalism alone because its meaning is mediated by genre, context, historical consciousness, symbolic structure, and communal use. Second, the distinction between jihad and jihadism is indispensable: jihad is a polyvalent Qur'anic and Islamic concept whose meanings cannot be reduced to armed violence, whereas jihadism is a modern ideological phenomenon that selectively appropriates Islamic vocabulary for political and violent ends. Third, Essencism provides a potentially useful hermeneutical criterion by distinguishing the essential meaning of a religious concept from its contingent, historical, and ideological manifestations. This inquiry is particularly important in contemporary Nigeria and Africa, where religious identity, insecurity, political competition, and extremist violence intersect. Ekanem and Ekefre have explicitly argued that Essencism can contribute to confronting religious intolerance in Nigeria, particularly through education and intellectual transformation. More recently, Ekanem and Emejulu have applied Essencism to the relationship between poverty, social injustice, religion, and insecurity,

indicating the author's continuing development of the philosophy as an instrument for social transformation. The task, therefore, is philosophical rather than merely apologetic. It is to determine whether religious language can be interpreted in a manner that preserves fidelity to revelation without surrendering reason, historical consciousness, or ethical responsibility.

### **Conceptual and Philosophical Clarification**

**Religious Language:** Religious language refers to the linguistic forms through which religious communities articulate claims about God, transcendence, salvation, morality, revelation, human destiny, sacred history, and ultimate reality. Unlike ordinary empirical language, religious language frequently speaks about realities that cannot be exhaustively verified through sensory observation. It consequently employs metaphor, analogy, symbol, paradox, narrative, poetry, prophecy, and performative utterance. A statement such as “God is my rock” is not ordinarily a geological proposition. “God is light” does not imply that God is a physical electromagnetic phenomenon. “The Kingdom of God” is not merely a geographical territory. Such expressions derive their significance from a semantic field in which language points beyond itself. Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of symbol is particularly useful here. Symbols disclose meanings that cannot be exhausted by literal paraphrase; they possess what may be called a semantic surplus (Ricoeur 15–20). Paul Tillich similarly distinguishes symbols from ordinary signs because symbols participate in and disclose dimensions of reality that ordinary signs merely designate (Tillich 41–49). Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy also cautions against abstracting words from the forms of life in which they function. Meaning is connected with use, and religious language possesses a distinctive use within religious forms of life (Wittgenstein 43–47). Consequently, a word cannot be interpreted adequately merely by consulting a dictionary. Its meaning is generated within a network of practices, narratives, institutions, beliefs, and historical experiences. Religious language is therefore simultaneously semantic, symbolic, existential, ethical, and communal.

### **Jihad and Jihadism**

The Arabic term *jihad* derives from the root j-h-d, associated with exertion, effort, or striving. The Qur'anic concept consequently cannot be reduced automatically to warfare. The Qur'an uses the language of striving in diverse contexts, including striving through moral commitment and struggle through one's resources and person (Qur'an 9:41; 25:52; 29:69). Armed conflict is more specifically associated with *qitāl*. This distinction is philosophically important because conceptual confusion between *jihad* and *qitāl* can produce a category error: a broad normative concept of striving is collapsed into one particular form of struggle. Contemporary scholarship has continued to emphasize that the Qur'anic semantic field of *jihad* is broader than armed combat. Jihadism, by contrast, refers to a modern ideological phenomenon in which selected Islamic concepts and texts are mobilized to legitimate revolutionary violence, political domination, or transnational militancy. It should therefore not be treated as a simple synonym for *jihad*. The distinction is conceptually necessary: *jihad* belongs to Islamic theological and ethical discourse, whereas jihadism is a modern ideological formation. The distinction does not mean that armed struggle has never been discussed within Islamic jurisprudence. Classical jurists developed extensive legal discussions concerning warfare, political authority, treaties, communal defence, and relations with non-Muslim polities. But these discussions cannot simply be transported without qualification into modern ideological contexts. The philosophical danger lies in allowing the historical existence of armed struggle to determine the total meaning of *jihad*. Such reasoning

commits a reductionist fallacy: because something is one historical manifestation of a concept, it is assumed to constitute the essence of that concept.

### **Violence and Sacred Violence**

Violence is the intentional use or threat of force to injure, dominate, destroy, or compel. Sacred violence, however, introduces an additional dimension: violence becomes associated with transcendent authorization. It is not merely “I am entitled to do this,” but “God authorizes me to do this.” The philosophical consequence is enormous because the claim of divine authorization may immunize the actor from ordinary moral criticism. Once violence is sacralized, human judgment can be presented as divine judgment. The combatant no longer perceives an opponent merely as a political adversary but as an enemy of God. Such dehumanization is one of the most dangerous consequences of violent hermeneutics. Yet the existence of violent religious movements does not logically entail that religion is essentially violent. That inference would constitute a genetic fallacy: it would explain a doctrine solely through some of its historical uses rather than examining its conceptual structure. The appropriate philosophical question is therefore not simply, “Has religion ever been used violently?” Obviously it has. The deeper question is, “Does violence constitute the essential meaning of the religious language being invoked?” This is the question to which Essencism becomes particularly relevant.

### **Theoretical Framework and Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language**

The theoretical framework of this study combines philosophical hermeneutics, philosophy of language, logic, and Essencism.

### **Hermeneutics and the Problem of Understanding**

Hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation, but interpretation is never an entirely neutral activity. The interpreter approaches a text from a historical location, carrying assumptions, experiences, conceptual categories, and expectations. Gadamer therefore emphasizes the historically effected consciousness of the interpreter and the “fusion of horizons” through which understanding occurs (Gadamer 300–12). The implication is decisive for religious interpretation. A modern reader of Matthew 11:12 does not inhabit the same world as a first-century Jewish hearer. Likewise, a twenty-first-century reader encountering jihad does not automatically inhabit the intellectual world of seventh-century Arabia or the jurisprudential world of classical Islam. Interpretation must therefore move dialogically between the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. Ricoeur supplements this approach by insisting that texts achieve a degree of autonomy from their original authors and contexts, thereby generating new possibilities of interpretation. But this does not imply interpretive anarchy. A text can yield multiple meanings without yielding every conceivable meaning. The philosophical task is therefore to distinguish legitimate plurality from arbitrary appropriation.

### **Language, Logic, and Meaning**

Logic functions as a safeguard against interpretive contradiction. A valid interpretation cannot affirm simultaneously that a passage commands indiscriminate violence and that the same passage categorically prohibits such violence unless it supplies a coherent distinction explaining the apparent contradiction. Religious extremism frequently operates through equivocation, selective quotation, false dilemmas, hasty generalization, and contextual omission. A historical command becomes a universal command; a metaphor becomes a literal instruction; a defensive permission becomes an unlimited mandate; a theological

symbol becomes a political programme. Aristotle's logical tradition reminds us that persuasion is not equivalent to validity. A rhetorically powerful proposition may remain logically defective (Prior Analytics I.1). This distinction is indispensable because extremism frequently possesses powerful rhetoric. The fact that a statement is emotionally compelling does not make it logically sound.

### **Symbolism versus Literalism**

Religious texts are frequently symbolic. Symbolism does not mean that religious statements are meaningless or fictional. Rather, symbols function as mediating structures through which transcendent realities become intelligible. Literalism becomes philosophically problematic when it assumes that the surface grammatical meaning exhausts the meaning of the text. A literal reading may be necessary at one level, but it is not necessarily sufficient at every level. The phrase "Kingdom of God" itself demonstrates the problem. If interpreted geographically, it becomes a territory. If interpreted politically in a crude sense, it becomes a state. If interpreted eschatologically and theologically, it signifies divine sovereignty and the transformation of human existence. The philosophical hermeneutic must therefore ask: What reality is the language trying to disclose? This question leads directly to Essencism.

### **Essencism as a Hermeneutical Philosophy**

Essencism is presented in Ekanem's work as a philosophical position concerned with the identification and realization of essence. In his discussion of the Essencist model, Ekanem derive the term from "essence" and describes essence as that which constitutes the basic nature of a thing and without which it could not be what it is (Ekanem and Ekefre 269). His work further emphasize the relationship between human nature, moral values, knowledge, and the ordering of society. Ekanem and Okolisah subsequently situated Essencism within a broader conversational method of philosophy, arguing that philosophical inquiry proceeds through dialogue and the exchange of ideas. This is significant for the present study because a philosophy that seeks essence should not begin from dogmatic closure. Essence must be investigated through reasoned inquiry. The central hermeneutical principle proposed here is therefore: A religious interpretation is philosophically authentic when it moves from linguistic appearance and historical circumstance toward the essential moral and ontological reality that the religious tradition seeks to disclose. This does not mean that every interpretation must be reduced to one single meaning. Nor does it mean that historical circumstances are irrelevant. Rather, historical circumstances are treated as mediating conditions through which essential meanings become manifest. Essencism consequently establishes a distinction between: linguistic form and essential meaning; historical circumstance and ontological significance; symbol and referent; religious doctrine and ideological appropriation; Normative revelation and contingent human practice. This distinction is particularly important in the study of religious violence. If a religious concept produces an interpretation that fundamentally contradicts the essential moral structure of the tradition from which it derives, the interpreter must provide a philosophical justification for that contradiction.

### **Historical Context of Matthew 11:12.**

Matthew 11:12 occurs within a chapter devoted to John the Baptist, Jesus' identity, and the dawning of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus says: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11:12). The passage is difficult partly because the Greek verb *biazetai* can support more than one grammatical possibility. It may be understood in a passive sense as "suffers violence" or in a

middle sense as something like “forces its way” or “advances forcefully.” The noun *biastai* can likewise refer to violent persons or those who press vigorously toward something. This ambiguity is not a trivial grammatical curiosity. It determines the philosophical horizon of the passage. If the Kingdom “suffers violence,” then the text describes opposition against God's reign. If the Kingdom “forces its way” or is entered by forceful determination, then the text emphasizes the urgency and radical commitment of discipleship. Either way, the passage cannot reasonably be isolated from the surrounding narrative. John the Baptist's ministry occurred within a politically charged Jewish world dominated by Rome and marked by messianic expectations. John announced repentance and the coming of divine judgment (Matt. 3.1–12). His imprisonment and eventual execution demonstrate that the proclamation of God's Kingdom was politically and religiously consequential. Jesus' proclamation likewise challenged existing conceptions of power. The Kingdom was not simply a political rebellion against Rome. Nor was it merely an inward psychological state. It represented divine sovereignty breaking into human history. The historical setting thus helps explain why the language of conflict appears in the text. The arrival of God's reign generates opposition because it challenges rival claims to authority.

### **Major Christian Interpretations of Matthew 11:12**

Christian interpretation of Matthew 11:12 has historically developed along several lines. The spiritual interpretation understands the violence metaphorically. Origen and Chrysostom associated the “violence” with the intensity of spiritual discipline and the determination required for entrance into the Kingdom. Augustine similarly interpreted Christian struggle primarily in relation to the conquest of sinful desires rather than physical domination (City of God XIX.17). The persecution interpretation understands the passage as describing violence directed against the Kingdom. The imprisonment and death of John, the opposition to Jesus, and the persecution of the early Christian community provide historical support for this reading. R. T. France situated the saying within the hostility surrounding the Kingdom's arrival (France 432–35). This recognizes a degree of semantic polyvalence. The text may simultaneously evoke the violent opposition encountered by God's Kingdom and the radical determination demanded of those who receive it. This approach is philosophically attractive because religious language frequently communicates through paradox. The Kingdom is powerful, yet its King is crucified. The first become last; the last become first. Strength appears through weakness; sovereignty is manifested through service. The theological context therefore makes it difficult to construe Matthew 11:12 as an uncomplicated command to commit physical violence. Jesus' teaching in Matthew consistently places love, mercy, reconciliation, and enemy-love at the centre of discipleship (Matt. 5.9, 5.44). At Gethsemane, Jesus rejects Peter's attempt to advance His cause through the sword (Matt. 26.52). The Cross becomes the ultimate theological paradox: divine victory is expressed through sacrificial self-giving. The essential Christian meaning of the Kingdom must therefore be reconstructed from the whole christological narrative rather than from one ambiguous sentence.

### **Historical Development of Jihad in Islamic Thought**

The concept of jihad developed within a complex Islamic intellectual tradition encompassing Qur'anic revelation, prophetic practice, jurisprudence, theology, ethics, spirituality, and political thought. The Qur'anic root j-h-d concerns striving or exertion. The Qur'an employs the language of striving in contexts that cannot be reduced to warfare. Indeed, Qur'an 25:52 instructs believers to strive against unbelief through the Qur'an itself, indicating a form of

non-military struggle. At the same time, the Qur'an contains passages concerning armed conflict. These passages cannot responsibly be erased from Islamic history. Qur'an 2:190, however, places a significant limitation upon fighting: believers are instructed to fight those who fight them and not to transgress. The Qur'anic discourse therefore distinguishes between struggle and aggression. Classical Islamic jurisprudence developed detailed doctrines concerning warfare. These doctrines were shaped by the political realities of premodern states and should not be confused automatically with modern international relations or contemporary militant ideology. Alongside jurisprudence existed an extensive spiritual tradition. Al-Ghazālī's writings emphasize the purification of the soul, the struggle against the *nafs*, and the moral transformation of the believer. The Islamic intellectual tradition therefore contains both juridical and spiritual dimensions of jihad. Modern scholarship has increasingly emphasized this plurality. The Oxford study striving in the Path of God explicitly argued that jihad has acquired different meanings across historical contexts and that reducing it to armed combat produces an inadequate account of the concept's development.

### **Distinguishing Qur'anic Jihad from Modern Jihadism**

The distinction between jihad and jihadism is philosophically indispensable. Jihadism is a modern ideological phenomenon. It emerged within particular historical circumstances involving colonialism, political authoritarianism, geopolitical conflict, revolutionary ideology, and identity crisis. Its advocates frequently appropriate religious vocabulary to establish political legitimacy. This does not mean that jihadist movements possess no connection to Islamic texts. They frequently cite Islamic texts. The philosophical issue, however, is how those texts are interpreted. Jihadist hermeneutics often involves: Textual selectivity; decontextualization; absolutization of historically situated passages; binary classification of humanity; delegitimization of competing interpretations; sacralization of political objectives; moral exclusion of opponents. This is not simply a theological problem. It is a problem in epistemology and logic. When an interpreter selects only passages concerning warfare while ignoring passages concerning mercy, justice, restraint, treaties, patience, and human accountability, the resulting picture is not the whole Qur'anic moral universe. It is a constructed fragment presented as the whole. Such reasoning is comparable to interpreting Christianity exclusively through its wars while ignoring the Sermon on the Mount, or interpreting Judaism exclusively through narratives of ancient warfare while ignoring prophetic demands for justice and righteousness. The principle is universal: a tradition should be interpreted through its normative totality rather than through its most violent fragments.

### **Comparative Analysis of Christian and Islamic Interpretations of Sacred Violence**

Christianity and Islam are not identical traditions. Their scriptures, theological structures, doctrines of revelation, concepts of salvation, and historical trajectories differ substantially. Yet both traditions possess internal resources for regulating interpretations of violence. Christianity contains traditions of pacifism as well as traditions of just-war reasoning. Augustine and Aquinas developed moral criteria for legitimate warfare, while later thinkers such as John Howard Yoder emphasized the radical nonviolence of Jesus' political ethics. Islam contains jurisprudential traditions concerning warfare as well as extensive spiritual and ethical traditions emphasizing restraint, justice, patience, and moral struggle. This comparison yields an important philosophical insight: the existence of violence within the historical experience of a religion does not establish violence as its essence. The Crusades

cannot exhaust Christianity. The Inquisition cannot exhaust Christianity. Colonial violence conducted under Christian symbolism cannot exhaust Christianity. Likewise, jihadist terrorism cannot exhaust Islam. Boko Haram cannot exhaust Islam. Al-Qaida and ISIS cannot exhaust Islam. The proper philosophical question is whether such movements faithfully embody the normative essence of the traditions they invoke. This distinction also prevents the opposite error: romanticizing religious traditions by denying their difficult histories. An honest philosophy must acknowledge historical violence while refusing to confuse historical practice with essential doctrine.

### **An Essencist Critique of Violent Hermeneutics**

Violent hermeneutics occurs when interpretation becomes a mechanism for converting sacred language into authorization for coercion, domination, or destruction. Its first characteristic is decontextualization. A passage is removed from the historical circumstances in which it arose. Its second is semantic absolutization. One possible meaning of an ambiguous expression is treated as its only meaning. Its third is ethical isolation. The selected passage is detached from the broader moral principles of the tradition. Its fourth is ideological appropriation. The interpreter's political objective is presented as though it were identical with divine intention. Essencism challenges all four. The philosophical criterion becomes: Does the proposed interpretation disclose or destroy the essential moral purpose of the religious tradition? If an interpretation of Matthew 11:12 makes Jesus a teacher of indiscriminate violence, it must explain how that interpretation coheres with enemy-love, forgiveness, mercy, and the rejection of Peter's sword. If an interpretation of jihad makes indiscriminate killing an unrestricted religious obligation, it must explain how such a reading coheres with Qur'anic injunctions against transgression and the broader ethical architecture of Islamic revelation. The burden of coherence therefore falls upon the violent interpretation. Essencism does not simply ask, "Can this interpretation be extracted from the text?" It asks the deeper question, "Can this interpretation survive within the essential whole of the tradition?" That is the difference between textual extraction and philosophical interpretation.

### **Religious Language, Logic, and the Crisis of Extremism**

Extremism is sustained by more than emotion. It is sustained by a particular logic of interpretation. One recurring structure is the false dilemma: Believer or enemy; sacred or profane; loyalty or betrayal; obedience or apostasy; victory or annihilation. Such binary categories simplify a complex moral universe and transform disagreement into existential warfare. Another structure is equivocation. A term with multiple meanings is assigned the meaning most useful to the interpreter's political purpose. Jihad, for example, is reduced to warfare; "violence" in Matthew 11:12 is transformed into a divine command for physical aggression. Another is hasty generalization. Because violence occurred in one historical context, violence is declared universally obligatory. Another is contextual omission. The interpreter deliberately excludes passages that complicate the desired conclusion. Philosophy has an essential role in exposing these errors. The purpose of logic is not merely to win arguments but to protect thought from contradiction, manipulation, and fallacy. Gadamer's hermeneutics adds another safeguard: the interpreter must allow the text to challenge the interpreter rather than forcing the text to say what the interpreter already believes. Religious extremism often does precisely the opposite. It begins with the conclusion and then searches Scripture for authorization.

### **Towards an Essencist Philosophy of Peace and Human Flourishing**

The philosophical alternative to violent hermeneutics must be more than negative. It must provide a positive account of what religious interpretation ought to accomplish. Essencism provides such an orientation through the concepts of truth, human dignity, moral responsibility, justice, and flourishing. Peace cannot simply mean the absence of armed conflict. Peace must involve the restoration of relationships, justice, dignity, security, and the possibility of human development. This understanding has resonance within both religious traditions. Christianity speaks of peace as shalom and associates blessedness with peacemaking (Matt. 5:9). Islam speaks of salām and repeatedly links righteousness with justice and mercy (Qur'an 16:90; 49:13). An Essencist philosophy therefore interprets religious traditions according to their capacity to promote the flourishing of human beings as moral and spiritual persons. Human flourishing cannot be reduced to material prosperity. A society may possess wealth and technology while suffering moral disintegration. Likewise, a religious community may possess powerful institutions while lacking compassion. The human essence requires intellectual, moral, spiritual, social, and material development. Ekanem's published Essencist work is particularly relevant here because it treats philosophy not merely as abstract speculation but as a framework for addressing concrete social problems. His 2014 work presents Essencism as a model for educational and social development, while his later work explicitly connects Essencism with religious intolerance, insecurity, and social justice. This practical orientation gives Essencism a distinctive relevance to peace philosophy.

### **An Essencist Hermeneutical Model**

The analysis developed in this paper may be condensed into five hermeneutical principles. The first is: Contextuality: No sacred expression should be interpreted without examining its historical and literary context. Second, Semantic Plurality Where language is genuinely ambiguous, interpretation must acknowledge the plurality of possible meanings rather than manufacture artificial certainty. Third, Logical Coherence: An interpretation must remain compatible with the broader moral and theological architecture of the tradition. Fourth: Essentiality: The interpreter must distinguish the enduring essence of a religious concept from its contingent historical manifestations. Fifth' Ethical Consequence: Interpretation must be evaluated in relation to the moral consequences it generates. An interpretation that requires the systematic dehumanization of others demands extraordinary philosophical justification. These five principles produce a hermeneutics that is neither naïvely literalist nor arbitrarily relativist. The model may be represented philosophically as: Text → Context → Meaning → Essence → Ethical Application. The movement is not circular in the sense of returning mechanically to the beginning. It is dialectical. Context illuminates meaning; meaning points toward essence; essence provides ethical orientation; ethical application tests the adequacy of interpretation.

### **Philosophical Implications for Christianity and Islam**

The significance of this approach extends beyond the two texts examined. First, it suggests that religious pluralism need not imply philosophical relativism. Christians and Muslims may disagree profoundly about revelation while still engaging in rational dialogue concerning justice, human dignity, peace, and violence. Second, it demonstrates that faith and reason are not necessary enemies. Both Aquinas and Ibn Rushd represent traditions in which rational reflection contributes to religious understanding. Third, it establishes that interpretive humility is an intellectual virtue. The interpreter who claims complete

possession of sacred meaning may actually be demonstrating a failure to understand the depth of sacred language. Fourth, it reveals that religious education is a security issue. Where young people are taught to memorize texts without understanding context, genre, logic, and ethical purpose, they may become vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Fifth, it demonstrates that peace requires hermeneutical work. Military force may suppress a violent movement temporarily, but it cannot eliminate the intellectual structures that reproduce extremism. A durable peace must therefore include education, philosophical reasoning, theological dialogue, historical literacy, and ethical reconstruction.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the philosophical problem of religious language through an Essencist analysis of Matthew 11:12 and the concept of jihad as distinguished from modern jihadism. The central argument has been that sacred language cannot be responsibly interpreted through isolated literalism. Religious meaning emerges through the interaction of language, history, context, symbolism, tradition, reason, and ethical purpose. Matthew 11:12 illustrates the danger of interpreting an ambiguous religious expression outside its theological and historical horizon. The language of “violence” belongs to a narrative in which the Kingdom of God is breaking into a world marked by political domination, religious expectation, prophetic confrontation, suffering, and ultimately the Cross. To transform this language into an unrestricted command for physical violence is to ignore the wider ethical and Christological structure of the Gospel. The Islamic concept of jihad presents a parallel but not identical hermeneutical problem. The concept encompasses striving and exertion in the path of God and has developed through spiritual, ethical, juridical, political, and historical traditions. Modern jihadism represents a particular ideological appropriation of Islamic language rather than a sufficient description of the entire concept of jihad. The distinction is indispensable both intellectually and ethically. The deeper philosophical lesson is that texts do not interpret themselves. Human beings interpret them, and human beings bring desires, fears, political interests, historical memories, and ideological commitments to the interpretive enterprise. Consequently, the struggle against religious extremism must also be a struggle for responsible interpretation. Here lies the principal contribution of Essencism. By distinguishing essence from accident, Essencism provides a philosophical mechanism for determining whether a particular interpretation expresses the intrinsic purpose of a religious concept or merely reflects a contingent historical appropriation. It refuses to deny historical violence, but it equally refuses to make violence the essence of religion merely because violence has occurred in religious history. The essential question therefore becomes: What does the religious concept fundamentally seek to disclose and produce in human existence? If the answer is truth, justice, moral responsibility, spiritual transformation, human dignity, and flourishing, then interpretations that systematically destroy these values must be subjected to serious philosophical criticism.

The Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to conquest when its central narrative culminates in sacrificial love. Jihad cannot be reduced to terrorism when its conceptual history encompasses striving, moral discipline, spiritual purification, communal responsibility, and regulated struggle. To confuse these distinctions is to confuse the shadow with the substance. Ultimately, the crisis of religious extremism is also a crisis of interpretation. The sacred word can become either a lamp or a weapon, depending upon the intellectual and moral hands that carry it. Philosophy must therefore stand at the threshold of interpretation as both guardian and questioner. It must ask whether language is being used to disclose truth or to sanctify power; whether scripture is being interpreted or manipulated; whether

faith is producing moral transformation or merely legitimizing political desire. An Essencist philosophy of religious language answers by calling interpretation back to essence. It is a movement from letter to meaning, from meaning to essence, from essence to ethical responsibility, and from ethical responsibility to human flourishing. In this movement lies the possibility of a more mature philosophy of religion one that neither trivializes the sacred nor surrenders reason; one that neither denies historical conflict nor glorifies it; one that respects religious difference without abandoning universal ethical responsibility. The future of interreligious peace may therefore depend not only upon what humanity believes, but upon how humanity learns to interpret what it believes. Sacred texts have survived empires, wars, migrations, revolutions, and civilizations because their meanings continue to speak across generations. The responsibility of the present generation is to ensure that those meanings become instruments of wisdom rather than weapons of destruction. The ultimate task of an Essencist hermeneutics is consequently not merely to understand religious language. It is to understand it well enough to prevent misunderstanding from becoming violence.

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