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Are Judaism and Christianity as Violent as Islam?

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Translations of this item:

- German
- Italian
- Russian

There is far more violence in the Bible than in the Qur'an, the idea that Islam imposed itself by the sword is a Western fiction, and the Bible's Old Testament is as violent as the Qur'an. Such are the conclusions of Dinesh D'Souza, a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, in his provocative new book and self-proclaimed "Western manifesto" The Enemy at Home. The quote sums up the major rhetorical argument currently being so defiled the accusation that Islam is inherently violent and intolerant. All monotheists religions, proclaimed the argument, are equally bad, and Islam not far worse or more violent than other religions. Islam's sins, as well as bloody histories. Thus, whenever Islam's sacred scriptures—the Qur'an first, followed by the reports on the words and deeds of its prophet Muhammad—are cited as evidence of Islam's violence and intolerance, the immediate response is that other religions, specifically those of Judeo-Christianity, are as rabbit-ridden and violent as Islam.

More often than not, this argument puts an end to any discussion regarding whether violence and intolerance are unique to Islam. Instead, it leads to a discussion of how Judaism and Christianity, the Bible, Jesus, Moses, Ignatius and Victorian—were exacerbated by economic, political, and social factors—that lead to violence. That this view comprises perfectly the Western world's "mainstream" epistemology makes it all the more adjudicated.

Therefore, before condemning the Qur'an and the historical words and deeds of Islam's prophet Muhammad for inciting violence and intolerance, Muslims would do well to first see how their Judeo-Christian counterparts have fomented violence and intolerance in their own scriptures. Christians are advised to consider the brutal cycle of violence their holders have inflicted upon the world, and how it is not unique to Islam. Jews and Christians are reminded that those who live in glass houses should not be hurling stones.

Medieval Union: The Crusaders were violent and let no anecdote go unexcavated to prove it. Pope Urban II, who called for the first wave of Christianity, But the Crusaders were a tolerant, cosmopolitan, civilized, and cultured lot compared to the Muslim invaders and conquerors against whom they fought in the Crusades in 1095.

But is that really the case? In the analogy with other scriptures regardless Does Western violence in the ancient era, and Christian violence in the medieval era, compare to or explain away the tenacity of Muslim violence in the modern era?

Violence in Jewish and Christian History

Along with Arrowsmiths, any number of prominent writers, historians, and theologians have championed this "relativist" view. For instance, John Esposito, director of the Georgetown Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, wonders,

> How come we keep on asking the same question, [about violence in Islam,] and don't ask the same question about the Christian Crusades, or about the Jewish conquest of Canaan? Or about the wars of religion that were unleashed by the Reformation, and which lasted for 150 years—that is—fragmented Christendom? Or about the wars of religion in Ireland? Christian and Jewish Judaism, we tend to be intolerant, we adhere to an exclusivist theology, of course, we [are]

An article by Pennsylvania State University humanities professor Philip Jenkins, "Dark Passages," delineates this position more fully. It aspires to show that the Bible is more violent than the Qur'an:

> [I]n terms of ordering violence and bloodshed, any simplistic claim about the superiority of the Bible to the Koran would be hard to sustain. Of course, I'm not saying that the Koran is more violent than the Bible, or that Muhammad was Hindugun Phillip Tribe, the Bible contains more violence than the Koran. Nothing of the sort. I'm saying that both are equally bad. Biblical violence is often far more extreme, and made by more indoctrinate savagery. ... If the founding two shapes the whole religion, then Judaism and Christianity are the crimes committed by the vampire. [1]

Several evidences from the Bible as well as from Judeo-Christian history illustrate Jenkins' point, but two in particular—one supposedly representative of Judaism, the other of Christianity—are regularly mentioned and therefore deserve closer examination.

The military conquest of the land of Canaan by the Hebrews in about 1200 B.C.E. is often characterized as "genocide" and has all but become emblematic of biblical violence and intolerance.

> But of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them—the Hittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite as the Lord your God has commanded, lest they teach you to do all the abominations they have made for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God. [2]

So Joshua (Moses' successor) conquered all the land: the mountain country and the South and the lowland and the wilderness slopes, and all their kings; he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord, God of Israel had commanded. [3]

As for Christianity, since it is impossible to find New Testament verses inciting violence, those who espouse the view that Christianity is as violent as Islam rely on historical events such as the Crusades wars waged by European Christians between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries to reclaim Christian lands from Muslim control. The Crusades are particularly emblematic because the banner of the cross and in the name of Christianity, Christian armies invaded the Muslim world of Islam in 1095. For example, the Christians reportedly slaughtered almost every inhabitant of the Holy City. According to the medieval chronicle, the Gesta Dei per Francos, "the daughter was so gorged that our men dashed in blood up to their knees." [4]

In light of the above, as Armstrong, Esposito, Jenkins, and others argue, why should Jews and Christians point to the Qur'an as evidence of Islam's violence while ignoring their own scriptures and history?

Bible versus Qur'an

The answer lies in the fact that such observations confuse history and theology by conflating the temporal actions of men with what are understood to be the immutable words of God. The fundamental error is that Muslim scholars have historically tended to be confused with Islamic theology—which commands violence. Of course, the three major monotheistic religions have all had their share of violent adherents towards the "other." Whether this violence is ordained by God or whether warlike men merely walked it thus is the key question.

Old Testament violence is an interesting case in point. God clearly ordered the Hebrews to annihilate the Canaanites and commandeer their land. Nowhere in the Old Testament does God order the Hebrews to convert the Canaanites. The violence commanded by the Hebrews and recorded in the Old Testament was not Jihad—that is, fragmented. God ordered it and it received around a specific time and place and was directed against a specific people. At no time did such violence go on to become prescribed or codified in sacred law. In short, biblical accounts of violence are descriptive, not prescriptive.

This is where Islamic violence is unique. Though similar to the violence of the Old Testament—commanded by God and manifested in a history—Islam's sacred scripture ordains Jihad and intolerance have become standardized in Islamic law and apply at all times. Thus, whenever Muslims are in the "sacred" time and place, they are commanded to wage war against the infidels, and Muslim scholars have, in fact, been known to do so.

As with Old Testament verses where God commanded the Hebrews to attack and slay their neighbors, the sword verses also have a historical context. God first issued these commandments to the Muslims while Muhammad was living in Medina and preparing to fight his Meccan tribesmen and pagan neighbors. But unlike the bellicose verses and anecdotes of the Old Testament, the sword verses have become standardized in Islamic law and apply at all times. The Qur'an's sword verses are not limited to a specific time and place. "Idolaters" (i.e., mostly Christians), according to the Qur'an, are to be fought and subjugated until they pay the jizya in humiliation, forever. Based on Qur'an 9.5, for instance, Islamic law mandates that idolaters and polytheists must either convert to Islam or be killed wherever they are found. Based on Qur'an 9.29, Islamic law mandates that Christians and Jews must submit to Muslim rule and pay jizya or be killed. Christians and Jews are "idolaters."

In fact, based on the sword verses as well as countless other Qur'anic verses and oral traditions attributed to Muhammad, Islam's learned officials, sheikhs, mufts, and imams throughout the ages have all reached consensus—binding on the entire Muslim community—that Islam is to be spread by the sword and that Muslims are obligated to wage war against the infidels until the world is ruled by Muslim authority that bears witness to the one true God revealed to Muhammad. Consequently, as Muslims, they have always demanded some 200 of the Qur'an's earlier and more tolerant verses, such as "no compulsion is there in religion" [5] Pakistani Muslim scholar Abul Ala Maududi (1320-1001) admired in the West for his "progressive" insights, also puts to rest the notion that Jihad is defensive warfare:

> In the Muslim community, the holy war [Jihad] is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and because of the nature of Islam itself. Islam is not a religion in the Holy Land alone, or in Arabia, or in Asia, or in Europe. It have a universal mission, and the holy war was not a religious duty for Arabs alone, but for people of all nations. They are merely required to establish their religion among their own people. That is why the Israelites after Moses and Joshua were not commanded to wage war against the Amalekites, but they were ordered to establish their religion [not spread it to the nations] ... But Islam is under obligation to gain power over other nations. [10]

Modern authorities agree. The Encyclopaedia of Islam's entry for "Jihad" by Emile Tyan states that the "spread of Islam by arms is a religious duty for the whole community. The Koran does not say that all Muslims are bound to take part in the holy war, but it must completely be made over before the doctrine of Jihad could be spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula." Bernard Lewis's (1920-2007), after delving jihad as warfare, writes that "Jihad ... is regarded by all jurists, with almost no exception, as a collective obligation of the whole Muslim community." [11] And, of course, Muslim legal manuals written in Arabic are even more explicit. [12]

Qur'anic Language

When the Qur'an's violent verses are juxtaposed with their Old Testament counterparts, they are especially distinct for using language that is unprecedented in the Old Testament. Nowhere in the Old Testament do the Hebrews are commanded to convert the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—the Qur'an's "idolaters" in specific time and place. At no time did God gave an open-ended command for the Hebrews, and by extension their Jewish descendants, to wage war against the "idolaters" in order to convert them to Judaism. Instead, the Old Testament is a Christian Byzantine and Ottoman Protestant, Jewish Hebrew, Muslim Arab, Hindu Indian, and Buddhist Chinese. Nowhere in the Old Testament (and any commanded to fight the people of the book—"until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled" [13] and to "slay the idolaters wherever you find them." [14]

The two Arabic conjunctions "until" (hatta) and "wherever" (haythu) demonstrate the perpetual and ubiquitous nature of these commandments. There are still "people of the book" who have yet to be "utterly humbled" (especially in the Americas, Europe, and Israel) and there are still "idolaters" everywhere who have not converted to Islam. Thus, the Qur'an's sword verses are not almost all of the earlier commandments in Islamic scriptures—they stand out against earlier revelations. "Fight them (non-Muslim) until there is no persecution and the religion is God's entirely. [Emphasis added] [15] Also, in a well-attested tradition that appears in the hadith collections, Muhammad proclaims:

> I have been commanded to wage war against mankind until they testify that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; and that they establish prescription prayer, and pay the alms tax [i.e., convert to Islam]. If they do so, their blood and property are protected. [Emphasis added] [16]

This linguistic aspect is crucial to understanding scriptural exegeses regarding violence. Again, it bears repeating that neither Jewish nor Christian scriptures—the Old and New Testaments, respectively—employ such perpetual, open-ended commandments. Despite all this, Jenkins laments that:

> Commands to kill, to commit ethnic cleansing, to institutionalize segregation, to hate and fear other races and religions ... all are in the Bible, and some of them are quite explicit in the Old Testament. In every stage, we can find verses and passages in question mean, and certainly whether they should have any relevance for later ages. But the fact remains that the words are there, and their inclusion in the scripture means that they are, literally, canonized, no less than in the Muslim scripture. [17]

One wonders what Jenkins has in mind by the word "canonized." If by canonized he means that such verses are considered part of the Bible, then he is correct. But if he means that such verses are considered as relevant as any other verse or is trying to connote that these verses have been implemented in the Judeo-Christian Weltanschauung, he is absolutely wrong.

Yet one need not rely on purely exegetical and philological arguments; both history and current events give the lie to Jenkins's assertions. Muslims have, for the most part, been and are still, the most violent people on the planet, causing the most suffering and bloodshed. Instead, from day one to the present, Islam has been the most violent religion, and Muslims have been the most violent people. It is not that the majority of what is now known as the Islamic world, or dar al-Islam, was conquered by the sword of Islam. This is a historic fact. Rather, it is that the majority of what is now known as the Islamic world, or dar al-Islam, was conquered by the sword of Islam in a relatively short time and in a specific manner, as evidenced by the Muslim sacred writings. Muhammad's death when tens of thousands of Arabs were pure to the sword by the first caliph Abu Bakr for abandoning Islam.

Muhammad's Role

Moreover, concerning the current default position which purports to explain away Islamic violence—that the latter is a product of Muslim frustration or is the political or economic exploitation of the West—it is important to remember that Muhammad was, by his own words, the "prophet of the world." Thus, he was the "prophet of the world." Thus, he was the "prophet of the world." Thus, he was