

05. Misunderstanding Christianity, Violence



4. Texts that misunderstand Christian teaching.

Sûrah 4:157-158 (from Medina) reads: *‘The Jews say: “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God” though they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared so unto them ... but God raised him up unto Himself’* (see also 3:55 and 5:72-75). That Jesus was not truly crucified is a strange idea that contradicts the Gospel record. It derives from Docetist sources.

This is not the only statement in the Quran that is based on legends found in apocryphal gospels. The legend of Jesus making birds from clay (see Sûrahs 3:49 and 5:110) is found in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

The Quran also misunderstands the Christian idea of the Triune God. It thinks that Christians teach that there are three gods: God, Mary and Jesus. *‘When God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, “Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?”’* (Sûrah 5:116, from Medina).

It is one thing to find reasons why Muhammad misunderstood Christian teaching. It is another to accept the statements of the Quran to be direct revelations from God. Again and again the Quran speaks against Christians calling Jesus ‘the Son of God’ (for example Sûrah 9:30). He was possibly not helped by lack of clarity in Christian teaching. Once again, a problem arises if people attribute the misunderstanding to God by accepting the words of the Quran not as Muhammad’s response to his experience, but as the very words of God.

5. Texts that give divine authorisation to the use of force to propagate Islam.

The most worrying aspect of the Quran is the claim that it is God's will to use force to propagate religion. The word most non-Muslims are familiar with is the noun 'jihad' – perhaps best translated as 'striving'. It comes from the root 'jahada', from which comes the verb 'to strive'.

Sometimes ‘strive’ (jahada) refers to the discipline required to submit to God’s will. For Muhammad, Abraham was the first Muslim, the first to submit to the will of the One God. All who share Abraham’s faith are true Muslims. Muhammad sees this especially in Moses and Jesus and those who follow them faithfully. Muhammad sees himself as God’s Messenger calling everyone to strive to be faithful disciples of Abraham.

‘Strive for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you – and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham. He named you muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper’ (Sûrah 22:78 (?)).

‘Whosoever strive, strives only for himself’ (Sûrah 29:6, ?).

‘Strive in God’s way so that haply you may prosper’ (Sûrah 5:35, from Medina).

Mostly ‘strive’ [jahada] is in the context of ‘waging war’, which is part of ‘God’s way’.

‘O Prophet! Strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh with them. Their refuge is Hell’ (Sûrah 9:73, from Medina; repeated in Sûrah 66:9, also Medina).

Those who were left behind exulted in staying back, opposing the Messenger of God and were averse to striving with their wealth and with their selves in the way of God. And they said “Go not forth in the heat.” Say “The fire of Hell is of a heat more intense’(Sûrah 9:81, from Medina). They are threatened with Hell for not supporting the war or putting their lives on the line.

‘The Messenger and those who believe in him strive with their wealth and with their selves. And it is they who shall have good things, and it is they who shall prosper’ (Sûrah 9:88, from Medina).

Many texts speak of the use of force, without using 'jahada'. Sometimes the focus is on defence:

'Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress' (Sûrah 2:190, from Medina).

'Permission is granted to those who are fought, because they have been wronged – and truly God is able to help them – who were expelled from their homes without right, only for saying, "Our Lord is God". Were it not for God repelling people, some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein God's name is mentioned much, would have been destroyed. And God will surely help those who help Him – truly God is Strong, Mighty' (Sûrah 22:39-40, ?).

Waging war is not restricted to defence

'Those who believe fight in the way of God, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of false deities. Fight, therefore, against the allies of Satan' (Sûrah 4:76, from Medina).

'Fight in the way of God. Thou art accountable only for thyself, and urge on the believers. It may be that God will restrain the might of the disbelievers, for God is stronger in might and more severe in punishment' (Sûrah 4:84, from Medina).

'If the disbelievers turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them, and take no protector or helper from among them' (Sûrah 4:89, from Medina).

'The recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavour to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides, or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a greater punishment' (Sûrah 5:33, from Medina).

'I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. So strike above the neck, and strike their every fingertip' (Sûrah 8: 12, from Medina).

God destroys towns (*'How many a town have We destroyed'*, Sûrah 7:4), so it is logical for God's followers to do so. When Muslim slay their enemies *'You did not slay them, but God slew them'* (Sûrah 8:17, from Medina). We find similar statements in the Hebrew Scriptures, but not in the Christian New Testament.

‘Fight them until there is no strife, and religion is wholly for God’ (Sûrah 8:39, from Medina).

‘It is not for a prophet to take captives until he overwhelms his enemy in the land’ (Sûrah 8:67, from Medina).

‘When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful’ (Sûrah 9:5, from Medina).

'Fight those who believe not in God and in the Last Day, and who do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden, and who follow not the Religion of Truth among those who were given the Book, till they pay the jizyah (the tax) with a willing hand, being humbled' (Sûrah 9:29, from Medina).

To fulfil the mission given him by God, Muhammad felt obliged to spread belief by force of arms: *'to make the Religion of Truth prevail over all religion'* (Sûrah 9:33, from Medina).

'When you meet those who disbelieve, strike at their necks; then, when you have overwhelmed them, tighten the bonds. Then free them graciously or hold them for ransom, till war lays down its burdens. Thus [shall it be]' (Sûrah 47:4).

Muhammad pictures God as a warrior God. The call to use violence to propagate what the Quran calls 'the Religion of Truth' is understandable in light of the tribal practices of the time. The problem is that Muhammad himself and his followers considered the above instructions as the words of God, with the consequence that they understood the use of force as divinely sanctioned.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a more thorough treatment would involve a comparison of the Quran and the Hebrew Scriptures. Especially in the presentation of God as a warrior God and in the use of violence there are similarities, for comparisons can be drawn between the tribal customs of Arabia and the tribal customs of ancient Israel. Today Jewish and Christian scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures recognise the call to violence in the context in which it were written. It are seen as the expression, not of God's will, but of the limited understanding of the time.

Muhammad assumed that the enemies of the Muslims were God's enemies:

'Whosoever is an enemy of God, His angels and His messengers, and Gabriel and Michael: God is indeed the enemy of the disbelievers' (Sûrah 2:98, from Medina).

'Prepare for them what you can of strength of arms and horses tethered for battle, frightening thereby the enemy of God, and your enemy' (Sûrah 8:60, from Medina).

'O you who believe! Take not Mine enemy and your enemy as friends' (Sûrah 60:1, from Medina).

At times the ancient Israelites shared this assumption, an assumption that Jesus rejected:

‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:43-48).

Paul writes: ‘If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink’ (Romans 12:20).

Jesus had a different teaching because he had a different notion of God. I am not claiming that people do not have a right to defend themselves against aggression. Nor am I denying that people and states have failed to obey Jesus, and have, in his name, indulged in aggression to further their own interests. What I am claiming is that when Christians behave in this way we cannot quote our sacred Scriptures in support of our behaviour.

The early histories of the spread of the Christian religion and the Muslim religion are very different. From the beginning Islam has included a political component. Force was used first of all to get what was needed to support the Muslim community. It was used also against those who resisted Islam, and, when the Muslim community was strong enough, force was used to spread Islam. Muhammad himself took part in 27 raids between his arrival at Medina and his death. By contrast, for the first three hundred years Christians had no defence against those who tried to crush them, and the spread of Christianity resulted from its commitment to love and the meaning that people found in it. When, in the fourth century, Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman State the state continued to use force to strengthen its hold on power. When such force was used it was in the interest of the state, not of Christianity, and was a failure to obey the revelation that is at the heart of the Christian way of life.

Muslims claimed the right to use force and quoted from the Quran to support their claim. This is a hugely important difference, and one that we all need to explore if Muslims and Christians are to find common ground in our pursuit of peace. The Christian position is not complicated: Jesus taught us to love our enemies. The Quran gives a different picture.

The Study Quran quotes the following hadith (page 1808). Muhammad is quoted as saying:

‘I have been commanded to fight the people until they bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is God’s Messenger, perform the prayer and pay the alms. When they have done this, their blood and property are safe from me, except for what Islamic law requires, and then the reckoning is up to God.’

All religions must respect people's freedom of conscience in following the way of life that they find gives meaning to their life, while respecting other people's freedom to follow a different path. This involves respect for one's own and other people's conscience. If we employ force to override a person's freedom in this matter, and if we do so in God's name, we undermine religion and present a false God.

If we are using force because our sacred literature requires it, we must realise that all human words, however inspired, are human words, with all the beauty and power of human words, but also with the limitations that any word has in regard to the most profound questions facing us. If sacred texts encourage the use of force, we must accept the fact that in this the texts are faulty. We must purify our notion of God, and learn to recognise the historical context out of which these faulty human words came. We must learn from experience, and together enlighten each other in regard to our notion of God. We can learn from each other instead of fighting to defend our necessarily limited understanding.



Peace Prayer