

VIOLENCE IN THE KORAN

The world witnessed a flood of reaction to Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture, a reaction that has gone well beyond words, with attacks on churches in Gaza, the West Bank and Basra. Some even called for the Pope to be executed.

Australia's Cardinal George Pell weighed into the debate, suggesting that violent responses to the Pope's September 12 lecture demonstrate the link "for the Islamists" between religion and violence.

On the other hand, no less a figure than the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Sheikh, issued a statement on the official Saudi news service, defending Muslims' divine right to resort to violence: "The spread of Islam has gone through several phases, secret and then public, in Mecca and Medina. God then authorised the faithful to defend themselves and to fight against those fighting them, which amounts to a right legitimised by God. This ... is quite reasonable, and God will not hate it."

Saudi Arabia's most senior cleric also explained that war was never Islam's ancient founder, the prophet Mohammed's, first choice: "He gave three options: either accept Islam, or surrender and pay tax, and they will be allowed to remain in their land, observing their religion under the protection of Muslims." Thus, according to the Grand Mufti, the third option (the sword) was only a last resort, if the non-Muslims refused to convert or surrender peacefully to the armies of Islam.

Sheikh Abdel went on to urge people to read the Koran and Sunnah (the record of Mohammed's teaching and example) for themselves, pointing out that the Koran has been translated into many of the world's languages: "Those who read the Koran and the Sunnah can understand the facts."

On this at least the Archbishop of Sydney and the Saudi Grand Mufti do agree, for in an address earlier this year, Pell also urged people to read the Koran.

So what are these facts contained in the Koran and Sunnah that the Grand Mufti would have us read?

As it happens, reading the Koran is not without its difficulties. There is, for a start, the thorny problem of context. The Koran gives little help with this: it does not mark off specific passages one from another and its 114 chapters (suras) are not laid out in chronological order.

The keys to unlocking the context for individual passages of the Koran can be found in the life of Mohammed, the Sunnah. The sources for the Sunnah are the traditions (hadiths), of which Sunnis recognise six canonical collections, and biographies of Mohammed (sira literature).

Although the volume of this material is considerable, it is now largely available in English translation, much of it on the internet.

In addition to the inherent difficulty of the sources, many secular Westerners rely on certain crippling preconceptions. One is the often-heard mantra that "all religions are the same". Another is the claim that "anyone can justify violence from any religious text". This idea stretches back at least to Rousseau, who considered any and all forms of religion to be pernicious.

Either of these views, if firmly held, would tend to sabotage anyone's ability to investigate the Koran's distinctive take on violence.

There is another obstacle, and that is Western culture's own sense of guilt and suspicion of what it regards as Christian hypocrisy.

Any attempt to critique some of Islam's teachings is likely to be met with loud and vociferous denunciations of the church's moral failings, such as its appalling track record of anti-Semitism. And did I mention the crusades?

Finally, the reality is that Muslims adhere to widely varying beliefs and practices. Most people are understandably afraid to come to their own conclusions about violent passages in the Koran, lest they find themselves demonising Muslims.

But does the Koran incite violence?

It is self-evident that some Koranic verses encourage violence. Consider for example a verse which implies that fighting is "good for you": "Fighting is prescribed upon you, and you dislike it. But it may happen that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that you love a thing which is bad for you. And Allah knows and you know not." (2:216)

On the other hand, it is equally clear that there are peaceful verses as well: "Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious." (16:125)

Resolving apparently contradictory messages presents one of the central interpretative challenges of the Koran. Muslims do not agree today on how best to address this. For this reason alone it could be regarded as unreasonable to claim that any one interpretation of the Koran is the correct one.

Nevertheless, a consensus developed very early in the history of Islam about this problem. This method relies on a theory of stages in the development of Mohammed's prophetic career. It also appeals to a doctrine known as abrogation, which states that verses revealed later can cancel out or qualify verses revealed earlier.

The classical approach to violence in the Koran was neatly summed up

in an essay on jihad in the Koran by Sheikh Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Hamid, former chief justice of Saudi Arabia: "So at first 'the fighting' was forbidden, then it was permitted and after that it was made obligatory: (1) against those who start 'the fighting' against you (Muslims) ... (2) And against all those who worship others along with Allah."

At the beginning, in Mohammed's Meccan period, when he was weaker and his followers few, passages of the Koran encouraged peaceful relations and avoidance of conflict: "Many of the People of the Book (Christians and Jews) wish that they could turn you away as disbelievers ... But forgive and overlook, till Allah brings his command." (2:109).

Later, after persecution and emigration to Medina in the first year of the Islamic calendar, authority was given to engage in warfare for defensive purposes only: "Fight in the path of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God does not love transgressors." (2:190)

As the Muslim community grew stronger, and conflict with its neighbours did not abate, further revelations expanded the licence for waging war, until in Sura 9, regarded as one of the last chapters to be revealed, it is concluded that war against non-Muslims could be waged more or less at any time and in any place to extend the dominance of Islam.

Sura 9 distinguished idolators, who were to be fought until they converted - "When the sacred months are past, kill the idolators wherever you find them, and seize them, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush" (9:5, the 'verse of the sword') - from "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews), who were to be given a further option of surrendering and living under Islamic rule while keeping their religion: "Fight ... the People of the Book until they pay the poll tax out of hand, having been humbled." (9:29)

The following excerpt from Ibn Kathir, whose commentary is one of the mostly widely used by Muslims in the West today, illustrates how the doctrine of abrogation can be applied to reconcile the Koran's verses: "*But forgive and overlook* (2:109) ... was abrogated by the verse *kill the idolators* ... (9:5), and *Fight* ... (9:29). Allah's pardon for the disbelievers was repealed... It was abrogated by the verse of the sword. The verse *till Allah brings His command* gives further support for this view. ... the Messenger of Allah and his Companions used to forgive the disbelievers and the People of the Book, just as Allah commanded ... until Allah allowed fighting them. Then Allah destroyed those who he decreed to be killed ..."

The resulting doctrine of war has been elaborated by numerous Muslim scholars, including the great medieval philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who like the Saudi Arabian Grand Mufti, adhered to the 'three option' theory:

“To discuss or argue ... with them is not up to us. It is for them to choose between conversion to Islam, payment of the poll tax, or death.”
(*The Muqaddimah*)

All this explains Sheikh Abdel Aziz's response to the Pope's speech. Alluding to the distinction between the Meccan and Medinan periods of revelation, the Grand Mufti invoked the doctrine of Sura 9:29 (cited above), that fighting against People of the Book continues until non-Muslims convert or surrender.

Today most Muslims acknowledge the religious legitimacy of "defensive jihad" - including the Palestinian struggle - but many appear to reject the idea of offensive, expansionist jihad. Most would emphasise the defensive aspects of Mohammed's numerous military campaigns, claiming that his attacks on others were only to pre-empt future aggression against Muslims. It is also often asserted that Mohammed's military exploits were context-specific responses to the unique situations he encountered in his lifetime, and not binding on later generations of Muslims.

However the idea of a purely defensive jihad is hard to reconcile with the phenomenal military expansion of Islam in its first 100 years. For centuries the validity of the doctrine of expansionist jihad just seemed self-evident to Muslim scholars, as it was validated by the military victories it had delivered across the greater part of the Christian world, as well as Zoroastrian Persia and Hindu India.

In the present day, although Islam lost its military dominance, it has not yet come to a consensus about how Muslims should conduct themselves under non-Muslim rule. There is no consensus that a just war should not be conceived in sacralised terms as a jihad.

There is no consensus that the earlier, more peaceful verses of the Koran take priority over the later, more violent ones. There is no consensus that the old program of military expansion should not be resumed if and when it becomes practical to do so. There is no consensus that non-Muslims should be allowed to discuss the Koran and the life of Mohammed without becoming the target of intimidation, and subjected to accusations of ignorance, incompetence or racism.

The Muslim world is incredibly diverse and such a consensus may never be developed. Nevertheless it must be attempted. The important work to achieve this consensus is under way, but it remains to be completed, and any debate that can hasten the development of a less sacralised approach to the use of force within Islam deserves everyone's whole-hearted support.

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