

Is The Bible More Violent Than The Quran?

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Heard on All Things Considered

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From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

And I'm Robert Siegel. If you place the Bible and the Quran side by side and compare them, which is the bloodier scripture? Well, that's the question we put to NPR's Barbara Bradley Hagerty.

BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY: As the hijackers boarded the airplanes on September 11th, 2001, they had a lot on their minds. And if they were following instructions, one of those things was the Quran.

In preparation for the suicide attack, their handlers had told them to meditate on two chapters of the Quran in which God tells Muslims to cast terror into the hearts of unbelievers.

Unidentified Man: Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them.

HAGERTY: The chapter, as read in this audio book, continues.

Unidentified Man: Prophet! Make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal righteously with them! Hell shall be their home, an evil fate.

HAGERTY: When Osama bin Laden declared war on the West in 1996, he cited the Quran's command to strike off the heads of unbelievers. More recently, U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan lectured his colleagues about jihad and the Quran's exhortation to fight unbelievers and bring them low. Hasan killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas, last year.

Given this violent legacy, Philip Jenkins decided to compare the brutality quotient of the Quran and the Bible.

Mr. PHILIP JENKINS (Religion Historian): Much to my surprise, the Islamic scriptures in the Quran were actually far less bloody and less violent than those in the Bible.

HAGERTY: Jenkins is a religion historian at Penn State University and author of the forthcoming book "Dark Passages," which is already drawing controversy before it's

even published. Violence in the Quran, he and others say, is largely a defense against attack.

Mr. JENKINS: Then we turn to the Bible, and we actually find something that is for many people a real surprise. There is a specific kind of warfare laid down in the Bible which we can only call genocide.

HAGERTY: It is called herem, and it means total annihilation. Consider the Book of 1 Samuel, when God instructs King Saul to attack the Amalekites:

Unidentified Man #2: And utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

HAGERTY: When Saul failed to do that, God took away his kingdom.

Mr. JENKINS: In other words, Saul has committed a dreadful sin by failing to complete genocide. And that passage echoes through Christian history. It is often used, for example, in American stories of the confrontation with Indians, not just is it legitimate to kill Indians, but you are violating God's law if you do not.

HAGERTY: Jenkins notes that the history of Christianity is strewn with herem. During the Crusades in the Middle Ages, the popes declared the Muslims Amalekites. In the great religious wars, Protestants and Catholics each believed the other side were the Amalekites and should be utterly destroyed. But Jenkins says, even though the Bible is violent, on the whole, Christianity and Judaism today are not.

Mr. JENKINS: What happens in all religions, as they grow and mature and expand, they go through a process of forgetting of the original violence, and I call this a process of holy amnesia.

HAGERTY: They make the violence symbolic. Wiping out the enemy becomes wiping out one's own sins. Jenkins says that until very recently, Islam had the same sort of holy amnesia. Many Muslims interpreted jihad, for example, as an internal struggle, not physical warfare.

Mr. ANDREW BOSTOM (Editor, "The Legacy of Jihad"): This is just preposterous. I'm sorry.

HAGERTY: Andrew Bostom is editor of the book "The Legacy of Jihad." He says there's a big difference between the Bible, which describes the destruction of an enemy at a point in time, and the Quran, which urges an ongoing struggle to defeat unbelievers.

Mr. BOSTOM: It's an aggressive doctrine. The idea is to impose Islamic law on the globe.

HAGERTY: Take suicide attacks, he says, a tactic that Muslims have used to great effect in the U.S., Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. It's true, suicide from depression is forbidden in Islam, but Bostom says the Quran and the Hadith, or sayings of Muhammad, do allow self-destruction for religious reasons.

Mr. BOSTOM: The notion of jihad martyrdom is extolled in the Quran, Quran verse 9:1-11. And then in the Hadith, it's even more explicit. This is the highest form of jihad: to kill and to be killed in acts of jihad.

HAGERTY: That may be the popular notion of jihad, says Waleed El-Ansary, but it is the wrong one. El-Ansary, who teaches Islamic studies at the University of South Carolina, says the Quran explicitly condemns religious aggression and the killing of civilians by making the distinction between jihad - legal warfare with the proper rules of engagement - and irjaf, or terrorism.

Mr. WALEED EL-ANSARY (University of South Carolina): All of those types of incidents - 9/11, Major Nidal Hasan and so forth - those are all examples of irjaf, not jihad.

HAGERTY: Which is wrong, according to scripture.

Mr. EL-ANSARY: Oh yeah, absolutely. It takes one to hell.

HAGERTY: So what's going on here? After all, we all have images of Muslim radicals flying planes into buildings, shooting up soldiers at Fort Hood and trying to detonate a bomb on an airplane on Christmas Day. How do you reconcile a peaceful Quran with these violent acts?

Waleed El-Ansary says in the past 30 years, there's been a sort of perfect storm that has allowed for a violent strain of Islam. The first factor is political, that is frustration at Western intervention in the Muslim world. The second is intellectual: the rise of Wahhabi Islam, a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam subscribed to by the likes of Osama bin Laden. And so, El-Ansary says, fundamentalists have distorted Islam for political purposes.

Mr. EL-ANSARY: Basically what they do is they take verses out of context and then use that to justify these egregious actions.

HAGERTY: El-Ansary says we are seeing more religious violence from Muslims today because the Islamic world is far more religious than is the West. Still, Philip Jenkins says Judeo-Christian culture should not be smug. The Bible has plenty of violence.

Mr. JENKINS: The scriptures are still there. They are dormant, but not dead.

HAGERTY: And can be resurrected at any time - for example, by white supremacists who cite the murderous Phineas when calling for racial purity or by a conservative Christian when shooting a doctor who performs abortions.

In the end, the scholars can agree on one thing: The DNA of early Judaism, Christianity and Islam, code for a lot of violence. Whether they can evolve out of it is another thing altogether.

Barbara Bradley Hagerty, NPR News.

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