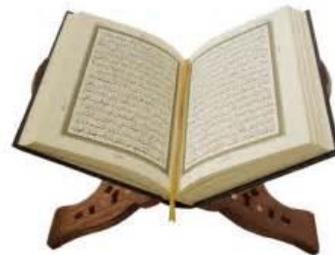




The Islam Research Group

Violence in the Bible and the Quran: A fundamental difference



Contents

	Page
I. The claim that the Bible is as violent as the Quran	3
II. The Bible and how Christians read it	
i. The Old Testament	4
ii. The New Testament	8
iii. The authorship, composition and canonization of the Bible	14
iv. Christian approaches to reading the Bible	15
III. The Quran and how Muslims read it	
i. The Quran	19
ii. The authorship and composition of the Quran	20
iii. Islamic approaches to reading the Quran	20
IV. Christian approaches violence in the Bible Contrasted with Islamic approaches to violence in the Quran: A Fundamental Difference	22
V. Conclusion	25

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***Note on II The Bible and how Christian read it
and III The Quran and how Muslims read it***

Every fact cited in the above two sections is believed to be unchallenged by any generally respected academic authority.

The claim that the Bible is as violent as the Quran

1. One of the most common responses that tends to follow criticism of Islam for promoting violence is that the Bible contains as much violence as the Quran, if not more. The assertion is often made as a provocative rhetorical retort, and the line of argument as to why the presence of violence in the Bible should invalidate criticism of violence in the Quran is rarely set out clearly, but it is suggested that there are three logical inferences:

- i. Both Christianity and Islam are inherently violent***

It makes no sense to criticise one religion for endorsing violence because the problem of religious violence is intrinsic to all religions, or at the very least to each of the three major Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A criticism of promoting violence may be valid if directed against all those religions, but is illogical if made against one alone.

- ii. Whether a religion promotes violence is dependent on interpretation***

Judaism, Christianity and Islam each contain within their scriptures material that may be used to justify violence and material that may be read to support tolerance. The fact that most Christians perceive Christianity as fundamentally peaceful merely serves to demonstrate that the presence of violence in a religions' foundational texts or history does not render it incapable of a pacific interpretation.

- iii. To criticise Islam and not Christianity for violence is hypocritical***

Unless a person critical of the Quran for promoting violence is equally prepared to condemn the Bible their opinions deserve to be dismissed as partisan and disingenuous. The failure to deal with the two religions similarly, likely indicates that the critic of Islam is acting on such suspect motives, such as perceived cultural superiority, petty sectarianism, xenophobia or racism.

It is of course correct that the Bible contains much violence and other behaviour that would be treated as reprehensible by modern standards. Therefore any serious answer to the above observation involves explaining how Christianity treats these passages in order to interpret them non-violently, and why the core tenets of Islam prohibit a similar treatment of the Quran. Unfortunately, such an answer does not easily lend itself to a swift, snappy, reply.

One may suspect that the issue of Biblical violence is often introduced into a discussion on Islam to give the maker of the claim an aura of broad perspective and even-handedness; to 'push back' against a critic of Islam by criticising a tradition that they feel protective of; or to distract the conversation from the original topic. Whether the latter is intended or not, it all too often the result.

It is suggested that the issue of Quran-inspired violence is of huge and immediate importance in understanding contemporary geopolitical events and in protecting a tolerant society, whilst the issue, which by contrast is somewhat dry and academic of the role of the Bible in Christian theology is such a recurring and problematic feature of discussions of the former, that there is a need for an article such as this to address the arguments outlined above in a discrete, structured and analytical way.

II. The Bible and how Christians read it

i. The Old Testament

2. Christians believe Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus was a Jew and the Old Testament comprises Jewish scriptures that had all been written long before the birth of Jesus which were selected by the early Christian church for Christians to read to better understand Jesus' life and ministry.

The Old Testament, as approved by the Catholic church¹ consists of forty six books which are commonly grouped together as four subsets:

The Pentateuch: The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) contain some of the best known of any religious stories, including:

- The creation of the earth and the heavens in six days by God;
- Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden;
- The Great Flood;
- God's covenant with Abraham;
- Joseph's enslavement by his brothers, his later rescue of them and his bringing of them to Egypt.
- Moses leading the Israelites (descendants of Joseph and his brothers) out of Egypt across a miraculously parted Red Sea,
- The Israelites wandering for forty years in the wilderness during which they are sustained by God and receive the Mosaic Law, summarised as the Ten Commandments.

The book of Leviticus contains a system of strict moral and ritual laws ('Mosaic law') and punishments, given by God to Moses during the events of the Exodus.

The Historical Books: There follows a series of accounts of the history of the Israelites, including:

- The Israelites' occupation of the Promised Land and the defeat and expulsion with God's help of the tribes living there;
- a period in which Israelites had a tribal society, united by a series of 'judges';
- the First Kingdom under kings Saul, David and Solomon;
- the division of the kingdom into Israel in the north and Judah in the south;
- the fall and assimilation of Israel to the Assyrian Empire;
- the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, the Exile in Babylon of leading Israelites, and the return of the former captives – thereafter identified as Jews rather than Israelites - to Judah.
- The Second Temple period under the Maccabees.

¹ Other denominations have slightly different canons. However, this difference has no relevance to the points in issue in this article.

The Wisdom Books: The Wisdom books are characterised by a poetic use of language and their focus upon the moral lessons intended by the author rather than any claim that the events and characters depicted are of independent historical importance.

For example in the Book of Job, Satan asserts to God that Job is only faithful because he has been blessed with wealth and family, and God permits Satan to test Job's faith with a series of hardships.

The Book of Psalms is a collection of hymns.

The Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom and Sirach are principally collections of moral sayings: some short, others as extended instructions of moral living.

The Song of Songs is an amalgam of erotic poetry, traditionally read as a metaphor for God's intimate knowledge of and love for with his people

The Prophetic Books: The prophetic books are collections of sermons. A distinguishing feature from the other books is that they are presented as containing messages from God, rather than the author's own reflections, many including frequent claims of divine authority such as "*The Lord says...*". The original sources of the prophecies include visions (such as Ezekiel's vision of dry bones buried in the desert, becoming covered in flesh again and returning to life). Some are expressed as anticipating future events; others give the Israelites counsel to deal with contemporary problems.

Even if read literally they were generally not written by the eponymous prophet as they often recount the stories of a prophet whom they refer to in the third person, such as the well known tales of Daniel in the lion's den or Jonah's survival in the belly of a fish.

Of particular importance to Christians is the prophecy in the Book of Isaiah, delivered during the Babylonian captivity, of a coming Messiah who would be sent by God to establish a new kingdom of Israel, which Christians interpret as a premonition of Jesus' ministry.

3. One might reasonably divide 'Old Testament violence' into three broad categories:

Acts of God

Particularly well known amongst the many episodes of divine wrath are²:

- the Great Flood in which the entire human and land animal population of the world - save for Noah, his family, and the animals they saved upon their ark - was drowned by a great flood sent by God to punish mankind's wickedness and enable the world to make a new start under a universal covenant³;
- the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in a hail of fire and brimstone after a crowd from the cities attempted to commit a homosexual rape of two angels of the Lord⁴;
- The plagues sent by God to the people of Egypt to compel Pharaoh to free the Israelites, and especially the final plague whereby the first born child of every household occupying a house not marked with the sign of the Passover would die.

Since the Bible contains no instruction that the reader should attempt to imitate the divine wrath of God, this tract will not deal with this category of violence.

Legislative: divinely prescribed laws and violent punishments

The Mosaic law contains many prohibitions that are specifically punishable by death. Capital offences under the Mosaic law include:

- instances of offences against the person that would be punishable in most societies such as rape⁵, murder, kidnapping and striking one's parents⁶;
- offences against a conservative code of sexual morals including instances of adultery, incest, male homosexuality and bestiality⁷;

² These three stories of God's anger are each cited dozens of times in the Quran.

³ Genesis 6-9

⁴ Genesis 18-19

⁵ Deuteronomy 22:25-7;

⁶ Ex. 21:12

"[The Lord told Moses:] Whoever strikes a man a mortal blow must be put to death. He however, who did not hunt a man down but caused his death by an Act of god may flee to a place that I shall set aside for the purpose. But when a man kills another after maliciously scheming to do so you must take him even from my altar and put him to death. Whoever strikes his father or mother shall be put to death. A kidnapper, whether he sells his victim or still has him when caught shall be put to death. Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death"

⁷ Leviticus 20:10-16:

"If a man commits adultery with his neighbour's wife both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. If a man disgraces his father by lying with his father's wife both the man and his stepmother shall be put to death, they have forfeited their lives. If a man lies with his daughter in law both of them shall be put to death since they have committed an abhorrent deed. They have forfeited their lives. If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed they have forfeited their lives. If a man marries a woman and her mother also, the man and the two women shall be burned to death for their shameful conduct so that such shamelessness shall not be found"

- religious offences including sacrificing to gods other than Yahweh⁸, false prophecy⁹, witchcraft/necromancy, blasphemy¹⁰ and sabbath breaking¹¹.

The mode of execution is not generally specified, but when it is, stoning to death is the most commonly prescribed method.

Historical: Violence inflicted by humans at God's direction and/or with divine assistance

This violence is at its most extensive in the period of the settling by the Israelites of Canaan, and consequent wars with the neighbouring tribes. For instance:

- In 1 Samuel 15 God commands King Saul, through the prophet Samuel to:

“Attack Amalek, 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.”

The comprehensiveness of the instruction is emphasised in later verses as Saul spares one Amalek, King Agog, whom he takes as his prisoner; and keeps some animals to sacrifice as an offering to God. Through Samuel, God reproaches Saul for his disobedience in taking Agog prisoner, and even though Saul immediately thereafter kills Agog, God regretted having made Saul king and Samuel began the quest to find a new king.

- The well-known Psalm 137, beginning ‘*By the rivers of Babylon*’, concludes with the particularly vivid words:

“O daughter of Babylon, you destroyer, happy the man who shall repay you the evil you have done us! Happy the many who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock!”

amongst you. If a man has carnal relations with an animal the man shall be put to death and the animal shall be slain,. If a woman goes up to any animal to mate with it the woman and the animal shall be slain. Let them both be put to death their lives are forfeit “

⁸ Exodus 22:20

⁹ Deuteronomy 13:1-10

¹⁰ Leviticus 24:10-16

¹¹ Exodus 31:14

ii. The New Testament

4. The New Testament comprises the books of the Bible written after and about Jesus' ministry. These include:

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles: Each of the four Gospels gives an account of the life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke dealing with the history of the early church in the years immediately following the death of Jesus.

Epistles: A compendium of letters written by the apostles, the majority by St Paul who converted to Christianity after the resurrection, addressed to members or congregations of the early church. These give spiritual guidance, practical advice on living in a Christian community, and occasionally personal news and greetings

The Book of Revelations: The Bible concludes with a prophecy written during the early church period by an author giving the name of John, traditionally associated with St John the apostle. The prophecy envisages in mystically graphic terms, the supernatural events that will bring about the end of the world.

A very brief overview of teachings of Jesus

5. The Christian church is based around the life and teachings of Jesus as they are recorded in the New Testament. Jesus taught his disciples and larger audiences in sermons, of which many of the key ideas are expressed through parables and metaphors rather than straightforward instructions or explanations. This gives considerable scope for Christians to interpret his words differently, but no fair assessment could dispute that his main themes, as recorded in the Gospels, include that:
- God is a loving father who will readily forgive sins following repentance,
 - People, as God's children, should respond to that love by showing loving kindness to one another.
 - i. This kindness may take the form of practical help, as encouraged by Jesus' declaration that whenever anyone cares for any hungry, thirsty, naked or ill person, or a stranger or prisoner they will be treated by God as having as though they had performed that service for Jesus himself¹².
 - ii. It may also take the form of forgiveness of wrongs done to one as illustrated by the parable of the Prodigal Son and the line from the Lord's Prayer "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*"¹³;

¹² Matthew 25:34-45

¹³ Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-21

- Those who show kindness to others will receive reward in heaven, but that those who do not will endure suffering in hell¹⁴.
- One ought not to worry about acquiring material possessions, but should instead focus on spiritual purity and ‘*store up treasure in heaven*’ by good deeds;
- The kingdom of heaven is not limited to observant Jews but includes non-Jews (evident from Jesus’ discourses with the Samaritan¹⁵ and Canaanite women¹⁶ and the Roman Centurion¹⁷) and those on the margins of society (illustrated, by Jesus associating freely with lepers or tax collectors for the occupying Roman Empire). This call to inclusivity has been called, even in a non-religious context, the ‘*Good Samaritan principle*’ after Jesus’ most famous parable in which a non-Jew was shown to be doing God’s will by helping the victim of a robbery, after two observant Jews had failed to help.¹⁸

Jesus and the Mosaic Law

6. Jesus was a Jew. He taught in synagogues and was addressed as ‘Rabbi’, but his comments regarding his view of the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament are capable of different interpretations. His fullest discourse on the subject is that recorded in the Sermon on the Mount as it appears in St Matthew’s Gospel chapter 5:

17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ [a term of abuse] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

¹⁴ Matthew 6:19-20

¹⁵ John 4

¹⁶ Matthew 15

¹⁷ Luke 7:1-10, Matthew 8:5-13

¹⁸ Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ *“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.*

²⁶ *Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*

²⁷ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*

³¹ *“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

³³ *“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfil to the Lord the vows you have made.’³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

³⁸ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

⁴³ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’*

⁴⁴ *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Later, when asked which of Moses' commandments was the greatest, Jesus replied:

*'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind.' This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*¹⁹

Jesus' harshest words recorded throughout the whole of the gospels were reserved for the Pharisees, who were a powerful Jewish sect seeking the strict enforcement of the Mosaic law (Matthew 23):

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them...."

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are...

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you

¹⁹ Matthew 22:35-40. These phrases are to be found within the Mosaic law itself:

Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

Leviticus 19:18:

"Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord"

appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness....

*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"*²⁰

Although the above passages include instructions to follow 'the law and the prophets', they also contain extended instructions to the effect that '*the important matters of the law, - justice, mercy and faithfulness*' – elsewhere exemplified as an attitude of genuine humility, service, and love of one's neighbour – even one's enemy- were of greater importance.

On several occasions Jesus exempts himself and his disciples from compliance with the Mosaic law, giving no indication that he is using any special authority beyond that which any Jew would have. So that, for example, he dismisses criticism of him and his disciples by the Pharisees for preparing food on the sabbath with the phrase "*Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath*".

Crucially, Jesus explicitly disapproved the application of the violent sanctions prescribed in the Mosaic Law. When faced with the application of the law to a woman caught in adultery for which Leviticus prescribes stoning to death, Jesus secured her release with the words: "*Let he who is without sin cast the first stone*"²¹.

Jesus' attitude to violence

7. The gospels do not record any use or endorsement by Jesus of any violent act²². Indeed some of his sayings – such as his instruction to "*turn the other cheek*" in Matthew 5:38-40 (produced in its context above) may plausibly be read as adopting a pacifist standpoint.

When during his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane one of his supporters draws a sword and cut off a high priest's servant's ear, Jesus heals the wound and reproaches his defender with the words:

*"Put back your sword where it belongs. Those who live by the sword will perish by it. Do you not suppose that I can call on my father at a moment's notice more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would Scripture be fulfilled which say it must happen this way"*²³.

²⁰ Matthew 23:1-33

²¹ John 8:3-11

²² This refers to violence against human beings. Jesus does use mild violence against inanimate objects (overturning money changers tables), he curses a fig tree and he transfers a demon to a herd of swine that run over a cliff.

²³ Matthew 26: 51-54

Jesus' attitude to government

8. Jesus taught through general principles and parables. He is not recorded as promoting any precise set of rules or system of government.

When he was asked whether Jews should pay taxes to the Roman Empire, Jesus replied:

*"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's"*²⁴.

At Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus' reply to Pilate's question if it is true that he had claimed to be the king of the Jews was:

*"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But now (or 'as it is') my kingdom is not from the world"*²⁵.

These sayings and others have traditionally been seen as indicating that Christianity is a value system concerned with morality and spirituality, which is distinct from the exercise of secular power. Whilst there has never been thought to be any prohibition upon Christians engaging in the exercise of secular power, and in the Middle Ages Christianity became deeply entwined in the fabric of medieval power structures of empires, kings, feudal bonds and the judiciary, no modern interpretation of Christianity by a mainstream church suggests that Jesus had intended his teachings to form the basis of a system of government. In the modern age Christianity has shown itself to be entirely consistent with and supportive of secular democracy.

²⁴ Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, Luke 20:20-26.

²⁵ John 18:33-36

iii. Authorship, composition and canonisation of the Bible

9. Biblical authorship is a highly complex field of academic research. Although many of the books of the Bible are traditionally attributed to a specific author who often lends the book their name, almost all texts other than the epistles and the Book of Revelations show signs of an extended process of composition and editing. There is a consensus amongst scholars that most books of the Old Testament reached their final form during or shortly after the Babylonian Captivity (586-538 BCE) although most are based upon much earlier texts, many probably beginning as oral traditions.

Therefore, although one generally encounters the Bible as a single tome, often spoken of as though it was written as a grand narrative commencing with the Creation in Genesis and reaching its fiery ending in the Book of Revelations, properly understood, the Bible should be approached as a collection of ancient scripts that document an evolving religious tradition over many centuries and which vary greatly in content, format and type. No single book of the Bible (except conceivably the Book of Revelations) was written with a view to its being later included in a Christian Bible. In fact, the majority of the books, and in particular those that contain the verses relied upon by those asserting that the Bible is similarly violent to the Quran, were likely composed half a millennium prior to the birth of Jesus.

Suffice to say that the complexity and difficulty of reading the Bible with historical authenticity far exceeds that for any other literary source most people will ever have cause to read or comment upon.

IV. Christian approaches to reading the Bible

10. Christians worship and follow Jesus, not merely as a prophet but as God incarnate. The Gospel of St John describes Jesus as God's '*Word made Flesh*'²⁶. The importance of the Bible in all branches of Christianity has always lain in its ability to inform the reader about Jesus rather than in its books constituting an independent written message from God.

The early church: St Paul and the Council of Jerusalem

11. Since Jesus, the twelve apostles and St Paul had all been Jews, and Jesus frequently referred to his fulfilment of the prophecies in the Torah, the church in the decades immediately following the crucifixion considered itself to be part of the Jewish community. However, as is clear from the Sermon on the Mount and other Gospel passages quoted above, Jesus, whilst on the one hand validating 'the law and the prophets' was clearly teaching a morality that placed the spirit of charity towards all one's neighbours in preference to the strict application of the Mosaic law.

As St Paul found himself converting an increasing number of non-Jews to Christianity, the issue of the applicability of the Mosaic law became a source of controversy within the church. Approximately twenty years following the death of Jesus, the Council of Jerusalem²⁷, took place, presided over by both St Peter and St Paul to resolve the issue. This determined that, subject to a number of exceptions, the Mosaic law was not binding upon Christians.

²⁶ John 1:14

²⁷ Acts of the Apostles:15

Since this time very few Christians have also been practising Jews, and, to the author's knowledge - no branch of Christianity has ever taught that Christians are generally bound by the Mosaic law.

Catholic exegesis

12. Throughout the middle ages, literacy was rare and the Bible, only circulating in Latin, was interpreted by the church. The church's interpretation of the Bible:

- treated the Bible, not as objective history but as the means of conveying moral messages, such as God's faithfulness to his people, the necessity for obedience to God's will, the virtue of patient forbearance of hardships and the vindication of hope in a future salvation.
- since the church's principal focus was upon the person and teachings of Jesus as the Son of God, the Old Testament, for all its apparently capricious violence, became understood principally as an allegory for the unlimited and universal charity preached by Jesus in the gospels.

In the thirteenth century, the church's methodology was summed up as follows:

*The letter teaches the facts; allegory what you should believe;
the moral what you should do and the anagony what you should hope for.*²⁸

This pattern, it is suggested, is immediately recognisable in ecclesiastical art and architecture. The Great Flood is invariably presented as symbolic of salvation and starting afresh; Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac becomes for Christians a foreshadowing of God's love for mankind by sending Jesus into the world; the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt and consequent hardships in the desert is read as an allegory of salvation from sin and the forbearance this can require; Joshua's destruction of Jericho or David's slaying of Goliath act as an exhortation to faith in the Lord; Job a perfect example of patience and so on.

Throughout the middle ages the church developed a complex theology including:

- the doctrine of original sin,
- purgatory,
- the apostolic and Petrine successions, and
- transubstantiation

none of which are immediately obvious from the Bible but involved significant extrapolation from its text. Informed by this theology, heaven and hell, the sacred, miracles, and the importance of piety were much more immediate concerns to the medieval Christian than they tend to be amongst many post-Enlightenment Christians. To a people whose own lives tended to be short and harsh, the allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament set in a past unimaginably long ago and far away and somewhat fantastical, seem to have given great comfort. Approached as allegories for the mysteries of Christian faith, the issue of historic injustices to Egyptian charioteers, Philistine giants or Babylonian infants does not seem to have prayed much on anyone's minds until recent times.

²⁸ St Augustine of Dacia (d. 1282)

Protestant exegesis

13. With the invention of the printing press and the translation of Bible into vernacular languages, Christians led by Jan Hus, John Wycliffe and Martin Luther were to rely on the Bible as their authority in criticising contemporary church practises. During the Reformation Protestant churches developed a doctrine of *sola scriptura* – that the Bible contained all that was needed for salvation, discernible without church or tradition.

Article VII of the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion* that establish the foundational dogma of the Church of England (as first issued in 1571 and confirmed in 1662) confirms the earlier catholic position that the Mosaic law is not binding upon Christians:

The Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.

Inevitably the freedom to interpret the Bible independently of the Catholic church has led over the centuries to a plethora of different protestant churches from austere Presbyterians to lively evangelicals. There can, however, be observed a general tendency in Protestantism to treat the Bible as more literal and less allegorical than as taught by the Catholic church and to apply a more rationalist approach to discovering a single consistent meaning running throughout its many and varied books.

Modern Biblical scholarship

14. With the Enlightenment came a new science of Biblical scholarship that now includes:
- Evaluating the process by which the Bible came to be written by comparison with other historical and archaeological evidence;
 - Form criticism: analysis of the Bible text to detect signs of alteration through transmission and cast light on ‘hidden’ original texts; and
 - Reconstructing the ancient authors’ thinking to determine what they intended to say – which may be different to what a modern reading of their words may imply.

By way of example, two insights from textual criticism about which there is now consensus amongst biblical scholars are that:

- The Pentateuch is in fact an amalgam of several originally distinct narratives and different models may be adopted to disentangle them with different theological implications.
- The gospels traditionally attributed to Matthew and Luke each present material found in the Gospel of Mark (‘the Marcan priority’), and also material from a gospel that has since been lost, referred to as the ‘Q’ source. Due to this overlapping these are referred to as the three synoptic gospels.

It is uncontested that the original words and actions of Jesus had been retold after his death by his apostles, not as objective history but in such a way as would encourage the faith of the early Christian community and preserve what they saw as the meaning and significance of Jesus' ministry. It is now unchallenged by any serious scholars, illustrated by the easily observable structure of the three synoptic gospels and the existence of apocryphal 'gospels' that had not been accepted by the church, that these oral traditions had undergone a process of becoming formalised before being written down, and that thereafter the written accounts had undergone an extended process of editing before four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were selected for being finally canonized by the church.

Consequently it is perfectly normal for biblical scholars to discuss why a biblical author expressed themselves in a particular way, and even to ask whether a particular passage may in fact have been a later invention (where, for example, Jesus seems to predict the destruction of Jerusalem which in fact occurred forty years after his death). Despite this spirit of scientific enquiry, biblical scholarship is predominantly conducted by Christians at Christian institutions.

Although some Christian traditions tend to be less inquisitive into how the Bible came into existence than others, the characterisation that is sometimes presented of Christians unquestioningly accepting the words of the Bible as literal history to be slavishly applied or emulated is itself in defiance of the evidence.

III. The Quran and how Muslims read it

i. The Quran

15. The Quran consists of a series of announced prophetic revelations declared by Mohammed between the year 610 and the year of his death 632. These revelations contain:

- statements in support of monotheism;
- exhortations to righteousness including frequent and vivid descriptions of heaven and hell;
- the referencing and partial retelling of stories from Arab folk lore, Jewish scriptures and the New Testament;
- statements addressing Mohammed's own circumstances – both personal and in regard to his role as leader of the Muslim community;
- and, in later verses, and laws to be applied by the Muslim community.

The legal provisions of the Quran, known as the *sharia*, establish rules for such matters as commerce, inheritance, divorce, the custody of children, the treatment of slaves and the punishment of offences. Punishments instructed by the *sharia* include:

- Specific sanctions for certain offences, such as confining to a house until death or the infliction of a hundred lashes for *zina* (prohibited sexual activity)²⁹ ;
- The principle of proportionate compensation or retribution (*qisas*) at the discretion of the victim or their family³⁰; and
- A general instruction to the Islamic community to apply sanctions including death, crucifixion, amputation of a hand and a foot or banishment against those '*causing mischief in the land*'³¹.

The *sharia* contains many other provisions, some of which are inconsistent with human rights and modern democratic values, such as:

- endorsement of slavery, including permission to have sex with one's slaves³²
- instruction to husbands to beat disobedient wives, lesser sanctions having failed³³;
- multiple instances of verses instructing Muslims to fight unbelievers nor take an unbeliever as an ally against a fellow Muslim.

²⁹ Quran 4 (*al Nisa/The Women*): 15-16; 24 (*al Nur/The Light*): 2-4.

³⁰ This principle has Quranic authority in the case of murder in Surah 2 (*al Baqarah/The Cow*), but is extended to other offences by all schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

³¹ Quran 5 (*al Ma'idah/The Table Spread*):32-33.

³² Quran 4 (*al-Nisa/Women*):24; 23 (*al Mu'minum/The Believers*): 1-7; 33(*al-Ahzab/The Parties*): 50; and 70 (*al-Ma'arj/The Ascending Ways*): 29-30

³³ Quran 4 (*al-Nisa/Women*):34

ii. Authorship and composition of the Quran

16. It is important to bear in mind that according to the core tenets of Islam, the Quran was declared to Mohammed by the angel Jabril (God's messenger angel, Gabriel, from the Book of Daniel and the New Testament). Gabriel is believed to have spoken to Mohammed using Arabic words which Mohammed repeated verbatim. Therefore, to a Muslim the authorship of the Quran is attributed to God alone.

For a non-Muslim, although imaginative explanations are conceivable, given the verses' complexity and convenience to Mohammed's own interests, the overwhelmingly likely alternative to the Quran being revealed to Mohammed by Gabriel is that Mohammed devised each verse himself, for his own purposes, and invented his visitations from an angelic messenger.

Earlier Quranic verses had been memorised as they were announced, later verses were recorded contemporaneously. The verses were arranged in their current order by the third caliph, Uthman, Mohammed's double son in law, within twenty years of Mohammed's death.

iii. Islamic approaches to reading the Quran

17. The Quran is by no means an easy book to read. Uthman's arrangement of the verses is neither chronological nor completely thematic; it contains many Arabic words and phrases of which the meaning is ambiguous; it is by turns repetitive and fragmentary; and as a result a distinctive feature of English translations is the large quantity of textual insertions and explanations contained within parentheses or footnotes.

However, there are three reasons why, for Muslims, interpreting the Quran to provide a relatively clear and consistent meaning is a much more straightforward exercise than is interpreting the Bible for Christians:

- i. The Quran consists of pronouncements made by just one man over a twenty year period, contrasted with the Bible's countless unknown authors contributing to its text in uncertain circumstances over many centuries;
- ii. Many of the more controversial verses were deliberately worded to be unambiguous and enforced as laws, whereas this is only true for a very small part of the Bible;
- iii. Because the Quran itself repeatedly asserts its own literal inerrancy³⁴, within Islam, questioning either the authenticity of the received text or its absolute authority as the verbatim word of God is strictly prohibited.

³⁴ For example: 53 (*al Najm/The Star*): 1-5 *By the star when it sets, your companion has neither strayed nor erred; nor does he speak out of caprice. It is naught but a revelation taught him by one of awesome power.*

18. Moreover, it is an invariably held article of Islamic belief that Mohammed, as God's final chosen messenger, '*the seal of the prophets*', should be treated as the most perfect human and as an exemplar to all to be followed in interpreting the Quran. Mohammed's words and actions were recorded in a permanent form long after his death in biographies (*sira*) and reports containing chains of narration dating back to the time of Mohammed and his companions known as *hadith*. All schools of Islam accept that some accounts in the *sira* and *hadith* are reliable but some are not.

There is a large body of Islamic scholarship (*tafsir*) relating to the Quran. Scholarship permitted in Islam includes:

- Examining what the individual words and phrases meant in the Arabic language as it was used in Mohammed's time;
- Determining through historical enquiry when verses were revealed, so that a later verse may be treated as clarifying or even abrogating an earlier verse³⁵;
- Where the Quran refers to contemporary events, or where a verse may have been prompted by a particular question asked of Mohammed, using historical enquiry – including the evaluation of different *hadith* - to determine whether the historical context, any circumstances in which the verse had come to be announced, and whether the words and actions of Mohammed and his companions who knew him well provide any guidance to its true meaning;
- Drawing theological conclusions from the words of the Quran read as a whole.

Partly because different schools of Islam regard different *hadith* as reliable, there are significant differences of opinion concerning how the Quran is to be interpreted.

Since the Quran is intended to be applied as law, from the eighth century several schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) also became established. Since different schools applied different tests as to how literally the Quran was to be interpreted, and since scholars differed which *hadith* they accepted as genuine, significant variations in *shariah* have developed.

However, for all the variety that has developed in Islamic theology and jurisprudence, all schools of Islam agree that the *sharia* constitutes a system of laws that was announced with the intention that it be applied with sanctions, and all concur that where the text of the Quran is clear and unambiguous, as it often is, this reflects the direct instruction of God in his final and permanently binding revelation to humanity.

³⁵ The Quran whilst asserting its inerrancy overall, also accepts that one verse may abrogate an earlier verse – a doctrine known to Muslim scholars as *naskh*. Two verses in the Quran are commonly taken to refer to this phenomenon:

2 (*al Baqarah/The Cow*):106: “No sign do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten but that we bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Dost thou not know that God is powerful over all things?”; and

16 (*al Nahl/The Bee*):101 “And when we replace one sign with another- and God knows best that which he sends down – they say “You are only a fabricator!’ Nay, but most of them know not.”

IV. Christian approaches violence in the Bible contrasted with Islamic approaches to violence in the Quran: A Fundamental Difference

The role of Mosaic law in Christianity contrasted with the role of Sharia law in Islam

19. Although the Mosaic Law and *Sharia* have many common features, not least their strict prohibitions, draconian punishments and their promotion of retribution, the ways in which Christianity and Islam treat these laws are entirely different.

Since the Council of Jerusalem, no Christian denomination has ever taught that the Mosaic law should be generally applied.

The rationale for the non-applicability of the Mosaic law may be stated in several ways.

- i. According to the narrative of the Old Testament the Mosaic law was part of a covenant reached between God and Abraham, and renewed by Moses during the events of the Exodus. Even giving the Bible its most literal interpretation, the Mosaic law was only ever expressed as applying to the Jewish people.
- ii. According to Christian theology, the Mosaic law was part of an old covenant between God that was replaced by a new covenant in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.
- iii. Jesus himself taught repeatedly, and in his most passionate words, against a legalistic approach to determining righteousness and against religious authorities applying the violent sanctions specified in the Mosaic law.
- iv. The early church, led by Saints Peter and Paul, confirmed the general non-applicability of the Mosaic law at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 50. As both those saints are themselves biblical authors and the decision of the Council appears within the Bible itself, it would be contradictory for a Christian to reject it in the name of biblical authority.
- v. Whilst some Christians may see values represented in the Mosaic law that they perceive as revealing God's will – for example, the belief that homosexuality is a sin or that one should refrain from work for one day a week – all accept that the practical application of these interpretations is, for Christians, a matter of judgment and discretion. No Christian denomination since the Council of Jerusalem has asserted that Christians are generally bound by the Mosaic law. This non-applicability is readily demonstrable by the fact that Christians have never recognised a prohibition to eating porcine food products, do not undertake Jewish rituals such as the Passover, and are generally uncircumcised.

At the core of Islam is the belief that the Quran is the final, perfect, verbatim, instruction of God's instructions. No mainstream Islamic tradition has ever held that following God's commandments as laid down in the Quran is not a strict obligation for all Muslims.

- i. The Quran is unambiguously expressed as including a series of laws which are intended to be enforced, on occasion by prescribed sanctions. It is repeatedly expressed as obligatory on all Muslims.
- ii. According to Islamic theology, the Quran has not been and may not be superseded.
- iii. All the *hadith* attributed to Mohammed and the traditions attributed to his companions, reaffirm that the *sharia*, however Muslims may interpret it, is to be strictly observed

Therefore, although both the Mosaic law and the *sharia* may be seen as similarly violent, the implication that therefore Christianity and Islam are similarly violent is fundamentally misconceived because no branch of Christianity teaches that Christians are bound by the Mosaic law, whilst no branch of Islam teaches other than that Muslims are bound by the *sharia*.

The treatment of the violence of Old Testament figures in Christianity contrasted with the treatment of the violence of Mohammed in Islam

20. Although in the Old Testament biblical figures such as Joshua, Saul, David and Solomon commit violent acts, and engage in other conduct that would be properly regarded as reprehensible, the way in which Christianity treats this violence and the way in which Islam treats reports of violent acts by Mohammed are entirely different.

Christians do not regard the violent actions of Old Testament figures necessarily as examples to imitate.

This may also be expressed in several ways:

- i. Christians follow as their perfect exemplar Jesus who was himself entirely peaceful and who preached non-violence. Jesus specifically disapproved of attempts in his own time to enforce religion, or even his own defence, by violent sanctions.
- ii. Christianity has consistently taught that the stories of the Old Testament have their value in casting light on the events of the New Testament. In liturgy and theology its meaning is determined by use of analogy in the context of the life of Jesus, not by providing a model of behaviour to be literally interpreted and emulated in contrast to Jesus' message of love.
- iii. Even if one found it difficult to discover a Christian moral to a particular Old Testament story, Jesus' imperative not to apply violence prohibits a Christian from emulating the specific behaviour attributed in scripture to Joshua or Saul. The Old Testament has never been preached as a valid alternative moral system to the New; and if the two appear to be in conflict, for Christians it is the word and example of Jesus that must prevail.

By contrast, for Muslims absolutely regard Mohammed as the perfect example to imitate. There are many exhortations within the Quran to emulate Mohammed. Moreover, the accounts of Mohammed's military campaigns are treated as a matter of history not religious allegory. It is undisputed that Mohammed:

- organised his followers into a military force that raided Meccan caravans, fought battles with Meccans and eventually took control of most of the Arabian Peninsula.
- oversaw a system of severe physical punishments including killing, torture and enslavement of those who rejected his rule or defied the *sharia*.

Therefore, although both the Old Testament figures and Mohammed and his companions may be regarded as similarly violent, the implication that therefore Christianity and Islam are similarly violent is fundamentally misconceived because no branch of Christianity teaches that that Christians are bound to emulate the example of Old Testament figures where to do so would conflict with Jesus' message of unlimited and universal charity; whilst no branch of Islam teaches other than that Muslims are bound to emulate the example of Mohammed – who killed, tortured and enslaved those who resisted his rule- as the ultimate exemplar of moral behaviour.

V. Conclusion

21. Of course not all Christians have always interpreted Christianity in a peaceful way, and not all Muslims have interpreted Islam to be violent. Both religions have very long histories, spread across continents and complicated by racial, political and cultural factors that have influenced adherents' interpretations of their scriptures. But the undoubtedly true observation that every major human institution will have people whom future generations regard as cruel or compassionate, wise or foolish, noble or corrupt, heroic or villainous, does not mean that Christianity and Islam do not have distinct credos. They do, and in the case of Christianity and Islam the two approaches to violence are fundamentally different.

All branches of Christianity treat the stories and laws of the Old Testament – as the name suggests - as a former imperfect revelation requiring an interpretation consistent with Jesus' perfect example of loving kindness. It is simply unimaginable that the Jesus described in the Gospels might, in different circumstances, have organised his followers to rob, kill, torture, enslave, maim and rape in the way that Mohammed did.

By contrast when the Quran instructs beheadings, lashings or the amputation of fingers, hands and feet, these instructions, when given, were intended to be applied to real necks, backs and limbs. No branch of Islam has ever taught other than that this was how the Quran was intended to be interpreted when Mohammed announced it, nor that this was how Mohammed himself, as the perfect example of Islamic values, applied it, and intended it to be applied forever.