

CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

In the wake of the recent wave of violence in Egypt, notably that of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood against Christians and their Churches, we need to examine the nature of Islam and its relationship to Christianity. People might be surprised to know that this kind of violence of Muslims against Christians in Egypt has been going on now for over one thousand years. Yet, is this the way *it must be* according to Islamic teaching?

Following is an actual, authentic letter from Islam's prophet Muhammad himself. An Arabic copy of the letter endorsed with Muhammad's handprint is kept at the Orthodox Monastery of the Mother of God of the Burning Bush at the base of Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula, dedicated to St. Catherine in the fifteenth century (shown on a CBS *60 Minutes* episode). This oldest continuously occupied monastery predates Muhammad by some 150 years, having been established in the mid to late 400's and fortified under the protection of the Emperor Justinian (527-565).

Here is an English translation of Muhammad's letter:

"This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them.

Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight.

The Muslims are to fight for them.

If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.

Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their

covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world)."

Knowing these words of their prophet Muhammad, how could any self-respecting Muslim condone or perpetrate violence against Christians just because they are Christians? The answer is simple: something about Muhammad's teaching has been lost, changed, or misrepresented.

Within only a dozen years after Muhammad's death (632), Muslim forces beginning in Arabia had overrun Syria, Palestine, Persia, and Egypt, a staggering achievement. Within a hundred years, Muslim forces occupied all of North Africa and southern Spain, but were repelled from Western Europe north of Spain at Poitiers in France by the army of Charles Martel (*the Hammer*; 732). Islamic pressure from the East continued to dominate the attention of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire until the eventual loss of Asia Minor (i.e., Turkey) following the Battle of Manzikert (1071) and the fall of Constantinople. The Crescent symbol of Islam recalls the Muslim capture of the Orthodox Christian jewel city of Constantinople on May 29, 1453, late in the month under the waning moon.

Early Muslim rule of non-Muslims, especially Christians and Jews, showed toleration, as long as the subject population paid its head-tax. In fact, this toleration, for instance in Syria and Persia, allowed "Christian" groups in heresy and schism from the Orthodox Church to flourish. Many Christians in the East served in the Muslim government without repercussion (e.g., St. John of Damascus).

Yet beginning with Muhammad himself, violence marked the path of Islam. Not only was he a preacher and administrator, he was also a military leader. This was shown in the defeat of Medina and the taking of Mecca, and this use of force is codified in the Muslim "Bible," the *Quran*.

The *Quran* (or Koran) is an Arabic word meaning "recitation," or "readings." The *Quran* is supposedly a collection of readings taken from an eternal book in the seventh heaven, and these readings, divided into chapters called *surahs*, were said to have been revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. Muhammad, being practically illiterate, transmitted these revelations to his aids through whom they were maintained by memory and oral tradition. The first official written copy of the *Quran* was produced 25 years after Muhammad's death in 657 under the direction of his chief aid Zayd ibn-Thabit; it was pronounced the official text for all Muslims by the caliph Uthman, while all other non-authorized versions were destroyed by order of the caliph.

Besides the *Quran*, a collection of other sayings of Muhammad, known as the *Hadith* (for instance, the letter cited above), exists to define Muslim faith and practice. The *Quran* and the *Hadith* together comprise *shariah*, or the “constitution” of Muslim governance. Different sects within Islam stress, or interpret, the various aspects of *shariah* differently resulting in a variety of practices under the Muslim umbrella.

What exactly does the *Quran* say about Christians, particularly the Muslim treatment of Christians? Is any violence to be used by Muslims against Christians? Here are some excerpts:

“Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah (Arabic, meaning “God”) and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.” (Surah 2.62; 5.69)¹

“And with those who say, We are Christians, We made a covenant, but they neglected a portion of what they were reminded of, therefore We excited among them enmity and hatred to the day of resurrection; and Allah will inform them of what they did...Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely, Allah – He is the Messiah, son of Marium (i.e., the Virgin Mary). Say: Who then could control anything as against Allah when He wished to destroy the Messiah son of Marium and his mother and all those on the earth? And Allah’s is the kingdom of the heaven and the earth and what is between them; He creates what He pleases; and Allah has power over all things.” (Surah 5.14, 17)

“Certainly you will find the most violent of people in enmity for those who believe (to be) the Jews and those who are polytheists (i.e., worshipers of many gods), and you will certainly find the nearest in friendship to those who believe (to be) those who say: We are Christians; this is because there are priests and monks among them and because they do not behave proudly.” (Surah 5.82)

On one hand, according to the *Quran*, Christianity is the religion closest to Islam, and while Christians who do not convert to Islam face eternal punishment, Christians should not live in fear of Muslim violence.

¹ From *The Qur’an*, translated by M. H. Shakir, Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., Elmhurst, New York, Ninth Edition 1995.

On the other hand, the *Quran* endorses violence against unbelievers who fight against Islam, and it commands fighting, striving (Arabic, *jihad*) as a way of life for all Muslims.

“And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits. And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drive you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them in the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers. But if they desist, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And fight with them until there is no more persecution, and religion should be only for Allah, but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors.” (Surah 2.190-193; 8.39; 22.39)

“So when the sacred months have passed away, then slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them; surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful...And if they break their oaths after their agreement and (openly) revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief – surely their oaths are nothing – so that they may desist. What! Will you not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Apostle (i.e., Muhammad), and they attacked you first; do you fear them? But Allah is most-deserving that you should fear Him, if you are believers.” (Surah 9.5, 12-13)

“Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth (i.e., Islam), out of those who have been given the Book (i.e., the Bible), until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection. And the Jews say: Uzair is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah (i.e., Jesus Christ) is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the sayings of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away! They have taken their doctors of law and their monks for lords besides Allah, and (also) the Messiah son of Marium and they were enjoined that they should serve one God only, there is no god but He; far from His glory be what they set up (with Him).” (Surah 9.29-31)²

² “The entire *Surah 9* has been accordingly called ‘a chapter of war proclamations.’ Thereafter the Muslims were *obliged* to wage war against *all* unbelievers (i.e., non-Muslims). They could contemplate tactical ceasefires, but never its complete abandonment short of the unbelievers’ abject submission.

Christians are not singled out for Muslim aggression, yet aggression against and subjection of Christians is permitted in the encounter between Islam and Christianity.

Clearly for centuries, Muslim groups have understood the words of the *Quran* and Muhammad to necessitate aggression against Christians. Indeed, certain Christian groups have understood their mission to include violence against Muslims and other opponents deemed enemies of their brand of "Christianity," whether the Crusaders in the Holy Land or the Spanish Inquisition which also actively persecuted the Jewish people there. The Orthodox Church understands such acts of violence perpetrated by Christians to be products of sin, unnatural, and abnormal. At best, even in the case of Christians engaged in a defensive war to protect their homeland, violence is a concession to weakness; more commonly, violent acts committed by Christians are a perversion of life given by God in Christ.

One difference between Christianity and Islam is that *physical violence is commanded* in the *Quran* as modeled in the very life of its prophet Muhammad, whereas Jesus Christ and His Apostles not only gave no command to use physical aggression in the work of the Gospel, they condemned it as contrary to the very way of God. Other insurmountable differences are the *Quran's* denial of God the Holy Trinity [Surah 5.73], the denial of the Crucifixion (and Resurrection) of Christ [Surah 4.157], the denial that Jesus is the Son of God [Surah 5.17; 9.30], and the claim that Muhammad is a true prophet, indeed, greater than the "prophet" Jesus. If the archangel Gabriel had, in fact, communicated the words of the *Quran* to Muhammad, then the message of the *Quran* would be the same as – and not contradict and undermine – the Christian Gospel as spoken by Gabriel to both the prophet Daniel and the Virgin Mary (see Dan. 8:16; 9:21; and Luke 1:26).

So what about the letter from Muhammad cited above? It seems at some points to contradict the words of the *Quran*, especially regarding the prohibition of even "compulsion on [Christians]" and Muslims even "fight[ing] for [Christians]." "There is an intermediate state known as *Dar al Sulh* – when the Muslims are a minority community and need to adopt temporarily a peaceful attitude in order to deceive their neighbors...The final objective all along is *Dar al Islam*, where Muslims dominate and infidels are converted or massacred."³ In other words, as exemplified by the dealings

This is the real meaning of Jihad," from *Defeating Jihad*, by Serge Trifkovic, Boston: Regina Orthodox Press, 2006, pg. 43.

³ *Defeating Jihad*, pg. 42. See also Serge Trifkovic's *The Sword of the Prophet*, Boston: Regina Orthodox Press, 2002, which documents the historically enacted aggressive ideology of Islam.

and words of Muhammad, Islam can display an approach of “peace,” yet it always, ultimately pursues a program of persuasive or forceful conversion *until all people become Muslim*.

An inherent conflict will always exist between Islam and Christianity, particularly from the side of Islam because, according to Muslim ideology, Christians are unbelievers who need to be converted or subjected to Islamic control, even if that means eliminating the opposition. Peaceful relations with Christians, on the part of the Muslim community, is a means to the end of eventual conversion and absorption into the world-wide House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*), and only then will the world become a House of Peace (*Dar al-Salam*). Christians, too, according to the commission of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 28:16-20), desire all people of the world to become Christian; however, Christians have not been sanctioned to use deception, coercion, or force of arms to achieve it (despite past efforts in this regard which should be condemned and not repeated).

Given the competing words of Muhammad and the *Quran*, it is not surprising to find “moderate” and “extremist/radical” characterizations of Muslim groups in non-Muslim media. On the surface in relation to its non-Muslim environment, Islamists can at times appear moderate and peaceful, and at other times Islamists act on their core principles in eruptions of violence not only against non-Muslims, but even against fellow Muslims who are perceived to sympathize with (and thus betray themselves to) non-Muslims. Whether Muslims act aggressively on these core principles or not, the propensity and justification of violence remains at the heart of Islam creating permanent conditions for social instability, political mobilization, and unspoken support of terrorism.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 19:36). The Apostle Paul writes: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:3-5). The Cross of Christ is our “weapon of peace,” the Resurrection of Christ our great hope. In these things we must suffer, confess the truth of God, and triumph over all the forces of evil in love and prayer to God, “Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).