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Is the Quran hostile to Jews, Christians?

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Commentary

WASHINGTON

When violence is committed in the name of Islam, the perpetrators often say that Muslims were never meant to enjoy good relations with followers of other religions, specifically Jews and Christians — and point to Quranic verses to prove this.

Not surprisingly, some non-Muslims often point to these quotes as evidence that Muslims are a threat to their way of life, justifying their own hostility toward Islam.

But is that what these verses really mean?

It is an often forgotten fact that the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over the 23-year period of his spiritual and political leadership, meaning that its verses necessarily addressed challenges facing the nascent Muslim community, in addition to the theological and spiritual matters any religion seeks to expound.

Thus while nearly two-thirds of the Quran recounts the lives of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus and Mary as expressions of the spiritual ideal, the remaining third sets out specific rules of conduct for the followers of the then-new Islamic religion.

Broadly speaking, these rules cover two major themes: good conduct in one's personal, social and familial life, and specific commentary on a past or present event — including political and communal problems.

The verses which are deemed hostile to Jews and Christians fall into the last category.

For example, while both communities are respectfully referred to as "People of the Book" — i.e., people who have been sent their own scripture by the same God who gave the Quran to the people of the Arabian peninsula — most such verses (about three dozen out of more than 6,000) speak of Christian and Jewish tensions with the early Muslims.

Verses considered hostile to Jews and Christians must be read in context: At the time that some of these verses were recorded, for example, a particular Jewish tribe allied to the Muslims had betrayed them — naturally, Muslims were warned against seeking protectors or allies among other communities.

But should instructions in the Quran relating to such specific incidents be generalized to apply to the relationship between Muslims, Christians and Jews today?

The Torah and Gospel are mentioned around a dozen times each in the Quran — always favorably — and described as "a guidance and light" to mankind. Those among their followers who are righteous — alongside righteous Muslims — "no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve" (Quran 2:38).

Moses is mentioned in the Quran by name — Mussa in Arabic — no less than 136 times, through the retelling of familiar stories for the reader of the Bible: his confrontation with Pharaoh over the bondage of the children of Israel in Egypt in particular is repeated many times.

Jesus meanwhile is mentioned by name — Issa in Arabic — 25 times, as well as by titles such as the Messiah, son of Mary, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God over the span of 15 chapters.

Biblical stories of his life are retold in the Quran, including his virgin birth, his healing of the blind and the leper, and his raising of the dead.

Muslims are even told that intermarriage with Jews and Christians is permitted under Islam, though both because of patriarchal custom and the relevant verse appearing to be addressed to men, it has usually been difficult for a Muslim woman to enter into marriage with a Jewish or Christian man (who would be considered the household head).

Not a single reference in the Quran to either Jesus or the Gospel, to Moses or the Torah, is anything but affirming and respectful.

There are theological differences with Christian beliefs: Jesus is a highly-regarded prophet, rather than God's son. Still, the overall message is of coexistence, not division.

It is such a tragedy that some of us grasp at whatever we can to nurture a feeling of fear or hatred of what we don't understand, projecting this fear onto our, or others', holy books — in this case the Quran. If we listen to its message with an open mind, we might be reassured — if not left in awe — by its resonant and familiar message.

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