THE SWORD VERSES: BASIS OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM

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Since the 9/11 attacks on 9 Sept. 2001, Muslim violence has been much discussed. If you will permit me seemingly to digress and begin with a discussion of Protestant approaches to the Bible, I would like to explain Muslim violence toward unbelievers, as I see it.

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Protestantism can be divided into two groups: mainline Protestants and fundamentalist Protest­ants. The distinction rests largely on two approaches to scripture. Mainline Protestants (and Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians) believe in a doctrine of inspiration, but they do not subscribe to a dictation theory (God dictated every word to the biblical authors). For mainline Protestants, God ensured that the Bible as a whole would teach the Christian faith as a whole, but his influence was more subtle. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, tend to subscribe to the dictation theory.

From these two theories of inspiration (call them the “subtle theory” and the “dictation theory”), there derive two theories of inerrancy (doctrines concerning errors in the Bible). The doctrine of inerrancy held by mainline Protestants (and Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) is the one that Vatican II stated in 1965 in *Dei Verbum* (ch. 3 § 11): “the books of scripture teach fully, faithfully, and without error that truth God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.” Not all assertions in the Bible are without error; but the Bible does teach without error “that truth God wanted put into the sacred writings *for the sake of our salvation*.” Consequently, for the majority of Christians, it is not a problem that the Bible contains unimportant contradictions.

For fundamentalist Protestants, however, the doctrine of inerrancy is quite different. Since God dictated every word of scripture, the Bible can contain no errors—period. Not in the least detail. If scripture says, for example, that Joshua stopped the sun for a day (Josh 10:12-13) . . . well, that’s what happened. If the Bible says seven days (Gen 1), then, by God, it was seven days. (I once followed a bumper sticker here in Houston that said: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”)

We can call these two theories of inerrancy “limited inerrancy” (which follows from the subtle theory of inspiration) and “absolute inerrancy” (which follows from the dictation theory of inspiration).

The term “fundamentalist” arose because of a set of twelve paperbacks that appeared from 1910-1915. The books contained 90 essays by 64 authors. The series was entitled *The Fundamentals*: *A Testimony to the Truth* because it asserted doctrines that it said were essential to Christianity. Most of the doctrines (Trinity, Incarnation, etc.) were common to all Christians; but one doctrine was the absolute inerrancy of the Bible, in each and every detail. That is why, when the word “fundamentalist” was coined by a journalist in 1920 to refer to this particular doctrine of *The Fundamentals*, the word came to mean “one who accepts the Bible as completely and literally true.”

Because biblical fundamentalists have tended over the decades to be arch-conservative not just in religious matters but also in social and political affairs, the meaning of “fundamentalist” broadened. Today “fundamentalist” may mean a person with a literalist approach to scripture; or it may mean a reactionary, especially one prone to violence to preserve a reactionary ideology.

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These distinctions—between dictation theory and subtle theory of inspiration, between limited inerrancy and absolute inerrancy, and between “fundamentalist” in the narrow and broad senses—can help to explain Islam and violence.

Muslims believe that the Qur’an arose in this way: God said something to the angel Gabriel, Gabriel repeated it to Muhammad, Muhammad told it to his friends and relatives, and they wrote it down. This happened over and over again between 610 and 632 CE (when Muhammad died). By 650, all of these messages had been compiled into the Qur’an. Not the slightest error in transmission took place, at any stage. The Qur’an is, therefore—quite literally—the words of God.

Consequently, it is strictly accurate to say that all Muslims are fundamentalists—if by “fundamentalist” you mean the narrow sense. In fact, the foundation of authority in their system of belief is the dictation theory and absolute inerrancy.

Of course, there have been occasional Muslims who have come to believe what most non-Muslims believe about the Qur’an: that it is not absolutely inerrant and that it contains contradictions (both internally and with modern science and history). Isma`il al-Faruqi was an example of such a Muslim. He taught Islam at Princeton University in the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, however, he was found murdered in his bathtub in Pennsylvania. Another example is the British Muslim Salman Rushdie. Because he wrote a novel (*The Satanic Verses*, 1988) that merely suggested the possibility that not every word in the Qur’an is from God, the British government spent millions shunting him from one safe house to another to prevent his murder. The occasional liberal Muslim is not considered by most Muslims to be any longer a Muslim. And the *shariah* (Islamic law, which derives from the Qur’an and therefore must be adhered to) decrees a penalty for such apostates: death. Liberal Muslims live in such fear that they are mostly reluctant to express their doubts. (“. . . Muslims who do not believe that Muhammad received the Qur’an from God . . . dare not express their thoughts. . . . In the poignant phrase of Amir Taheri, ‘All of us [Muslim writers and poets] have graveyards full of friends.’” Pipes, Daniel. *The Rushdie Affair*. New York: Carol, 1990. 150-51.)

To sum up: just as surely as a Christian, by definition, is one who believes that Jesus is the Word of God, so a Muslim, by definition, is one who believes that the Qur’an is the word of God. Muslims are fundamentalist (in the narrower sense) by definition (or afraid to say otherwise): the very foundation of their religion is the absolute inerrancy of their scripture (in a way not even found among fundamentalist Protestants, since for the latter Christ is foundational and their absolutely-inerrant scriptures secondary). Although the principle of religious freedom is now enshrined in the very constitutions of modern western democracies (see Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom* § 2, “religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law”), in Muslim lands Islam’s “foundational fundamentalism” remains, I believe, the chief reason why religious freedom has made little headway.

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The Qur’an has several statements about treatment of non-believers. Quoting them from Rudolf Peters (*Islam and Colonialism*, 1979), they are, in the chronological order accepted by Muslims:

1. Q 15:94, “Burst forth with what thou art commanded and turn from the polytheists” (qtd. in Peters 13). (Preach, but avoid confrontations with non-believers.)
2. Q 16:125, “Summon to the way of thy Lord and goodly admonition, and argue against them with what is better” (qtd. in Peters 13). (Argue with non-believers.)
3. Q 2:190, “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not provoke hostility. Verily Allah loveth not those who provoke hostility” (qtd. in Peters 14). (Defensive wars are allowed.)
4. Q 9:5, “slay the polytheists wherever ye find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere; if they repent and establish the Prayer and pay the Zakāt, then set them free; Allah is forgiving, compassionate” (qtd. in Peters 14).
5. Q 9:29, “Fight against those who do not believe in Allah nor in the Last Day and [against those who] do not make forbidden what Allah and His messenger have made forbidden, and [who] do not practise the religion of truth of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the *jizya* off hand, being subdued” (qtd. in Peters 14).

The last two of these verses are called the “sword verses.” Peters comments, “Finally the unconditional command to fight all unbelievers was sent down” (14).

Given the Islamic fundamentalist attitude toward the Qur’an, how can Muslims explain these contradictory statements about treatment of non-believers? To deal with this problem, Islamic scholars through the centuries have used what is called the “theory of abrogation.” Peters explains the theory thus (p. 13):

the various verses regulating the dealings with the unbelievers contained prescriptions that had relevance only for a certain period. When the situation had changed, other verses were revealed abrogating the previous ones. This culminated in the absolute and unconditional command to fight the unbelievers, which was revealed during the last years of Mohammed’s lifetime, when the Moslems had the upper hand.

Since the command to fight the unbelievers was the last command God gave, it is the one—the only one—that remains in force. As Peters notes, “all [Muslim legal authorities] agree upon the unconditioned command to fight the unbelievers” (Peters 175 n. 13). For all Muslims, God has spoken in Q 9:5 and 9:29 (the last and therefore still-in-force revelations): “Fight against those who do not believe in Allah . . . and [who] do not practise the religion of truth . . . until they [are] subdued.”

Apologists point out that the Jewish and Christian Bibles contain violent language also. True. But non-fundamentalist Jews and Christians—the majority of Jews and Christians—allow the historical contexts of scriptural texts to influence the interpretation of the texts. For the Qur’an, however, because every word is a word of God, that opportunity is not available to Muslims. You and I might believe that historical context influenced the various statements about unbelievers in the Qur’an. But Muslims use the theory of abrogation to explain that when God sent earlier, more peaceful revelations about the treatment of unbelievers, he intended that those revelations be temporary. As for the last revelation (Q 9:29), God intended it to be permanent. Islam’s fundamentalism does not allow Muslims to acknowledge that Q 9:29 was dependent upon historical context; that would be to make God dependent upon historical context.

“Fight against those who do not believe in Allah” is God’s final word. It must be obeyed.

Muslims’ logic, then, seems to be:

The Qur’an is inerrant.

The suras (chapters) in the Qur’an can be dated relative to one another.

Seeming contradictions are to be explained by the theory of abrogation: revelations in later suras abrogate those in earlier suras.

Critics can dispute these propositions: the Qur’an is not inerrant; seeming contradictions are in fact contradictions; the traditional relative dating of the suras is indeterminable, or unreliable, or incorrect. But it really doesn’t matter. The interpretation of the sword verses and their application will be decided by Muslims, by what they decide is the truth. By all means, we must do everything in our power to dissuade them from the traditional interpretation. But, ultimately, it will not be up to us.