

Understanding Passeth Peace
The Origin and Beliefs of Islam
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1. Today, we will look at the origins and beliefs of Islam, the fastest growing religion in the world.
2. We will specifically consider whether Islam, as a religion, encourages violence.

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1. Islam arose in the Hijaz that lies on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula in the Great Rift Valley that includes the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.
2. In the sixth century, people from around the Hijaz came to Mecca each year to worship their many gods.

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1. Worshippers walked seven times around an early version of this structure called the *Ka'ba*, which contained 360 idols, representing each day of the lunar year.
2. Some people around Mecca recognized an invisible god they called "*Al Lah*," meaning "the god," that was not in the *Ka'ba*. Aslan, *No god but God* at 8.
3. The concept of *Al Lah* may have been brought to Mecca by Syrian Christians, who still refer to God as *Allah*. Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 340.

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1. According to traditional accounts, Muhammad was born in about 570 AD into a Meccan trading family and became an orphan at an early age.
2. He was raised by his uncle, a caravan driver, who took him on trips to Jerusalem and then on to Syria, where he learned about Judaism and Christianity.
3. Perhaps from his journeys to Syria, Muhammad became convinced that *Al Lah*, the invisible god recognized by a few people in Mecca, **"was the same god as Yahweh, the god of the Jews."** Aslan, *No god but God* at 8.

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1. From his visits to Syria, Muhammad would have learned a view of Jesus that differed from the Orthodox view that he is the divine son of God.

2. **“Syriac-speaking Christians . . . had little sympathy for the trend being developed in Hellenistic Christianity to endow Jesus with divine as well as human aspects.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 183.

3. According to one story, Muhammad was first recognized as a prophet by a Arian monk in this ancient Roman trading city of Bosra in Syria – Arians were considered heretics because they did not believe Jesus was God. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* at 185.

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1. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was forty years old, during his annual meditation in a cave during the lunar month of Ramadan, he went into what has been described as a trance or a seizure.

2. He awoke with what he said were revelations from the angel Gabriel on behalf of Yahweh, the God of Abraham.

3. Muhammad reported that God had selected him to be the final prophet, following in the line of prophets that included Moses, David and Jesus.

4. His assignment was **“to reform the existing religious beliefs and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabia so as to bring the God of the Jews and Christians to the Arab peoples.”** Aslan, *No god but God* at 17.

5. His wealthy wife, fifteen years his senior, was his first believer.

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1. For the next 23 years, Muhammad reported additional revelations, eventually assembled into the *Quran*.

2. The individual revelations are called “*surahs*” or “*suras*..

3. Muslims believe the *Quran* is **“the perfectly preserved word of God, committed to memory during Muhammad’s lifetime and later written down just as originally recited.”** Prothero, *God is Not One* at 41.

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1. Muhammad’s early *surahs* in Mecca form the heart of Islamic beliefs about God.

2. *Quran* 112:1-2 reports: **“He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend.”**

3. Another *surah* reported that God could not be thought of in human terms: **“Vision comprehends Him not, and He comprehends (all) vision; and he is the Subtle, the Aware.”** *Quran* 6:103.

4. These statements are very similar to statements in the Hebrew Scriptures about the nature of God.

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1. Like most Jews, Muslims reject “[a]ny attempt to anthropomorphize God by endowing the Divine with human attributes.” Aslan, *No god but God* at 151.
2. Early *surahs* omitted the seventh day of the Biblical creation story because God, not being human, did not need to rest after creating the heavens and the earth. *Quran* 46:33; 50:38.
3. Muslims decorate only with geometric or floral designs to avoid creating idols.

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1. Meccans had heard the Biblical story that Ishmael, the son of Abraham with Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden of his wife Sarah, was the father of “an Arab nation.” Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.12.4.
2. In Mecca, Muhammad reported a revelation that Abraham had brought Ishmael to the area near the *Ka’ba* in Mecca. *Quran* 14:37.
3. Muslims, like Jews and Christians, consider themselves the children of Abraham.

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1. Further linking Allah with the God of the Bible, *surahs* about Allah “came populated with figures already familiar to his listeners,” including Aaron, Abel, Abraham, Adam, Benjamin, Cain, David, Elisha, Ezra, Goliath, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Jesus, Job, John the Baptist, Jonah, Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea, Lot, Mary, Moses, Noah, Saul, Solomon and Zachariah. Feiler, *Abraham* at 165.
2. None of the reported stories reflects all the Biblical details because “the *Qur’an* assumes its readers are familiar with the Pentateuch and the Psalms.” Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 175.
3. Some of the details in the stories in the *Quran* differ from those in the Bible.
4. For example, in the *Quran*, Moses is rescued by Pharaoh’s wife and not by Pharaoh’s daughter. *Quran* 28:7-9.
5. Because Muslims believe the words of the *Quran* came directly from God, they regard these inconsistencies as God’s “correction” of the Biblical accounts.
6. “Any contradictions between the Bible and Islamic teachings are viewed as man-made elements” in the Bible. Dodge, *Understanding Islam* at 136.

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1. **“From the beginning of his ministry, Muhammad revered Jesus as the greatest of God’s messengers.”** Prothero, *God is Not One* at 101.
2. As Muhammad sought to bring the message of one God to the Meccans, **“[t]he Christian notion of the Last Judgment was central to the early message of the Qur’an.”** Armstrong, *Muhammad* at 49.

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1. Some of the Meccan *surahs* intentionally evoked the language of Jesus.
2. One *surah* stated: **“And we will set up a just balance on the day of Resurrection, so no soul will be wronged in the least. And if there be the weight of a grain of mustard seed, We will bring it. And Sufficient are We to take account.”** *Quran* 21:47.
3. Another warned that people not accepting Allah as the only God would not enter paradise **“until the camel pass through the eye of the needle.”** *Quran* 7:40.

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1. Early *surahs* painted a picture of paradise reflecting aspirations of a desert people.
2. **“In the heaven we are treated to fountains, cool shades, and chaste *houris* in gardens beneath which rivers flow; to carpets, cushions, goblets of gold, and sumptuous food and drink.”** Smith, *The World’s Religions* at 241.
3. The word “*houris*” literally means “pure beings” and is often translated into English as “companions” or “virgins.” *Quran* 56:36.
4. Relying on these images, for Muslims **“paradise is a goal, a destination, a place infinitely preferable to the one where we reside.”** Ali, *Heretic* at 113.
5. It is the promise of an instant trip to that paradise that motivates some people to blow themselves up.

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1. The Meccan *surahs* describe hell as a place **“of intense heat and suffering, with boiling water, hot wind, and black smoke.”** Dodge, *Understanding Islam* at 159.
2. Muhammad told the Meccan traders they would be sent to hell if they did not share their wealth with the poor. *Quran* 104:3-4.
3. Muslims reject the traditional Christian view that hell is eternal, believing that it ends when the punishment is sufficient. *Quran* 78:21-30.

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1. Muhammad told the Meccans, whose gods and goddesses had children, that God was being beyond human conception and **“begets not, nor is he begotten.”** *Quran* 112:3.
2. Meccan polytheists countered that the Christian God had begotten a son, Jesus, so there was nothing wrong with gods having children. Ali, *The Holy Quran* at 962 n. 57a.
3. Mirroring the non-orthodox views of Jesus Muhammad had encountered in Syria, a Meccan *surah* rejected this claim: **“Wonderful Originator of the heavens and earth! How could He have a son when He has no consort?”** *Quran* 6:101.
4. As one author states: **“When Muslims hear the phrase ‘Son of God,’ they understand it to imply that God had physical relations with a woman in order to have a son.”** Halverson, *The Illustrated Guide to the World Religions* at 117.
5. The claim that God could not have a son creates the most significant theological difference between Islam and Orthodox Christianity.

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1. **“When Muhammad proclaimed to the Meccans that their goddesses were mere myths and that Allah was the only true God, he was quickly subjected to persecution.”** Caner, *Unveiling Islam* at 46.
2. They said his claim of a day of reckoning **“was simply an old wives’ tale.”** Armstrong, *Muhammad* at 55.
3. To escape the persecution, Muhammad and about 70 followers left Mecca and went to Yathrib, a city 200 miles north of Mecca that included a large Jewish population that had asked him to mediate a dispute.
4. 622 AD, the date of the migration to Yathrib, now called “Medina,” is year one in the Islamic calendar.

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1. In Medina, **“Muhammad worked closely with Jewish leaders, enhanced his knowledge of the Bible, and adjusted his new religion to accommodate his allies even more.”** Feiler, *Abraham* at 167.
2. An early Medina *surah* expressly adopted the teachings of the Jewish prophets, including Jesus: **“We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us, and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord: we make no distinctions between any of them, and to Him we submit.”** *Quran* 3:84.

3. Mohammed instructed his followers to pray toward Jerusalem and arranged the time for prayers to coincide with the Jews' Friday evening preparation for the Sabbath so they could prepare for worship together.
4. He established a feast day to coincide with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

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1. Among Medina Jews having similar views, Muhammad railed against the Christian Trinity, which Muhammad considered among **“intolerably heretical innovations created by ignorance and error.”** Aslan, *No god but God* at 101.
2. One *surah* states: **“So believe in Allah and His messengers. And say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you. Allah is only one God. Far be it from his glory to have a son.”** *Quran* 4:171.

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1. The statement, **“Far be it from His glory to have a son,”** reflects Muslim belief that the concept of “son,” which they interpret biologically, is a pagan idea.
2. A Medina *surah* asserts: **“[A]nd the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. These are the words of their mouth. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before. Allah’s curse be on them! How they are turned away!** *Quran* 9:30.
3. A commentary to this statement states: **“[W]hen St. Paul saw that the Jews would on no account accept Jesus Christ as the messenger of God, he introduced the pagan doctrine of sonship of God into the Christian religion, so that it might become more acceptable to the pagans.”** Ali, *The Holy Quran* at 405 n. 30b.

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1. Although denying that God can have a son, Muslims accept the Christian claim that Jesus was born to a virgin, as reflected in the dialogue from Medina between Mary and the angel:
 - a. **“She said: My Lord, how can I have a son and man has not yet touched me?”** *Quran* 3:45.
 - b. **“He said, Even so; Allah creates what He pleases. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, Be, and it is so.”** *Quran* 3:47.
2. Muslims believe that God simply decreed that Mary would have a son in the same way that God ordered the creation of Adam, who also did not have a father. *Quran* 3:59.

3. In Medina, Muhammad also acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah: **“The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only a messenger of Allah and His word which He communicated to Mary and a mercy from Him.”** *Quran* 4:171.

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1. **“While the Jews [in Medina] may have been prepared to align politically with Muhammad, they were not prepared to accept him as a prophet.”** Feiler, *Abraham* at 168.

2. Instead, they ridiculed him, saying his claimed revelations about events in Jewish history were confused and inaccurate.

3. They rejected his claim that Jesus was born of a virgin and was the Messiah.

4. **“Muhammad’s rejection by the Jews was probably the greatest disappointment in his life, and it called his whole religious position into question.”** Armstrong, *The History of God* at 154.

5. In 624, Muhammad received a new revelation requiring followers to pray in the direction of the *Ka’ba* in Mecca and changed Friday prayers to the middle of the day, which **“widened the rupture among the religions.”** Feiler, *Abraham* at 169.

6. As one author states: **“Rather than the model to emulate, Judaism had become the faith to censure.”** Lewis, *God’s Crucible* at 43.

7. A late Medina *surah* reflects this changed attitude: **“Thou wilt certainly find the most violent of people in enmity against the believers to be the Jews and the idolators and thou wilt find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, We are Christians.”** *Quran* 5:82.

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1. After Muhammad’s rejection as a prophet in Medina, **“Islam became not merely a set of modifications of preexistent monotheistic traditions, fed from Jewish and Christian sources, but a wholly new religion.”** Pagden, *Worlds at War* at 169.

2. To give guidance to followers of this new religion, Muhammad announced five simple-to-remember “pillars of Islam” given to him by the angel Gabriel.

3. The first pillar is to proclaim, preferably before witnesses, that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger or prophet.

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1. The second pillar is praying five times a day, facing Mecca.

2. The times to pray are based on the position of the sun.

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1. On Friday at about noon, the Muslim world largely stops what it is doing and gets down on its knees for prayers in the local mosque.
2. Muslims assume positions of submission they saw in Middle Eastern Christians.
3. One prayer seeks blessings for all the descendants of Abraham.

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1. The third pillar of Islam – giving a fixed amount per year to the poor – is based on a person's assets or savings. *Quran 2:110*.
2. A typical amount is 2.5 percent per year of the value of those assets – in some societies today it is collected by the government as a tax and non-Muslims are expected to pay a comparable amount to the government.

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1. The fourth pillar of Islam is the "*Hajj*."
2. Once in their lifetime, if they are able, Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage to the *Ka'ba* in Mecca, the holiest site in Islam. *Quran 2:158*.

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1. As the pagans did at the time of Muhammad, pilgrims circle the *Ka'ba* seven times and hope to touch the sacred black stone in a corner of the *Ka'ba*.
2. The stone, which is probably a meteorite, is believed by Muslims to have been used by Abraham and Ishmael to rebuild the *Ka'ba*. *Quran 2:125*.

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1. The final pillar requires that Muslims not eat, drink or engage in sex from sun up to sun down during the lunar month of Ramadan. *Quran 2:183*.
2. Muhammad based the idea of a month-long fast on practices of Jews in Medina. Aslan, *No god but God* at 147.

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1. Following the five pillars is rewarded with an afterlife in paradise.
2. As one Medina *surah* teaches: **“Those who believe and do good deeds and keep up prayer and pay the poor rate – their reward is with their Lord; and they have no fear; nor shall they grieve.”** *Quran 2:277*.

3. Because Muslims believe destiny in the afterlife is totally dependent on a person's actions during life, they see no need for a savior and reject the idea of original sin.

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1. The promise by Muhammad of an attractive afterlife, including his promise that **“martyrs who die in holy wars go to heaven,”** attracted large numbers of believers and motivated armies to fight to the death for him. Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 388.
2. The followers of Muhammad won battles against their enemies.
3. In a still controversial episode, his followers beheaded Jews in Medina they accused of having supported their enemies in battle.

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1. Mecca surrendered to Muhammad, who then destroyed the idols in the *Ka'ba*.
2. Muhammad and his followers battled other pagan tribes in Arabia, quickly uniting all of Arabia under his leadership.

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1. Muhammad died in 632 AD, soon after uniting the Arabian tribes.
2. He is buried in Medina, in the tomb beneath the green dome near the center, which is the second holiest site in Islam.
3. Many Muslims believe the empty tomb next to Muhammad is reserved for Jesus.
4. Muslims believe it is not possible that God would let Jesus, whom many consider a prophet second in importance only to Muhammad, die on the cross. *Quran* 4:157.
5. They believe that Jesus was taken up to heaven alive, from which he will one day return, reject Orthodox Christianity and proclaim the truth of Islam. *Quran* 4:158.

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1. After Muhammad's death, a succession dispute led to a division of Islam into Shia and Sunni branches.
2. The minority group, backing Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, became the Shia.
3. **“The Shia invested social, political, and religious authority in the leader, whom they call the Imam.”** Prothero, *God is Not One* at 51.
4. A larger group, which became the Sunnis, backed Abu Bakr as his successor.

5. **“The Sunnis invested social and political authority in a series of caliphs, reserving all-important religious authority for the broader community.”** *Id.*
6. Sunni and Shia Muslims also differ on which of the many sayings attributed to Muhammad are authentic.
7. These sayings, called *“hadith,”* include **“verses from the Torah and Gospels, bits of rabbinic sayings, ancient Persian maxims, passages of Greek philosophy, Indian proverbs, and even an almost word-for-word reproduction of the Lord’s Prayer.”** Aslan, *No god but God* at 68.
8. The ones deemed authentic are considered second in authority only to the *Quran*.

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1. Within a few years after Muhammad’s death, Muslim armies captured Syria, Egypt and Palestine from the Byzantine Empire and large parts of the Persian Empire.
2. Many Christians in these areas had rejected Orthodox teachings of the divinity of Jesus and **“had been subjected to harassment and persecution by the government in Constantinople.”** Pagden, *Worlds at War* at 173.
3. As a result, these **“Nestorian and Monophysite Christians welcomed the Muslims and found Islam preferable to Byzantium.”** Armstrong, *Jerusalem* at 232.
4. In captured countries, Jews and Christians who didn’t convert, as “People of the Book,” were allowed to continue to practice their religion so long as they paid a special tax equal to the amounts paid by Muslims for support of the poor. *Quran* 9:29.

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1. In 638 AD, the Byzantines surrendered Jerusalem to the Muslims, who established a mosque on the platform where the Jewish Temple stood before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.
2. The Muslims built the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount to demonstrate their superiority over both Christians and Jews.

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1. Muslims later associated the rock under the Dome of the Rock with the story that Muhammad went to heaven, where he visited with Moses and Jesus, as shown in this Persian painting.
2. As a result, the Al Aqsa mosque site, including the Dome of the Rock, has become the third holiest site in Islam.

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1. In the seventh century and today, followers of other religions ask the same question -- does Islam, as a religion, promote violence and hatred?
2. One recent author who has looked extensively at Islam calls this a **“silly question,”** like asking if Christianity promoted slavery during the American Civil War. Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 376.
3. Muslims do not all have the same view of the teachings of Islam any more than all Christians had the same view of what the Bible teaches about slavery.
4. **“Even today, some Muslims like to emphasize [Muhammad’s] belligerence—they wage holy war and say they do so in the finest traditions of the Prophet—while other Muslims insist that Islam is a religion of peace, in the finest traditions of the Prophet.”** *Id.* at 374.

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1. The *Quran* is the collection of about 6,000 short statements Muhammad claimed were revealed to him over a period of about 23 years and memorized by his followers.
2. The revelations often relate to specific events in the life of Muhammad or his followers.
3. Because of their event-specific nature, the *surahs* can seem contradictory.
4. For example, one Medina *surah* says that people should not pray if they have consumed intoxicants. *Quran* 4:43.
5. Another, delivered after Muslim soldiers appeared for battle drunk, forbids intoxicants at all times and not just before prayer. *Quran* 5:90.
6. Is consuming intoxicants prohibited only before prayer or at all times?

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1. To deal with such inconsistencies, some Muslim scholars developed a doctrine called “abrogation,” in which the most recent *surah* trumps earlier inconsistent ones on the theory that God changed his mind.
2. A verse in the *Quran* is cited for this idea: **“Whatever message We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or one like it.”** *Quran* 2:106.
3. This doctrine has also been used by some to claim that verses of the *Quran* that are sympathetic to other religions are no longer applicable.
4. For example, when Muhammad first went to Medina, the *surahs* were very respectful of both Jews and Christians: **“Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last**

Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.” *Quran 2:62.*

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1. After Muhammad’s rejection by the Jews in Medina, the **“tone of the suras that describe revelations received during this period is sometimes harsher than that of earlier ones, particularly toward Jews and Christians.”** Feiler, *Abraham* at 168.
2. Here is a later Medina *surah*: **“And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers.”** *Quran 3:85.*
3. An official Saudi English translation of the Quran states that verse 2:62 **“was abrogated by the Verse 3:85,”** so **“after the coming of Prophet Muhammad on the earth, no other religion except Islam will be accepted from anyone.”**

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1. While fighting, Muhammad continued to report *surahs* one author calls **“short-term motivational devices.”** Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 379.
2. As a result, **“there is no debating the importance of the themes of fighting and killing in both the Quran and Islamic law.”** Prothero, *God is Not One* at 35.

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1. One infamous “sword verse” relates to a battle in which the enemy had attacked the Muslims during Ramadan and the soldiers needed guidance about how to respond: **“When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters, wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush.”** *Quran 9:5.*
2. Read in its historical context, this verse means **“kill the polytheists who aren’t on your side in this particular war.”** Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 379.

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1. But some Muslims read this and similar verses to be directed at anyone today who does not accept their view of the teachings of Islam, including Christians and Jews.
2. As one Muslim reformer has recently written: **“[T]he biggest problem with the Qur’an’s unique status is the fact that the most violent . . . Muslims can find in its holy writ justifications for everything they do.”** Ali, *Heretic* at 93.
3. Some proponents of abrogation claim *Surah 9:5*, read independently of its historical context, **“abrogated some 124 of the more peaceful Meccan verses.”** *Id.* at 98.

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1. Millions of Muslims reject abrogation and hostile interpretations of Islam as **“in direct defiance of Muhammad’s example and the teachings of the *Quran*.”** Aslan, *No god but God* at 103.
2. Pointing to particular *surahs*, they note that **“Muslims are commanded to avoid initiating hostilities, embarking on any act of aggression, or violating the rights of others.”** Dodge, *Understanding Islam* at 187.

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1. So, does Islam promote violence or not?
2. One author who has looked at this question writes: **“When people feel like fighting, they are pretty good at coming up with reasons why the fighting is justified—reasons why God is on their side.”** Wright, *The Evolution of God* at 387.

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1. If we focus only on the most hostile parts of any religion’s writings, **“every religion was a ‘religion of the sword.’”** Aslan, *No god but God* at 80.
2. The Bible has its own “sword verses.”
3. Psalm 137 seeks to punish the Babylonians by **“tak[ing] your little ones and dash[ing] them against the rock.”** *Psalms* 137:8-9.
4. *Deuteronomy* requires believers to kill anyone, including their own children, who turns away from God. *Deuteronomy* 13:6-11.

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1. The Crusades, inquisitions, slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Holocaust were all justified on the basis of violent interpretations of the Bible.
2. Just as most Christians reject interpretations of the Bible that have led to violence, most Muslims around the world reject interpretations of the *Quran* that encourage violence.
3. Karen Armstrong, a former nun and student of religion, has written: **“If we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another.”** Armstrong, *Muhammad* at 202.
4. Based on my conversations with many Muslims of peace and goodwill around the world, I choose to judge Islam through *their* actions and interpretations of the *Quran* and not through the actions of those who use its words to justify violence and chaos.

5. I believe that if we affirm that Islam can be seen by people of peace as a religion of peace, we are helping to assure that it is one.

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