

Scriptures rarely a significant motivating factor behind violence, say researchers

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World Trade Centre, 9/11. Credit: [slagheap](#)

Many people misunderstand the relationship between religion, scripture and violence, a new book argues. Some people worry that scriptures such as the Qur'an and the Bible fan the flames of violence in the world today, while others insist that they are inherently peaceful. According to an international team of researchers, the reality may be more complicated than either set of people think.

When acts of [violence](#) are reported in London, New York, or the Middle East, people often wonder what role religion might have played. Especially if Muslims are involved, there can also be a tendency to point fingers at the Qur'an. These knee-jerk reactions are not very helpful, the authors of "Scripture and Violence" suggest, and can lead to increased polarization in society, as well as unwarranted animosity against Muslims and people of other faiths.

Bringing together scholars from the University of Cambridge and other institutions around the world, the contributors to "Scripture and Violence" set out to clarify the relationship between violent-sounding passages from the Bible and the Qur'an and the actions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the real world. They concluded that there is much less cause for alarm than many people think.

Contrary to popular belief, scriptures are rarely a significant motivating factor when acts of violence occur, the researchers found. One researcher interviewed potential and actual ISIS recruits, and discovered that the Qur'an had not played a significant role in motivating them to join. A desire to be involved in "bad-ass-do-goodery" was much more influential.

Another researcher analyzed Muslim debates about [suicide attacks](#), and found that while some Islamic scholars had cited verses from the Qur'an to argue that suicide attacks are permissible in certain limited contexts, other Islamic scholars had used the Qur'an to argue that Muslims are prohibited from carrying out such attacks at all. These scholars all treated the Qur'an as sacred, but they disagreed about what actions were permissible. Political arguments were also much more prominent in the debates than discussion of the Qur'an, which played only a marginal role.

The authors of "Scripture and Violence" also argue that there is no need to be afraid of scary-looking scriptural passages.

"Some people think that the best strategy for preventing violence is to pretend certain scriptural passages don't exist," explains co-editor and New Testament scholar Julia Snyder. "But that's counterproductive. Instead, find out how people within these religious traditions actually understand these scriptures.

"When the Qur'an or the Bible talks about violence, religious people most often understand that as linked to specific historical contexts. Or they say that very specific conditions would have to be met for violent action to be taken. They don't think these passages call for violence now—even people who view their scriptures as the Word of God."

Clearing up misunderstandings about these issues will help overcome existing divisions within society, the researchers hope, and enable people of all faiths and none to focus on tackling urgent economic and social issues together.

"As lockdowns end and societies open up again, and as we seek to rebuild our communities together, it's important not to let unwarranted anxiety about people of other backgrounds or religious faiths get in the way," emphasizes co-editor Daniel H. Weiss from Cambridge's Faculty of Divinity. "This is a great time to let go of polarizing and inaccurate ideas about how religion and scripture actually work. In fact, within these [religious traditions](#), active grappling with tough passages can generate creative new solutions for dealing with present-day concerns."

According to the researchers, addressing fears about scripture and violence can enable people to recognize other prominent aspects of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scriptures—such as concern for the underprivileged and an emphasis on justice—and use scripture to reflect and debate together about what a good society would look like.

"Scripture and Violence" is available from 1 September 2020. Published

by Routledge, the book includes contributions from international experts on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts and traditions, who discuss key issues in interpretation of the Bible and the Qur'an, and highlight the diverse ways in which Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities understand scriptural texts. A variety of contexts are visited, from British India to Nazi Germany, from the Jerusalem Pride Parade to American evangelicals and the US military, and from CNN to European university classrooms.

More information: Scripture and Violence.

[www.routledge.com/Scripture-an ... p/book/9780815362579](http://www.routledge.com/Scripture-an...p/book/9780815362579)

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