

What can we learn from a few verses? Reflecting on *The Holy Qur'an Experiment*

Introduction

What can one learn about faith communities and their sacred texts just from hearing a few verses of scripture? What *can't* one learn? And how do people's pre-existing attitudes toward the Bible and the Quran affect how they react to verses from those texts? Those are the questions explored in this module.

The module uses a short film, *The Holy Qur'an Experiment*, as a conversation starter. In 2015, two men from the Netherlands, Sacha Harland and Alexander Spoor, disguised a Bible as a Quran, and read a few verses to people on the street. Harland and Spoor chose Bible verses they thought people in the Netherlands might find disturbing. The film, which has received almost 8 million views to date, records the reactions of some of the people they spoke with, before and after Harland and Spoor revealed that the verses were actually from the Bible, not the Quran. The verses quoted in the film come from Christian scriptures (some from the Hebrew Bible and some from the New Testament). Some of these are also sacred scriptures in Judaism, but the filmmakers chose to focus specifically on Christianity.

Watching the Film

Watch the short film (about 4 minutes long), which is available here: https://youtu.be/zEnWw_IH4tQ.

Note: The Scripture & Violence Project does not endorse the methods, content, or conclusions of the film. It is used in this module merely as a conversation starter. It is also important to note that the film does not actually tell us as much about how people in the Netherlands think about Islam, the Quran, and the Bible as the filmmakers themselves might think. For example, we do not know how the people interviewed in the film would have responded if they had been told from the beginning that the verses they were hearing were from the Bible rather than the Quran. Perhaps they would have responded in a very similar way – it is therefore not clear how much their response reflects their attitudes toward Islam or the Quran. The filmmakers also seem to have asked leading questions, with the hopes of eliciting certain types of responses, in keeping with the filmmakers' own attitudes and goals.

Digging Deeper

After watching the film, take some time to think about the following broader issues relating to scriptural texts and people's attitudes toward them:

1. Suppose someone came up to you on the street and read you a few verses from the Christian scriptures that they thought sounded problematic. How much would you actually learn about Christianity or its sacred texts just from hearing those few verses? More specifically:
 - a. Just from hearing a few verses read, what can one learn about those specific verses? And what *can't* one learn about them?
 - b. Just from hearing a few verses read, what can one learn about "the Bible" as a whole? And what *can't* one learn about "the Bible" as a whole?
 - c. Just from hearing a few verses read, what can one learn about "Christianity"? And what *can't* one learn about "Christianity"?
 - d. Do you think it is justified to conclude just from hearing a few verses that the Bible and/or Christianity are "bad" or problematic in some way? Why or why not?
2. Now suppose someone came up to you on the street and read you a few passages from the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament") or the Talmud, and said, "Judaism is bad – just look at these passages in their sacred texts!" How might you respond?
3. Finally, suppose someone came up to you on the street and read you a few verses from the Quran – the actual Quran! – and said, "Islam is bad – just look at these verses from their sacred texts!" Would your response be different than if the conversation was about the Bible, Christianity, or Judaism?
4. Now let's think further about people's attitudes toward the Bible and the Quran.
 - a. The film was made in the Netherlands. In your own country, what type of attitudes do people have toward the Bible and the Quran, and what concerns might they have about these texts?
 - b. How do you think a person's pre-existing attitudes toward the Bible and the Quran – or toward Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – might affect how they respond when someone reads them verses from those texts?
5. Did the film bring up any questions or concerns for you that you would like to discuss with the group?

Further Resources

- To think more about the issues raised in this module, see:
 - o The Scripture & Violence Project's short film *7 Tips for Grappling with Scary-Looking Scriptures*, available at: www.scriptureandviolence.org/learn-online.
 - o Julia Snyder (2021). "Introduction: Scripture and Violence – Is there a bomb in this text?" In Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-21.
- When *The Holy Qur'an Experiment* was first posted, the news program Russia Today reported on it. See <https://youtu.be/5EDtdPQIXwU>.

Summary of Key Takeaways

- Hearing a few scriptural verses read out of context tells us much less about faith communities and their sacred texts than one might think. It therefore does not provide a solid basis for making sweeping judgments about Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, or about the Bible and the Quran.
- A person's pre-existing attitudes toward the Bible and the Quran – or toward Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – might affect how they respond when someone reads them verses from those texts, either positively or negatively.