

Further Information for Leaders and Facilitators

General Guidance

General tips and guidance about how to organize an event and facilitate discussion are contained in the *Scripture & Violence Event Leader's Guide*, available at www.scriptureandviolence.org.

While the current module can be used on its own, it may help the quality of your discussion to have your group watch the introductory videos on our website first.

Tips and Guidance on Discussion Questions

Here are some tips and guidance on the questions posed in this module. This guidance is not meant as a set of “answers” that participants need to reach, but is designed to help leaders feel confident facilitating discussion. Leaders do not need to be “experts.” The group can have a stimulating discussion, even if some questions arise that no one in the group is able to answer.

Participants should generally be allowed to discuss freely. Leaders should draw upon the material in these notes primarily when the conversation gets stuck. Often, group members will come up with these ideas themselves, as well as many other interesting thoughts and questions that are not discussed below.

Analyzing the Home Office Letter

1. *The Home Office letter and the Bible*
 - a. *How much does the Home Office employee say about the various Bible verses cited in the letter?*
 - b. *How do you think the Home Office employee might have come across the particular Bible verses cited in the letter? (Note: The web addresses printed in the transcript were included in the original letter.)*
 - c. *Based on the letter, do you think the Home Office employee has extensive familiarity with the Bible and its use in Christian communities? Why or why not?*

Question 1 draws attention to how the Bible is used in the letter. As most participants will realize, the Home Office letter cites the Bible in an unusual manner. It is not customary in any religious community to provide web addresses when one cites scriptural verses – which suggests that the Home Office employee may have found these particular verses by using an internet search engine or website, rather than through their own knowledge or reading of the Bible. Participants can discuss what keywords the Home Office employee may have searched for to find the verses that are cited. Participants who are familiar with the Bible may also know that some of the verses cited do not seem to encourage violence at all when one reads

them in their original context. (In Matthew 10:34, for example, the “sword” is metaphorical.)

2. *Evaluating the overall argument of the Home Office letter*

- a. *It seems likely that the asylum seeker requested asylum on the grounds that he or she had converted to Christianity and was no longer safe in his or her country of origin as a result. The Home Office employee seems to have been concerned that this was not a truthful claim. What “evidence” does the Home Office employee provide in the letter to try to show that the asylum seeker’s claim is not trustworthy?*
- b. *Do you think this “evidence” actually shows that the asylum seeker’s claim is not trustworthy? Why or why not?*

Question 2 invites participants to analyze the overall argument of the Home Office letter, and to think about potential problems with it. The key question is: Does citing these Bible verses really demonstrate that the asylum seeker is not a sincere convert to Christianity? There are two major problems with the Home Office employee’s argument:

- The Home Office employee was probably doubtful that the asylum seeker was a sincere convert to Christianity. For the Home Office employee, the sticking point seems to relate to the asylum seeker’s stated motivations for converting, which appear to have related to the idea that Christianity is “peaceful.” The Home Office employee seems to argue that Christianity is not “peaceful,” and therefore that the asylum seeker had not been truthful about his or her conversion. This argument does not make sense, however. All that matters is whether the asylum seeker *thinks* that Christianity is “peaceful,” not whether Christianity actually *is* “peaceful.” (And since many Christians assert that Christianity is “peaceful,” it is entirely plausible that the asylum seeker might think so.)
- A secondary problem with the Home Office employee’s argument relates to the Bible. Citing verses in the Bible with violent imagery (e.g., “swords”) does not actually show that *Christianity* is not “peaceful.” The Home Office employee’s argument implies that the nature of “Christianity” can be discovered simply by reading isolated verses from the Bible. This idea is fundamentally flawed. For more on this topic, check out some of the introductory videos available at www.scriptureandviolence.org/videos, especially *10 Questionable Assumptions about Religion, Scripture, and Violence* and *7 Tips for Grappling with Scary-Looking Scriptures*.

3. *Does the Home Office employee's letter challenge the notion that Islam is primarily about "violence, rage and revenge"?*

Question 3 draws attention to the fact that the letter questions the idea that Christianity is "peaceful," but does not challenge the notion that *Islam* is "about violence."

Evaluating Responses to the Home Office Letter

4. *Below is a list of common problems that are often found in statements about scripture and religious traditions – even statements made by well-meaning people. Why might each of these be problematic?*
- a. *Implying that just by reading a religious tradition's sacred texts, one can learn everything one needs to know about that religious tradition (e.g., "Judaism," "Christianity," "Islam"), and about how individuals who identify with that tradition understand it themselves.*
 - b. *Citing a few select verses from the Bible or the Quran to support one's argument, without discussing other verses of the Bible or the Quran that might seem to pull in a different direction.*
 - c. *Misrepresenting the argument of the person one is responding to. Responding to something which the other person did not actually claim.*
 - d. *Making absolute or exaggerated claims that do not accurately reflect the complexity of the situation.*
 - e. *Responding to concerns someone expresses about New Testament passages, without addressing concerns they express about passages from the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament.*
 - f. *Challenging problematic ideas someone has expressed about one religious tradition, without responding to problematic ideas they have expressed – or may hold – about other religious traditions.*

To help participants gain an understanding of the common problems listed in Question 4, it can help to spend a few minutes thinking together about why each of them might be problematic. Possible answers could include (but are not limited to):

- (a) Just from reading scriptural passages on their own, one cannot learn how those passages are actually understood and interpreted in religious communities. In addition, scripture is just one factor among others that shapes a religious tradition. Also, individuals within a religious tradition often have a wide variety of different understandings of that tradition. Some individuals have a very limited knowledge of scripture, and it may not play much of a role at all in shaping their understanding of the tradition.

- (b) Both the Bible and the Quran contain a wide variety of material, originating in a variety of different times and contexts, and addressing many different situations. Reading one verse on its own – or even a few verses – does not always give an accurate picture of everything the Bible or the Quran has to say on a particular topic.
- (c) Misrepresenting the other person’s argument results in people talking past each other, and is not conducive to fruitful dialogue.
- (d) When it comes to human behavior or religious traditions, claims involving words like “always” and “never” – or other language conveying absolute or exaggerated ideas – are often inaccurate. Making inaccurate claims is not helpful when one wants to clarify a situation.
- (e) Defending the New Testament without addressing concerns about the Hebrew Bible can sometimes give the impression that the Hebrew Bible is problematic in ways that the New Testament is not.
- (f) Challenging problematic ideas someone has expressed about one religious tradition (e.g., Christianity), in a context whether other traditions have also been mentioned (e.g., Islam), can sometimes create the impression that while the person may be wrong about the one tradition (e.g., Christianity), they may be right about the other(s) (e.g., Islam).

5. *Which of the common problems listed above apply to the Home Office letter?*

The Home Office employee cites a few Bible verses in order to challenge the asylum seeker’s claim to have converted to Christianity. The letter’s argument illustrates both (a) and (b). The letter implies that one can learn that “Christianity” is not “peaceful” – as well as how the individual asylum seeker should understand Christianity – just by reading Bible verses. The letter also selectively cites a few superficially violent-sounding verses, without discussing other verses of the Bible that emphasize peacefulness.

6. *Which of the common problems listed above apply to each of the four responses?*

Discuss the four responses to the Home Office case one at a time, asking which of the common problems (a – f) might apply.

The **Deaf Preacher** seems to take the same approach to the Bible as the Home Office employee. The Deaf Preacher (a) tries to back up a claim about “Christianity” by referring to Bible verses, and (b) treats select verses as representative of “what the Bible is,” without discussing other verses of the Bible that might seem to pull in a different direction. This results in a “war of verses” that would be unlikely to change the mind of the Home Office employee. The idea that “Christianity is a religion of peace” is also arguably an exaggeration

(d), and the Deaf Preacher only responds to the Home Office letter’s ideas about Christianity, without mentioning Islam (f).

Among other issues, **Bernus Maximus** (a) seems to imply that one can learn about “Christianity” just by reading the Bible – and reading it without reference to the variety of ways in which Christians over the centuries have interpreted and applied it. Bernus Maximus also (e) defends Revelation without talking about the other Bible verses cited in the Home Office letter, and (d) makes a rather exaggerated claim about the content of the Bible: “not a single verse,” “actually the opposite.” Of course, there was no such thing as “Christianity” when most of the Bible was written, including most of the New Testament, so in a certain sense, the Bible doesn’t really “tell Christians what to do” very often. However, if one asked about what the Bible tells “the people of God” to do – a more relevant question – one can hardly say that every single verse in the Bible conveys the idea “don’t harm anyone.”

Jeff Heslep’s tweet (c) misrepresents the content of the Home Office letter, which does not present Islam as “good.” In fact, it seems likely that the Home Office employee has a negative view of Islam. Jeff Heslep also (d) makes an exaggerated claim, using the word “NEVER.” The claim is also inaccurate. In actual fact, devout Christians have sometimes carried out acts of violence in the name of Jesus.

One potential issue with the response of **the Bishop of Durham** – at least as it is presented on the Church of England website – is the explicit defense of the book of Revelation (e). This focus could give the impression that the passages from Exodus and Leviticus cited in the Home Office letter are somehow more worrisome than the passages from Revelation. Are they? In addition, the fact that the Bishop explicitly defends Christianity without mentioning Islam (f) – at least in this version of his remarks – could make it sound as if the Home Office employee has misrepresented Christianity, but not Islam. The tendency to focus on defending Christianity, without addressing problematic ideas about other religious traditions, is a common issue when Christians discuss religion, scripture, and violence.