

The Bible and Violence: A Case at the UK Home Office

Introduction

In the UK, asylum requests are processed by a government department known as the Home Office. In this module, we will discuss a case from 2019, in which a Home Office employee cited the Bible and violence to justify denying an asylum request – illustrating the real-world impact of common assumptions about religion, scripture, and violence.

The case attracted media attention when the asylum seeker’s lawyer, Nathan Stevens, tweeted a photo of part of the Home Office decision letter.^a In this module, we will first analyze what the Home Office employee wrote, then look at some public responses to it. We will think about how each person uses scripture to make their argument, and we will look out for common logical flaws. As we will see, even well-intentioned people can still end up saying problematic things about scripture and religion. Learning to recognize these is the first step to making sure we don’t fall into the same trap ourselves.

Background to the Case Study

In order to receive asylum in the UK, an applicant has to state why it is unsafe to remain in the country where they hold citizenship. A Home Office employee is then assigned to evaluate whether the information provided by the applicant is accurate, and whether the UK government’s conditions for granting asylum have been met. Has the applicant been truthful? And would they really be in danger in their country of origin?

Not all details of the 2019 case have been made public. Based on the available evidence, however, it seems likely that this particular 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. As part of the application, the asylum seeker also seems to have said that he or she converted to Christianity after discovering it was a “peaceful” religion. The Home Office employee assigned to the case would have been tasked with determining whether the asylum seeker was telling the truth, and with evaluating whether the asylum seeker’s country of origin was an unsafe place for a person in that situation to be.

Excerpt from the Home Office Letter

First read the excerpt from the Home Office letter on page 2. This is a transcript of the photo posted on Twitter by the asylum seeker’s lawyer.

^a Tweet, 19 March 2019. @nathstevens, pic.twitter.com/R1wAtHMNwH (accessed 16 September 2020).

...differences between Islam and the Christian faith: “In Islam there is violence, rage and revenge. In Christianity in the contrary it is talking about peace, forgiveness and kindness” (AIR 65).^b

Consideration has first been given to the Bible. In Leviticus, chapter 26,^c God states: “You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus+26&version=NIV>, accessed 14 February 2019).^d In Matthew, chapter 10,^e Jesus states: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+10&version=KJV>, accessed 14 February 2019). In Exodus, chapter 34,^f the Lord says to Moses: “Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2034&version=NIV>, accessed 14 February 2019).

Similarly, the book of Revelation is filled with imagery of revenge, destruction, death and violence. For example, in chapter 2,^g it states: “I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%202&version=NIV>, accessed 14 February 2019). In chapter 9,^h it states: “And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes. During those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them’, and in chapter 14ⁱ an angel proclaims: ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+9&version=NIV>, accessed 14 February 2019). These examples are inconsistent with your claim^j that you converted to Christianity after discovering it is a “peaceful” religion, as opposed to Islam which contains violence rage and revenge.

^b This citation appears to be attributed to the asylum seeker.

^c Leviticus 26:7-8

^d Note: The web addresses from Bible Gateway were included in the original letter.

^e Matthew 10:34

^f Exodus 34:12-13

^g Revelation 2:22-23

^h Revelation 9:3-6

ⁱ Revelation 14:7

^j I.e., the asylum seeker’s claim.

Analyzing the Home Office Letter

Analyze the Home Office letter using the following questions as a guide:

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?
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?
3. Does the Home Office employee’s letter challenge the notion that Islam is primarily about “violence, rage and revenge”?

Evaluating Responses to the Home Office Letter

Attempts to respond to problematic assertions about religion, scripture and violence can often be problematic themselves, as some public responses to the Home Office case illustrate. We will now consider four responses to the case that were posted on the internet shortly after the Home Office letter was made public. Read through the responses printed on the next page, then answer the questions. The goal of this exercise is to learn to identify common problems in statements people make, which is the first step to avoiding accidentally making problematic statements oneself.

Twitter Replies to Nathan Stevens' Tweet:

The Deaf Preacher (22 March 2019): “The person that said that Christianity isn’t a religion of peace, clearly shows they lack both in understanding and knowledge. love thy God, Love thy neighbor, love your enemies and bless them that persecute you. If at all possible live peaceably with everyone. That the Bible.”^k

Bernus Maximus (30 March 2019): “There’s not a single verse in the Bible telling Christians to harm anyone. It’s actually the opposite. The verses they use in Revelation are in the future, & refer to angels (& demons), not Christians. Horrible misinterpretation.”^l

Jeff Heslep (31 March 2019): “The Home Office must be Controlled by Rabid Muslims. Christianity Bad and Islam is Good? Most Terrorism in the World today is being done by devout followers of Prophet Muhammad. True followers of Jesus would NEVER use Terrorism in the name of Jesus.”^m

^k This tweet is no longer available online. Accessed 10 June 2019. This tweet cites the Bible. See Deuteronomy 6:4, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:35-40 (“Love your God,” “Love your neighbor”); Matthew 5:44 (“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”); Romans 12:18 (“If it is possible, ... live at peace with everyone”).

^l @bernusmax, <https://twitter.com/bernusmax/status/1112042864685580294> (accessed 18 September 2020).

^m @HeslepJeff, <https://twitter.com/HeslepJeff/status/1112366718565912576> (accessed 18 September 2020).

Statement from the Bishop of Durham, Church of England

“The Bishop of Durham, the Rt Rev Paul Butler, said the case shows the Home Office must radically change its understanding of all religious beliefs. He said: ‘I am extremely concerned that a Government department could determine the future of another human being based on such a profound misunderstanding of the texts and practices of faith communities. To use extracts from the Book of Revelation to argue that Christianity is a violent religion is like arguing that a Government report on the impact of climate change is advocating drought and flooding.’”ⁿ

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.
5. Which of the common problems listed above apply to the Home Office letter?
6. Which of the common problems listed above apply to each of the four responses?

ⁿ Church of England Media Centre (2019), “Response to Home Office letter regarding Iranian asylum seeker.” 21 March. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/response-home-office-letter-regarding-iranian-asylum-seeker> (accessed 16 September 2020).

Further Reading

Note: The Scripture & Violence Project does not endorse all of the perspectives voiced in the articles listed below. Readers are encouraged to analyze them critically, using the same techniques applied to the Home Office letter.

Articles about the Home Office asylum case:

- May Bulman (2019). “Home Office refuses Christian convert asylum by quoting Bible passages that ‘prove Christianity is not peaceful.’” *The Independent*, 20 March. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/home-office-christian-convert-asylum-refused-bible-not-peaceful-a8832026.html (accessed 16 September 2020).
- Anna Schaverien (2019). “Rejecting Asylum Claim, U.K. Quotes Bible to Say Christianity Is Not ‘Peaceful.’” *New York Times*, 21 March. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/europe/britain-asylum-seeker-christianity.html (accessed 16 September 2020).
- Simon Ross Valentine (2019). “How to test asylum-seekers’ faith.” *Church Times*, 12 July. Available at: www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/12-july/comment/opinion/how-to-test-asylum-seekers-faith (accessed 16 September 2020).

A similar Swedish case:

- Christian Mölk (2019). “Swedish Migration Board’s bizarre questions to Christian converts.” [Blog] 25 February. Available at: www.christianmolk.se/2019/02/swedish-migration-boards-bizarre-questions-to-christian-converts (accessed 16 September 2020).

Summary of Key Takeaways

- Problematic assumptions about scripture and violence sometimes play a role in governmental decision-making.
- People who talk about religion, scripture, and violence are not always knowledgeable about the topic.
- Responses to problematic assertions about scripture and violence are sometimes problematic themselves.
- Seeking to respond to problematic assertions about Islam can sometimes result in problematic assertions about Christianity, and vice versa.