

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, or to read some of our other introductory resources. Scriptural interpretation is a complex process, and the relationship between scriptural texts and real-world actions is multi-faceted. Our introductory resources give a brief overview of key concepts and ideas.

Tips and Guidance on Module Questions

Here are some tips and guidance on the questions posed in this module.

In order to allow participants to make their own discoveries, it is best to read the scriptural passage and discuss the questions in an open-ended manner first, before referencing these notes. Often, group members will come up with these ideas themselves, as well as many other interesting thoughts and questions that are not discussed below.

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.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Questions 1-5 are designed to help participants read the text carefully and get familiar with its contents. They can be answered simply by reading the text, without any background knowledge.

1. *According to verse 1, Muhammad and his companions had made a treaty with some other people. With whom?*

Question 1 draws attention to the fact that the text seems to refer to a specific historical situation – something involving a treaty with “idolaters” (*mushrikun*).

Participants may notice that it is not clear from the passage exactly what treaty this was, between whom, what its terms and conditions were, etc. It is best not to try to come up with “answers” to these questions at this point in the discussion, but simply to notice what is not stated in the text. This lack of detail will be discussed again in Question 5.

2. *What does verse 3 say about the treaty?*

Question 3 highlights further references to a “treaty” in the passage. In verse 3, Muhammad and his community are told they will be released from their treaty obligations, and the “idolaters” with whom they have a treaty are invited to “repent.”

3. *Verses 4-6 say that Muhammad and his companions should not take action against some people. Against whom should they not take action?*

Question 3 draws attention to the fact that the passage only grants permission to take action against certain people: certain “idolaters” who had a treaty with Muhammad, and whose treaty has been ended. (The references in verses 2-3 to “those who defy [God],” “repenting,” “turning away,” and “ignoring [God]” suggest that the “idolaters” concerned had acted in breach of the treaty obligations in some manner. This is also indirectly suggested by verse 4, which says to honor treaties with those who have honored their treaties and “those who have not supported anyone against you.”)

Verses 4-6 list a number of types of people against whom Muhammad and his companions should *not* take action. This includes some people who are still “idolaters,” suggesting that “idolatry” itself is not the decisive factor for action to be taken. (Historically, Muhammad and his companions do not seem to have taken this passage as license immediately to conduct action against all “idolaters” in their surroundings – they continued to uphold treaties with polytheists.)

Participants may also notice that the passage does not say whether action is only to be taken against healthy adult men, or also against women, children, the infirm, etc.

4. *In verse 5, permission is given to Muhammad and his companions to take action against certain people. What possible actions against these people are mentioned?*

Participants may notice that the passage does not provide concrete details about what it means to “kill,” “seize,” “restrict,” and “watch out” for people. What sort of “restricting” is to be done? After people are “seized,” are they to be imprisoned, ransomed, enslaved, etc., either temporarily or permanently? And what does “wherever you find the idolaters” mean? Anywhere in the world, or anywhere within a certain geographical area, that Muhammad and his companions might already have assumed without being told?

5. *The text does not provide full information about the historical situation being discussed. What information is missing? How might this lead to a range of different interpretations of the passage?*

Participants will probably already have identified many ambiguities and gaps in the text. These very same ambiguities and gaps have led to considerable debate among Muslim commentators about the passage. For example, Muslim commenta-

tors have asked what treaty the passage refers to, and who the “idolaters” are. Some commentators have suggested that it was the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, which agreed to a ten-year truce between Muhammad and the people of Mecca, after years of hostility. The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah also involved the tribes allied with each of these groups, including the Banu Bakr, who were allied with the Meccans, and the Banu Khuza‘ah, who were allied with Muhammad. Not long after the treaty was signed, the Banu Bakr broke the terms of the treaty by attacking the Banu Khuza‘ah, with the aid of the Meccans. If this is the treaty referred to in our passage, the “idolaters” in question would be the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. The majority of commentators, however, say that the passage was revealed on a different occasion, perhaps a year later. The latter commentators disagree about which treaties and idolatrous tribes are referred to in the text – it could refer to almost any of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula.

Commentators also debate precisely what actions were permitted after the “four months” were over, and whether treaties with all polytheists were declared as having come to an end by the passage, or only those that the other party had actively broken through treachery.

Participants can also be encouraged to think about whether there might have been additional restrictions on the community’s actions that are simply not mentioned in this passage. For example, the passage does not say that action is not permitted against women, children and the infirm, but perhaps this was taken for granted, especially given other passages in the Quran and Muhammad’s own practices.

Digging Deeper

6. *What was your initial reaction to the passage? Did your response to the text change as you read it more closely and discussed it with others?*

The passage may make some participants feel uncomfortable – especially the first time they read it – and it is helpful to acknowledge that openly, and to talk about why they might react that way to the passage. Our initial reactions are often conditioned by preexisting assumptions about a particular religious group or religion in general, which may make us only see certain parts of a passage – e.g., the word “kill” – without noticing other parts – e.g., the fact that the passage deals with a particular historical situation. At the end of the discussion, some participants may still feel uncomfortable with certain elements of the passage – and that is fine.

7. *One could argue that the passage is primarily about “how to engage with treaty-breakers.” Imagine a situation today in which one country violates a treaty or agreement with another country. (For example, imagine that the US launches a military attack against the UK, or that a country starts developing nuclear weapons after promising not to do so.) In what types of situations would you consider it justified for the aggrieved party to carry out any acts of violence?*

Many participants probably do not object to the sorts of actions permitted by the passage when carried out in the context of modern nation states, and Question 7 is designed to help draw attention to that.

While some participants may have initially assumed that the passage was about “religion,” Question 7 may help them recognize that it is actually about politics. At the time of the Quran, “Muslims” had religious convictions and practices, but they were also a political entity – a sort of state – who interacted with other tribes and groups in Arabia *as a political entity*.

8. *Suppose you read the following on a website: “Muslim citizens of Europe and the US can’t be trusted. No matter how peaceful they may seem outwardly, they believe in the Quran, which commands Muslims to kill non-Muslims wherever they find them – just look at Quran 9:5.” How would you respond?*

The scenario imagined in Question 9 is one participants might actually encounter – Quran 9:5 is often invoked in this sort of statement. In their response, participants can make use of general insights about Muslims and the role of scripture in contemporary Muslim communities, as well as referring back to what they have learned about Quran 9:1-6 in the session. Possible elements of a response could include the following (among other ideas):

- Muslims over the centuries, and today, do not seem to have interpreted the passage as a general “license to kill” – that does not seem to be what “believing in the Quran” actually means, as far as history indicates.
- The passage seems to deal with a specific historical situation from the life of the Prophet Muhammad.
- It is not clear that the passage is a command to all “Muslims” at all times, as the statement on the website implies.
- It is problematic to cite 9:5 without taking the rest of the passage into account, including the limitations it places on what action may be taken, and against whom.
- The passage does not actually speak about “non-Muslims” in a general sense. The Quran does not consider Jews and Christians to be “idolaters,” for example.
- The passage relates to treaty-breaking.

- The Bible contains similar sorts of passages, but the website does not say that one shouldn't trust Christians and Jews.
- A great deal of violence today is carried out by the armies, police forces, etc. of modern nation-states, including the US and European countries. It is misleading to focus exclusively on Muslims.

This exercise can be a platform for discussing the challenges involved in drawing guidance from the Quran – or other scriptures – for life today, especially given the historical specificity of many scriptural passages.

Participants may not know exactly what guidance Muslims over the centuries have actually drawn from Quran 9:5. The best strategy is to ask some Muslims and find out. If that is not possible, participants can conduct the following thought experiment: Supposing for the sake of argument that Muslims generally think this verse “commands Muslims to kill non-Muslims wherever they find them,” what would one expect to see if one looked at Muslim communities in history and today? And is that what history actually shows? (If this is not what history actually shows, it suggests that Muslims generally *do not* think the verse “commands Muslims to kill non-Muslims wherever they find them,” as the “website” statement claims.)

Participants can also look for discrepancies between the wording of the “website” statement and the actual wording of the Quranic passage. Claims that are made about the Quran often contain this sort of subtle misrepresentation of the content of the Quran.

Similarly, participants can be asked what assumptions about Muslims and the Quran are evident in the “website” statement, and what the person who wrote such a statement might be trying to accomplish.