

Title: *Fitna*: A Christian response to an anti-Islamic film
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Geert Wilder's short film *Fitna* aims to shock, and succeeds in doing so. The fifteen minute film was posted on the Internet in late March. In the days since, it has disappeared and reappeared for various reasons, including threats to the staff of the video-sharing website on which it was hosted. Named after the Arabic word for schism, the format of the film consists of a simple pattern. A verse of the Qur'an apparently advocating violence is quoted, followed by footage of Muslim preachers exhorting related violent action and real world examples of corresponding acts of violence. The film-maker's central message is clearly seen in the conclusion: the Qur'an supports acts of violence and terrorism, and Muslims must address this by removing the offending verses.

There is much here that is disturbing in both content and approach. The violent episodes are gut-wrenching. The representation of the Qur'anic verses makes Islam appear unambiguously supportive of terrorism and brutality - certainly the preachers shown in the film read the Qur'an in such a way as to endorse violence. Yet the graphical statistics are without context. Geert Wilder's extreme right wing politics are also problematic. There is however one crucial question raised: Does the Qur'an indeed promote violence in the name of Islam?

At first glance the Qur'anic verses quoted seem clear in what they advocate. For example *Fitna* quotes Qur'an 47:4:

Therefore when ye meet the unbelievers, smite at their necks and when ye have caused a bloodbath among them bind a bond firmly on them...

Footage follows of hit lists of enemies of Islam and brutal attacks on individuals such as Theo van Gogh, the murdered Dutch film director and vocal critic of Islam. However there are multiple factors to consider in interpreting a verse in the Qur'an. The most obvious is context. In the case of 47:4 classical commentators such as Ibn Kathir universally explain the historical context as military (the Battle of Badr) . The verse itself even continues:

...and [confer] grace upon them afterwards or ransom [them] until the war lays down its burdens.

If the context is an historical military battle, and if the command is not simply towards a bloodbath, but to honourable, if brutal, military ethics then things are a bit more complicated than they seem in the movie.

There are other interpretive questions too. Is this Qur'anic injunction situational in application? Is this verse tempered by other teaching? Has it been 'abrogated' by other verses? Is it metaphorical or symbolic? Are the interpretations taken by teachers in the movie representative of the Muslim scholarly community? Prof Mohamed Elmasry, national president of the Canadian Islamic Congress notes the difficulties:

For the last 1400 years, Muslims and their religious scholars have dealt – and are still dealing with – the important question of how much of the Qur'an is binding on Muslims at all times and how much of its teachings apply only to the age of the Prophet Muhammad and the particular circumstances in which he and his followers lived. This is a continually difficult question...

The shock of the movie, and the subtlety of Qur'anic interpretation leads me to two challenges: one for non-Muslim observers, one for Islam. For the non-Muslim encountering any anti-Islamic polemic such as *Fitna*, it is important to be slow to adopt the rhetoric without first questioning your understanding of Islam and the Qur'an. Ask whether an Islamist reading of the Qur'an is authentic. Pick up a Qur'an and read it for yourself. Ask your Muslim neighbour how they read these verses in the Qur'an. Importantly, don't judge Islam by its worst advocates. Comparing the worst evil perpetrated in the name of Islam with the best good done in the name of Christ (or vice versa) achieves nothing. The argument of *Fitna* must be established or dismissed by the Qur'an.

But the challenge for Islam is that this may not be a simple task. To follow up on Prof Elmasry's comments, if the debate over the current application of so called 'sword' verses in the Qur'an is still unresolved, then it is not at all clear that Islamist readings of the Qur'an can easily be dismissed as aberrant. Even the most modernist of Islamic scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr agrees the Qur'an endorses violence in the name of Islam, even if it is only in self-defence .

What then does it mean to speak of the Qur'an as a message of peace, when there is no clear agreement on what is 'self- defence', (especially in the days of pre-emptive strikes)? Who are 'the innocent'? What is the line between 'war' and 'terrorism' for a powerless people? Muslims are unlikely to adopt Wilder's suggestion of removing selected verses from the Qur'an, but the challenge is to outline clearly whether Islamists are reading it incorrectly.

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