

# THE QUR'AN, ISLAM'S BATTLE-FLAG

Recently several new-readers of the Qur'an have remarked to me their surprise at finding it so **polemic**, warlike, embattled, adversarial--the opposition ("unbelievers," [Lat.] "infidels") seeming to be almost ever-present in the authorial consciousness. It is as though "the Book" were an army's battle-standard (an image I can't recall ever having seen, & that popped into my mind this morning).

1 Among the world scripture's, the only parallel I can think of is "(The) Great War" (Sanskrit, "Maha-bharata") --- after the Vedas, *the* classic of Hinduism; & in it is the "Blessed's-Song" ("Bhagavad-Gita"), which begins with a battle-scene in which the deity, Krishna, encourages a devotee, Arjuna, to kill Arjuna's cousin (but it's a book of divine-human love, *the* classic of bhakti yoga).

Contrast: In the Gita, warfare is spiritualized: in the Qur'an, war is almost exclusively physical "struggle" (Ar., "jihad," which in later Islam, especially Sufism, is more spiritual than physical conflict: it's the soul's warfare against evil & its temptations, & the meaning "spiritual discipline" comes to dominate the semantic domain).

2 In the history of religions, the outstanding example of the religious use of a battle-standard is Constantine's placing the Cross on his battle-standard\* after seeing, in vision, the Latin words "In hoc signo vinces" ("By this sign [the Cross, which appeared in the sky], conquer"). He went on to conquer Rome, establish himself as emperor, &--when northern pagans were pressing down upon Rome--moved his government to Istanbul (New Rome, Constantinople).

3 Constantine: Bernard Lewis, world-acknowledged authority on Islam & the Middle East, is the source of a pregnant gnome: "Muhammad started out being his own Constantine." Christianity took almost three centuries to produce a political-military-religious chief parallel to the one Islam had from the start!

Contrasts: (1) Muhammad was a success, his kingdom coming by his mouth & sword-hand: Jesus was a failure, died disappointed (the Resurrection was a divine surprise): from the start, Christian thinking has had to explain tragedy (the Cross) as essential to triumph (the Resurrection, the kingdom "built without [human] hands" [2Cor.5.1])). Judaism & Christianity have resources for living under Islam: Muslims find no help in the Qur'an for living under Jews, Christians, or any other people. The Bible was written by losers (enslaved & exiled Jews; Jesus & his disciples); the Qur'an wasn't. (2) Early Christianity spread from the bottom up, with no military help: Islam began sword-in-hand (Muhammad's Medina army taking over Mecca). Christianity's formation-period was nonviolent, so early-Christian writings (NT, Apostolic Fathers, et al) buffer OT violence: all the formative Islamic literature assumes coercion as a proper means of community creation-&-maintenance.

4 Doctrinally (Qur'anically), Muslims can't handle the reality, or even the thought, of an Islamic land's becoming nonIslamic: once Islamic, always Islamic; so the existence of the State of Israel is, on any terms, unacceptable, indigestible, blasphemous--& Muslims are to see to its destruction by whatever means it takes.

Why? Because every land taken by Muslims is a divine gift in perpetuity, & Muslims are to see to it that God's land-gifts don't fall into nonMuslim hands. I adduce here just one passage, 2.33.25ff: God "brought down" Jews & Christians ("the People of the Book") "from their fortresses and cast terror in their hearts; some you slew, some you made captive [i.e., took as slaves]. And He bequeathed upon you their lands, their habitations, and their possessions." No qualms here about using the sword to spread the Message by land-acquisition; quite the opposite: triumphalism. The Mediterranean basin & most of the Middle East was Christian, but--being militarily unprepared for the Muslim onslaught--became Muslim-dominated in less than a century.

5 But the now-dominating "land" is digital, & it's almost entirely nonMuslim.

In Muslim lands the sky belonged to God, the birds, & the muezzins' calls to prayer. Now it belongs to God, the birds, the muezzins' calls to prayer, & the West's electromagnetic waves (radio/television/computer) & (actually in some places, potentially in all) military aircraft. Islam is in multiple **crisis**--awareness of technological inferiority, intellectually-doctrinally confused, emotionally angry (&, in the case of the fundamentalists, enraged--some to the point of violence: 9/11 etc.).

Scores of times the Qur'an mentions what has been "sent down" from above, viz. the written Qur'an (an exact copy of the Original, in heaven). But now the competing send-downs are the West's nonMuslim messages--& bombs.

6 In #3103.8 I raised the possibility of productive **trialoging** among Jews, Christians, & Muslims. Extremely difficult. Rodney King said "Can't we all just get along?" after being beaten up after having disobeyed two reasonable requests of police officers. Last night on PBS (Moyer's "NOW"), when Riverside Church's Jas.Forbes said something like what Rodney King had said (though without referring to R.K.), Rich.Jn.Neuhaus called it "sentimental hogwash." The Qur'an (1.5.55ff) warns, "Take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other." And many passages say the Qur'an is perfect & complete: "no one can change the words of God" (1.6.30ff), & you're "cursed" (1.2.80ff) if you doubt any of it. (Some other references to this rigidity: 1.4.80ff [no "inconsistency"], 1.6.35ff ["neglected nothing"], 1.6.115 ["perfect are the words of your Lord"], 1.10.65f ["There is no changing the words of God," & disagreeers are guilty of "surmise" & "conjecting"], 2.32.1 ["nothing doubtful" in the Qur'an], 2.8.5.21 [a threat: the Qur'an is "guarded"].)

7 But hope is on the way! Courageous scholars, facing down the threat of fatwas, are publishing historical-critical treatises on the Qur'an. Just a few facts to finish off this Thinksheet: (1) No firm text till at least the 8th century. (Quotes in the AD 691 CE Jerusalem mosque differ from the present "perfect" text.) (2) All early MSS (manuscripts) are unpointed: no vowels. As I had to read unpointed OT (Hebrew/Aramaic) texts, I know the extreme difficulty, in many cases, of settling on an agreed meaning. In Arabic, if you add one small diacritical mark to the root for "white raisins" it becomes "virgins": which are Paradise-promised to faithful Muslim males? (3) The Christian-created historical-critical hermeneutics helped open the West to "modernism," its present freedoms, including religious liberty. Could happen to Islam.

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS  
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville MA 02632

