

# Ponder the Gharqad Tree

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (October 2022)



*Algerian Interior*, Eugène Delacroix, 1832-34

*“So join me brothers in fighting the infidels until we are victorious ...”*

These were the first words I heard recited at a school assembly in Oman. I assumed they were from the Koran, as Koranic recitations were given each morning, but this was the

first time they had been translated into English (so it would be more correct to say these were the first recited words I understood). This was my first international teaching post and, due to a late decision to teach abroad, I had started slightly later than most of the other teachers. As I looked around at the pupils and staff, nobody was batting an eyelid. Not even the Western staff. No eyebrows raised, no murmurs or stirrings. The boy finished his recitation. A few words were said by a member of the senior management team and everybody went off to class.

I pondered speaking to the head teacher, also from the Britain, about the inappropriateness of the quote and the mind-set such verses engendered in the mostly Arab pupils. But that proved a fleeting consideration. This was not England, Europe or the USA but Oman. I was new to the country and the culture and, I suspected, would have been met with surprise at merely raising the issue. As time went by, I knew I had made the right decision to say nothing.

Not long afterwards, I got hold of an English translation of the Koran, provided by what I can only describe as a proselytizing organisation which maintained an office on the first floor of a tourist site. The site was an architectural example of an old Omani house and madrasa, open to the public but with the main hall still being used for pre-booked meetings. The building was interesting but it was very hot and as I wandered upstairs inadvertently came across the office. I was invited in, out of the sun, and offered tea. My hosts were very genial and customary dates were also offered. One of the men was a young Englishman by origin, who said he had visited the country nine years previously and decided to stay. He explained that he felt life was, "More genuine here," and the pace of life healthier. He had converted to Islam and worked at the office but when I inquired into what he did exactly, his answer was vague and evasive.

It was one of those pleasant, serendipitous encounters (where

else would I get an English translation of the Koran in Muscat) on a hot afternoon and on departure I was given some literature in English, including the Koran. Upon returning to my apartment, my immediate thought was to locate the passage the boy had read aloud during assembly just a few weeks earlier. I could have searched for it on the internet but I was initially rather paranoid undertaking such research in Arabia, where internet activity is heavily monitored.

I couldn't find an exact match for what the boy had recited during that morning assembly and cannot remember the exact words after *infidels* but his first eight disturbed me so much I wondered if there were indeed passages encouraging war against non-believers in Islam's holy text. The closest, although certainly not the only command for aggression towards non-believers, I found was verse 9:29:

"Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture—until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled." (Koran 9:29).

A few months later, returning to Britain for a couple of weeks over the winter break, I bought a copy of Robert Spencer's *Religion of Peace?* Which I could not put down. Not the first half anyway. This part of the book meticulously lists and discusses violent passages in the Koran, of which there are many, and through this textual analysis makes a convincing argument for the violent and oppressive nature of Islamic doctrine. I then read Ibn Warraq's *Why I am not a Muslim*; the pseudonym, Ibn Warraq, chosen by the author to conceal his identity, fearing reprisals for his work in the wake of the Rushdie affair (which, as recent events have highlighted, lamentably continues).

Warraq turned his back on Islam for various reasons. Partly because it just doesn't stand up to rational scrutiny but to a

much larger extent because, he argues, it is a faith which seeks to control every aspect of its adherents' lives, and through its teachings is at odds with human rights, democracy and the belief in freedom of the individual. Warraq was wise to write under a pseudonym, pointing out the Muslim punishment for apostasy is death.

An ex-Muslim fluent in Arabic, he has written devastating critiques of the religion but this, his first book, provoked considerable controversy and criticism not just within Islamic circles but Western ones too. He expressed dismay that no Western scholar was willing to stand up and defend the values of free speech and human rights during the Rushdie affair but instead chose to criticise the author; further pointing out that nobody seemed willing to criticise Islam at a time when other major religions seemed fair game. The usual accusation, that critics of Islam do not have an insider's view of the religion and language, cannot be levelled against him.

I purchased a number of other books about Islam but could not take them with me to Oman, as they were critical analyses of the Koran and the Muslim faith as well as attempts to put the religion in historical context, a controversial exercise given the claim of its ahistorical message. The latter is especially salient, as my attempts over the next few years to engage in conversation with Muslims about some of the controversial, violent passages referred to above were met with the standard response of being *quoted out of context*.

Context can only pertain to two things. Either the rest of the verse has to be read, to provide a clearer overall meaning, or the historical context is being referred to—the verse pertaining to a particular place and time, implying the assertions are not for all time. For the majority of these verses, the overall literary context changes nothing in meaning, a factor borne out by Warraq and others.

Indeed, it is usually believers that quote passages out of

context; as in the standard response to assertions that Islam encourages violence. This standard response is the paraphrasing of 5:32 of the Koran: *whoever kills a human being, it is as though he has killed all of mankind*—implying all human lives are considered equal, regardless of faith, and therefore Islam really is a religion of peace. However, the whole verse reads:

“For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind. Our messengers came unto them of old with clear proofs, but afterwards lo! many of them became prodigals in the earth ...” (Koran 5:32).

The decree, being for the *Children of Israel*, is aimed at believers in the true faith, which Jews are accused of straying from the path of and Muslims remaining true to. The analogy of ‘killing one person being equivalent to killing all people’ is only valid if the perpetrator is not killing those guilty of committing *manslaughter* or spreading *corruption*. The crucial point being, what counts as *corruption*? To Muslims, Christians and Jews are corruptors of the true faith, atheists and agnostics worse and those considered not being *People of the Book* idolators not worthy of life anyway. Exclusion of non-believers from decrees of humaneness, and hostility and intolerance towards them, is clearly borne out in Mohammed’s farewell address, “I have been ordered to fight against the people until they testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah’s Apostle.”

As for historical context, I have already mentioned the belief that the message of Islam is ahistorical, in the same way that Christians understand the *Word* or *Logos* being eternal and inseparable from God. Muhammad’s recitations are held to be the revelation of this timeless message. It would seem, then, that rationalizing any part of the Koran’s teachings as

particular to circumstances in a specific place and time contradicts its claim to being a way of life for all time. For, by logical extension, if any commands were considered specific to their time, couldn't all commands on how to conduct oneself be said to be located in a specific place and time and therefore not constitute eternal instructions?

I returned to Oman to complete the remaining six months of my contract, knowing I could not take any of these books with me. By then, I figured I could conduct some limited research online as I was just looking up passages from the Koran and their meanings or interpretations, in the same way that the student was just quoting a passage from the Koran during morning assembly. I also started watching YouTube clips from Arabic TV. The intellectual acrobatics attempted by many of those defending the religion during talk shows were amazingly bizarre. More often, responses to questions were *non sequiturs*, including a good deal of anger and expressions of offence at daring to question the faith or point out anomalies.

These clips reminded me of a 1979 episode of the TV chat show *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*. Members of the cast of *Monty Python's Life of Brian* were invited to discuss the film, which had caused much controversy amongst Christians, with religious establishment figures who attempted to browbeat those they saw as blasphemers. In similar fashion, questioning certain aspects of Islam are considered blasphemy, whether you are an adherent of the religion or not, by the religious establishment and many of the faithful. It matters not if you are an unbeliever, you must abide by *their* rules. The West has had its religious wars and settled on an arrangement separating church and state, deeming no religious authority in a position to dictate how an individual live their life under threat of physical punishment; an actual freedom of belief and no compulsion in religion which Islam claims but does not practice, especially when non-believers, under Shariah, are

reduced to *dhimmi*-like status and suffer religiously sanctioned discrimination.

The religion itself encourages antisemitism and current opposition from Muslims toward Israel has to be viewed in this light; not solely in the claim to oppose illegal occupation of Palestinian land. If it were purely a question of illegal occupation why are Muslim countries not as vociferous in defying the illegal occupation of northern Cyprus or Western Sahara? (could it be in the latter two cases that the occupations are by Muslim countries) or, indeed, China's occupation of Tibet and of 'fellow-Muslim' lands in the region of Xinjiang?

Anyone doubting the antisemitism of the Islamic faith need only consider the following passage (by no means unique in anti-Jewish sentiment in Islam's Holy texts, including the Koran itself) from *Sahih Muslim*, one of the most revered hadith collections. Hadith 7339 reads:

"Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger as saying: The last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him; but the tree Gharqad would not say, for it is the tree of the Jews."

If this is akin to the apocalypse and the final judgement—Armageddon—then religious Muslims who accept the hadiths contained in *Sahih Muslim*, which the vast majority do, believe there is an existential battle between Muslims and Jews which can only end when all Jews are annihilated. Even the journalist and broadcaster Mehdi Hasan, a vociferous defender of Muslims and Islamic belief, has drawn attention to "the banality of Muslim antisemitism."[\[1\]](#)

To deny Islam's antisemitism is akin to denying the

antisemitism inherent in Christianity. Christians view(ed) Jews as despicable Christ killers, Muslims view Jews as betrayers of Mohamed and corrupters of the faith. The appalling acts of violence and prejudice that have been committed as a consequence of this Jew hatred are acknowledged by the politically correct as far as Christian bigotry is concerned but not Muslim. A noteworthy example of this is the zealous media attention given to the dramatic increase in antisemitic attacks across Europe in the first decade of the new millennium, originally attributed to far right and neo-Nazi groups. However, when it was discovered these incidents were largely perpetrated by young Muslim men, the matter seemed to immediately disappear from the mainstream media.[\[2\]](#)

It is, quite rightly, unacceptable for those of 'European extraction' to verbalize prejudicial hate, regardless of religious denomination or lack thereof, but when it is couched in minority cultural terms (religious or otherwise) it seems to lose its malignancy and metamorphoses into acceptable cultural relativism. At the time of the Rushdie affair, Ibn Warraq highlighted this prevalent hypocrisy. Why is the West so reluctant to criticize words and events associated with Islamic practices but more than willing to criticize Judaism and Christianity? There is a double standard being practised by politicians and the media, which only serves to reinforce certain cultural practices or beliefs within Islam not acceptable on the part of any other community.

This can only mean one thing. For all that the West claims to uphold equal rights it practises no such thing. In the name of multiculturalism, people are being treated differently; and so are not equal. Cultural relativism means that some individuals have certain rights and others have different ones. Or to put it another way, the equality of cultures means accepting the inequality of individuals within some of those cultures (namely women, religious minorities and homosexuals). Multiculturalism ultimately means accepting communities that



discriminate on these bases; with not much hope for those within them to exercise their supposed freedoms, as members of the wider society, and to make their own life choices. Multiculturalism discriminates against minorities within minorities and allows some minorities to discriminate against 'the other.'

[1] Hasan, Mehdi 'The Sorry Truth Is That the Virus of Antisemitism Has Infected the British Muslim Community' *Huffpost* May 21, 2013  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/anti-semitism-british-muslim-community\\_b\\_2922013.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/anti-semitism-british-muslim-community_b_2922013.html)

[2] Browne, Anthony *The Retreat of Reason* Civitas 2006

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Nikos Akritas has worked as a teacher in countries across the Middle East and Central Asia as well as in Britain. His book *Bloody Liberals: How Politically Correct Ideas About Race, Education and Religion are Killing Liberalism* is available on Amazon.

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