

# Islam and the Propaganda War (Part II): The Debater's Handbook

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In [Part I](#) I reviewed the propaganda war conducted by the American government during the Cold War, and lamented the lack of such a campaign against the forces of Jihad today. I discussed the need to reprint in full, and with a critical commentary appended, the Qur'an, and also to print intelligently abridged versions of the Hadith and Sira, again with critical commentaries appended, all for free mass distribution. I noted how important it was to have these works translated into a dozen of the major world languages and a half-dozen of the major languages of Islam, and to disseminate these texts not only through print publication (as was done during the Cold

War), but also, and mainly, by posting them online, where they could be viewed by tens of millions of people. And I suggested reprinting another set of texts, by ex-Muslims such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Ibn Warraq, able to offer from the inside a critical view of Islam's curious appeal. I discussed the continuing problem of why this hadn't yet been done, because governments are chary of paying for such campaigns, fearful of being charged with Islamophobia (look at the hysterical savaging of the Trump Administration over the so-called "Muslim ban"), and why, therefore, private parties now have to do what, in a more self-confident and less confused age, would be done, straightforwardly, by the government.

Another part of this privately-funded effort to undermine the appeal of Islam should be the training of a cadre of speakers well-prepared to take on, in a debate setting, the small army of Islamic apologists already deployed in this country: a cadre of well-trained people to whom we entrust the task of *How To Debate A Muslim*. The need for this training is great, given the widespread and systematic campaigns of Muslim apologists, especially on college campuses, and at mosques, where every week brings fresh news of outreach efforts to the non-Muslims who visit these mosques, mostly unwary innocents eager to Visit A Mosque, or Ask A Muslim Anything, or just Meet Their Muslim Neighbors, who will, of course, be just as accommodating and welcoming as all get-out.

These debaters willing to take upon themselves this important task, to attend these Mosque-and-Muslim Outreach affairs, not because they know nothing about Islam, but because they know a good deal, know perfectly well what is going on in this smilingly sinister meet-and-greet, and would like to upset the propaganda applecart before it become a juggernaut, deserve help. It may, for example, be useful for such people to have been given guidance as to which Qur'anic passages, especially those on violent Jihad and treatment of Infidels, are most telling in painting a true picture of Islam. Or a list of

those Qur'anic quotes always relied on by apologists – as 2:256 and 5:32 and 109:1-6 – and how to answer them, might be supplied in advance. And then they might be given a short list of stories in the Hadith, about the very episodes in Muhammad's life that Muslim apologists will most wish to avoid, and that can most effectively unsettle the Muslim speaker(s). And these stories will create unease, too, but of a different kind, among the non-Muslims visiting the mosque who are now confronted not with feelgood mental pabulum, but a real conflict, one that suggests all is not right with Islam. These Infidels will be hearing from this prepared cadre of anti-Islam speakers about aspects of Islam and of Muhammad that are rooted in the texts, cannot be convincingly explained away, and are deeply disturbing.

What is needed is something like a debater's bootcamp, real or virtual, to supply those who want to prepare for such debates the most useful material (the Jihad passages in the Qur'an, the least attractive aspects of Muhammad's life, from the Hadith and Sira) and to guide Infidels in how most effectively to marshal their arguments and evidence, so as not merely to hold one's own against any apologist for Islam, but to demolish that apologist's predictable defenses. This requires a basic knowledge of Islam, and an ability to deploy a few dozen passages from the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sira, in a convincing and winning manner. Some knowledge of the history of Islamic conquest, and of what happened to the many peoples subjugated by Muslim conquerors – who was killed, who converted, and who survived under what onerous conditions – should also be learned, and made quickly retrievable from a Smartphone, for use in a debate. Imagine the effect, for example, of being able to quote the Indian historian K. S. Lal on the tens of millions of Hindus killed in India under Muslim rule. Anyone who has heard Muslims defending the faith knows that the apologists keep going back to the same handful of arguments (the supposed need to know Arabic, the necessity of understanding violence in its "context," Muhammad as

“empowering” women), keep quoting the same misleading verses – e.g., 2:56, 5:32 without 5:33 – and keep insisting, wrongly, that the most disturbing passages are descriptive rather than prescriptive, that is, they try to argue that the most violent of verses are limited to the time and place of their original application. Non-Muslims can anticipate which passages and off-the-rack arguments will be used, and should be ready to respond with their own stock of selected texts that show Islam in quite another light. The series of mock debates with someone taking the role of a Muslim defending the faith, and using the same arguments and evasions that real Muslims do, will help polish the debater’s presentation.

Let’s run through some of the standard Muslim claims. First, there is the attempt to disqualify non-Muslims from discussing the texts in the first place because “you have to know Arabic to really understand the Qur’an.” Your reply is ready in the form of an obvious question: “80% of the world’s Muslims are not Arabs; very few of them know Arabic; aren’t they real Muslims? Are you suggesting that *they* don’t understand the Qur’an?” For this there is no plausible retort. Next is the usual business about Islamic texts being taken “out of context.” The debater must be prepared to explain how and why many of those 109 “Jihad verses” are not descriptive, as is the violence in the Old Testament, but prescriptive, that is meant to be applicable for all time. As Robert Spencer has noted, there are no Christian and Jewish groups around the world plotting murder and mayhem based on Biblical texts, the way Muslim groups are doing, basing their terror squarely on chapter-and-verse in the Qur’an. Transcripts of their statements or, even better, videos, of Muslim terrorists citing Islamic texts as prompting their actions, could be brought to debates, to be played on a laptop or a larger screen, with the killers gleefully describing how those texts prompted their gruesome killings – difficult to explain, impossible to defend.

Then there are two Qur'anic passages that more than any others are constantly quoted by Defenders of the Faith, and for which any Debater should be prepared. The first is 5:32 without its modifying 5:33. 5:32 says that "whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind; and whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind." This verse, lifted from the Jewish text of the Mishnah, sounds good. But it is the verse that immediately follows – 5:33 – that prescribes rather than proscribes killing, turning 5:32 upside down: "The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger and strive after **corruption in the land** will be **that they will be killed or crucified**, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land." Who "makes war upon Allah and His messenger"? It's the non-Muslims, of course, and it is they who should be "killed or crucified." Both Presidents Bush and Obama respectfully quoted 5:32 to show the pacific nature of Islam; neither quoted 5:33. Were they attempting to mislead the public, or was it that they themselves were misled by their advisers on Islam whom, I suspect, were Muslims themselves, happy to supply them with apposite quotes to show that "Islam-means-peace"?

The other Qur'anic passage always quoted by Muslim apologists is 2:256: "There is no compulsion in religion." But of course in Islam there is "compulsion in religion." The compulsion is both for Muslims and for non-Muslims. For Muslims, there is the fear that keeps those who might want to leave the faith from doing so, for apostasy is punishable by death. Is that constant threat of death not the most extreme sort of "compulsion"? As for non-Muslims under Muslim rule, the stark choice offered them is either to convert to Islam, or be killed, or remain alive but be forced to pay a burdensome capitation tax, the Jizyah, as well as endure certain other disabilities. Doesn't that kind of choice constitute "compulsion in religion"? Either you convert, or you die, or you pay an annual tax that can be crushing. You should bring

home to your audience what this means in practice. How many of us, if we had to pay, say, \$50,000 a year to Muslim rulers in order to remain Christians or Jews, would not, over time, decide in the end to convert? Wasn't this exactly what happened in the lands that Muslims conquered, where many converted to avoid the Jizyah? That takes care of 5:32 and 2:256.

There are also quotes from the Qur'an that Muslim apologists use, knowing full well that Infidels will misinterpret them. When Muhammad says in Qur'an 109:1-6, "For you is your religion and for us is our religion," this sounds good to Infidels: we will leave each other alone. That, of course, is preposterous, as we know, because Islam is determined never to leave Infidels alone, not until they surrender and choose death, conversion, or life as a Jizyah-paying dhimmi. The commentators on Qur'an 109 have written this: "When read in context, like many other verses misinterpreted for apologetic purposes, *surat al-Kafiroon* advocates the opposite of what is sometimes claimed. **This surah is not a proclamation on religious tolerance and freedom or a recognition of religious pluralism. In fact, this surah unequivocally forbids inter-faith dialogue, expresses Muslims' 'total disgust' of non-Islamic beliefs and advocates an 'us versus them' mentality between Muslims and disbelievers. This is how the surah is understood by mainstream Islam and the majority of its classical and contemporary scholars. Furthermore, if the historical context were to be ignored, it would still remain an abrogated verse superseded by 'the verses of fighting.'** The verse means that **'for us (Muslims) our (true) religion, for you – all the Unbelievers, who share the same falsity of belief – your (false) religion.'**"

Another principle that needs to be clearly understood by debaters and explained to audiences is that of *naskh*, or "abrogation." There are many passages in the Qur'an that are inconsistent with one another, and Muslims are taught that it

is the later verses that “abrogate” (“naskh” literally means “removal”) the earlier ones. Why does this matter so much? It turns out that the earlier verses, which date from Muhammad’s time in Mecca, when he still had powerful enemies, and therefore had to be more accommodating, are “softer” and more “peaceful” toward the Infidels. So it is precisely these verses that apologists for Islam will quote. The audience of Infidels will most likely be unaware that the later verses, which are much harsher than those from the Meccan period, are held to “abrogate” the earlier ones, and come from the period when he ruled the city of Medina (Yathrib), was much more powerful than he had been in Mecca, and could now afford to be more severe with his enemies. The prepared debater will come armed with this understanding, explain it to the audience, and offer some examples of such abrogation. For example, Qur’an 9:5, the Verse of the Sword (“Slay the idolaters wherever you find them”), is held by Muslims to have **“abrogated every agreement of peace between the Prophet and any idolater, every treaty, and every term.”** And once again we can undermine the Muslim apologist’s reliance on Qur’an 2:256 (“There is no compulsion in religion”) which, as we have seen, mischaracterizes reality under Islam (ignoring the would-be apostate’s death sentence and the non-Muslim’s duty to pay the Jizyah, both forms of “compulsion”), by noting that 2:256 is *also* an earlier verse *held to have been abrogated by many later verses* from the “Meccan” period. Just a few such examples will be enough to discomfit your Muslim opponent, and shake the audience’s trust in his assertions.

What else should the debater on Islam ideally be ready to discuss? He should be ready to ask about not only what is written in the Qur’an and Hadith, but how Islam has been practiced, that is, how Muslims have behaved over 1400 years, as they conquered many lands and subjugated many peoples.

In the question period you should start disingenuously:

“I’ve been studying the Qur’an on my own, and I just had a

question or two.”

“Oh, very good. It’s always advisable to have a Muslim help guide you through the more difficult passages. It’s not all simple, some people have been known to misinterpret. Obviously those Islamic State crazies have been the worst misinterpreters of the texts. I wouldn’t even call them Muslims. By all means, fire away.” (The Muslim speaker is hoping that you haven’t come across any of those unpleasant passages, and just called into question, *in advance*, your own understanding of the text – “difficult passages” that “some people have been known to misinterpret” – just in case.)

“Well, there’s this one verse I read – Qur’an 98.6 – that calls disbelievers ‘the vilest of creatures.’ I don’t know what to think of that.”

“There are some other words you’ve left out. I think it says ‘some people *may think* Infidels are the vilest of creatures.’ There’s quite a difference there. Besides, I’m pretty sure that’s one of the passages that was abrogated. So it doesn’t apply any more.” (Pouring on the taqiyya)

“Well, I just want to know if it means that some Muslims thought *at that time* that we non-Muslims were ‘the vilest of creatures.’ Who are the ‘disbelievers’?”

“Oh, the ‘disbelievers’ are the pagans. Pagan Arabs. Nothing to do with Christians or Jews, so don’t worry about it. Unless of course you are a pagan Arab and the year is 630 A.D.” (Nervous laughter from Muslims in the audience)

“Well, are you sure ‘disbelievers’ doesn’t mean all non-Muslims? I read that somewhere. And there’s another verse that I wonder about – Qur’an 3.110 – that calls Muslims the ‘best of peoples.’ What should I think of that?”

“Well, that just goes to show how easy it is to misunderstand some of these verses. Remember, you don’t know the Arabic



original. You don't know the context. Tell me, do you think all the Muslims here tonight really believe that the people we invited and who accepted our invitations are the – how did you put it? – the “vilest of creatures”? Do you think that's what I think of you? Of course not. Did you talk to a Muslim about these verses? Do you really think we Muslims think ‘we are the best of peoples’? That would be utter nonsense.. You know, these things shouldn't always be taken literally. There are whole libraries of Qur'anic commentaries that need to be consulted. It's not that simple.”

Don't be dissuaded. Keep up the questions, despite the taqiyya. Ask about what happens to apostates in Islam, about why the Jiyzah must be paid, about what the Qur'an says about Muslims taking non-Muslims as friends. Ask about little Aisha, Asma bint Marwan, Abu Afak, the Khaybar raid, the decapitations of 600-900 prisoners of the Banu Qurayza. Just raising these topics will cause your speaker's suave assurance to deliquesce into ill-concealed anger, which is the result you want.

Slavery is one subject to bring up as early as possible.

The back-and-forth might go something like this, beginning with your loaded question:

“Did Muhammad buy and sell slaves?”

“Yes. Almost everyone did it in those days.”

“Didn't the Islamic slave trade begin earlier, end later, and claim tens of millions more victims, than the Atlantic slave trade?”

“I don't know. That's the first I've heard of that. I'll have to check.”

“Well, I've done some research on this, especially about the castrating, by Arab slavers, of black African boys in the

bush, only 20% of whom survived both the operation, and the trip by slave coffle and dhow to the great Islamic slave markets. They were used as eunuchs. Just think – only 20% survived.” (Gasp from the audience)

(Deeply disturbed that you’ve been doing research) “Again, I’d like to check your facts. Of course, you know that Muhammad freed over 60 of his slaves. And he told his followers to treat their slaves kindly. He really was ahead of his time.” (A weak reply.)

“Yes, I’d read that. But he never attacked the institution of slavery. And if you want to check about the castration business, you might want to begin with a book I’ve just read – *The Hideous Trade* by Jan Hogedorn. That’s H-o-g-e-d-o-r-n. I hope you” – turning to audience – “will all have a chance to take a look.” (Sound of inputting into smartphones) “And one more thing – if Muhammad is the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct, doesn’t that mean that whatever he did, including owning slaves, is justified?”

“It’s complicated. I’m not sure why you keep coming back to this. Look, lots of people had slaves then, and no one has slaves today. So what’s your point? Can we go on to something else? I’d planned to talk about the things we can do together, as communities of faith– such as the Coat Drive for the Homeless. Raising funds to buy the hospital a new scanner.”

“I just want to be sure that I understand: because Muhammad owned slaves, slavery was legitimized in Islam. For all time. Isn’t that right? There was no anti-slavery movement in Islam, no Muslim William Wilberforce. Slavery continued to be legal in Saudi Arabia and Yemen until 1962, and was banned only because of terrific Western pressure. Black slaves were still held by Arabs in the northern Sudan until recently, and are held even now in Mauritania.” (Audible gasps, again, of surprise.)

“Well, again, I’d have to check your facts. I think you’re mixing up a lot of things. Apples and oranges. And what’s past is past.”

“Fine. Just google ‘slavery in the Arab world.’” (Many in the audience now input this.)

“I think we should get onto some other subject – we’ve used up enough time about something that doesn’t even exist any more. I mean, should I go to your president’s press conference and ask him about slavery?”

“Well, there is a difference, but let me ask another question. It’s about Aisha.” (Subdued fury in the face of your Muslim interlocutor.)

“Yes, she was Muhammad’s wife. They loved each other very much.”

“And how old was she when they married?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with Islam – I mean it’s not even in the Qur’an, or didn’t you know that? But of course they married – she was a young woman – only when she had reached puberty. Most of his wives were widows, whom he wanted to support.”

And then as the well-prepared debater, you let the taqiyya artist have it with both barrels. You announce that she was betrothed to Muhammad when she was six, and that he consummated his marriage – to be clear, *Muhammad had sex with Aisha*– when he was in his mid-50s and she was nine. (Gasps from many in the audience). And the main point you make is this: as Muslims regard Muhammad as the Perfect Man, the Model of Conduct, the True Believers continue to think it permissible to marry a girl as young as nine. They don’t “contextualize.” In other words, what happened 1400 years ago is still valid today.

“You’ve got your facts all wrong.”

“Do I? When Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, he lowered the marriageable age of girls to nine. Coincidence?”

“I don’t know what Khomeini did and I don’t care. He’s a Shi’a. If you want to find out what the Shi’a do, go to *their* meetings.” (Laughter from the audience). “I don’t know of a single Muslim country where a girl can be married at nine.”

“What about those photographs of child-brides in Afghanistan with their middle-aged husbands? Or in Pakistan? Anything to do with emulating Muhammad? And what about Saudi Arabia? How old does a girl have to be to get married there? There is no minimum age in Saudi Arabia.”

“I think what you are doing is pure Islamophobia, plain and simple. You don’t get any of your facts right. You didn’t come here to meet and talk with Muslims in good faith. You’re just here to make trouble. You should think about the others who came to learn about Islam.”

“I’ll leave it to the audience to do their own research on Aisha. Just google ‘Aisha’ and ‘Muhammad.’” (Sounds of audience members inputting both names into smartphones)

Those two topics – the Arab slave trade and Muhammad’s marriage to little Aisha, should be quite enough to spoil your Muslim debater’s evening.

But if there is time for more, then you might ask about what happened, and why, to Asma bint Marwan and Abu Afak:

“One last question. Do you remember what Asma bint Marwan did?”

“She wrote terrible, vile, disrespectful verses.”

“And what happened to her?”

“She was punished for mocking. She made fun of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).”

“Made fun?”

“Yes. So one of the Muslims decided to punish her.”

“Oh really? It wasn’t just ‘punishment,’ was it? He decided to kill her, just because she made fun of someone.”

“Not just anyone. The Prophet Muhammad. It is not permitted to make fun of him. It is blasphemy. You would want to do the same if someone made fun of Jesus.” (Sounds of doubt from the audience).

“Actually, no. I might not like it, but I’d never want to kill someone for making fun of Jesus. People make fun of Jesus all the time, and many of us find it in bad taste, but no one is killed for that.”

“I don’t believe you. I don’t think Christians would allow Jesus to be mocked that way. And if they did, they wouldn’t be very good Christians to permit such disrespect. We Muslims would never allow anyone to blaspheme the Prophet (pbuh).”

“Ladies and gentlemen, what we have here is a failure to communicate.”

“Can we please get onto something more important?”

“I think Muhammad’s marrying a nine-year-old is serious. I think Muhammad’s taking pleasure in someone’s murder is serious.” Point, set, match.

Such discussions need not be formally requested by non-Muslims, as part of Mosque Open Houses, or Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbors events. In the question period that will follow the presentation by a Muslim speaker, you can turn it into a real debate merely by asking probing questions on the most sensitive matters. Ask about apostates in Islam, about why the

Jiyzah must be paid, about what the Qur'an says about Muslims taking non-Muslims as friends. Ask about Aisha, Asma bint Marwan, Abu Afak, the Khaybar raid, the decapitations of 600-900 prisoners of the Banu Qurayza. Just raising these topics will cause your speaker's mask to fall and his suave assurance to decompose into ill-concealed anger.

"Are you done? I think we all see where you are coming from. Believe me, I'll be happy to talk to you about this for as long as you like, but I really don't think it fair to take up everybody's time when they came to learn the really important things about Islam. For example, how many people know that we Muslims respect Jesus as a prophet? Or that we revere Mary as the greatest of all women? Do you know – do you even care – that Mary is mentioned 70 times in the Qur'an, which is more than she is mentioned in the New Testament? No, I didn't think so. But despite what you've attempted here tonight, I will be happy to meet with you and discuss the things on which we can agree or at least agree to disagree. Just make an appointment and we can discuss these things, but, as we Muslims prefer, in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Enough Islamophobia. Remember, we are all children of Allah. Fortunately, given the terrible things we've seen recently – that unbelievably cruel ban on Muslims, which none of us ever expected to see in our country – I'm not surprised that so many of my Christian and Jewish friends have told me 'we are all Muslims now.' We are deeply grateful to all of you for your support and for coming here tonight. And I'd love to continue the discussion. But right now, we don't want the dinner Mrs. Al-Bazzazz has laid out for us to get cold. So let's not keep her waiting."

Sound of people getting up from their seats, hastening to a table laden with curried chicken, lamb kebabs, basmati rice, hot pita bread, baklava, fruit juices and water. Everyone has moved on from the Qur'an, the Hadith, slavery, Aisha, Asma bint Marwan.

This interchange, or one very like it, ought to be easy to

arrange at Mosque Open Houses and Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbors nights. All you must do is have at the ready on your smartphone a few dozen Qur'anic quotes and a few dozen Hadith, and a willingness to speak out, to enable you to disrupt the proceedings from going as the Muslim hosts had planned.

Given crowd psychology, it might be good to go with a friend or two, also well-prepared, and able both to support your questioning or, should you be silenced, to pick up the baton and ask the questions you did not get to ask. A single critical questioner may be depicted by annoyed Muslims as a lonely crank, but two or three people echoing one another's dissents can, under the circumstances, constitute a multitude. Your aim is to cause visible anxiety to the Muslim speaker, to rattle him, to make the audience begin to question the sanitized version of Islam he was hoping to present to his audience without any cross-questioning. The less the visiting Infidels know, the better for him and his scripted *bonhomie*. Your job is to make that audience, simply by showing that you do know something about Islam that has not been part of the smooth presentation they've just been given, to start to mistrust the taqiyya-artist. The truth is on your side and, ideally, if unafraid to give offense, you will both unsettle the speaker and send your fellow Infidels home, not necessarily on your side, but at least no longer certain what to think, and determined to look up some of the passages, from the Qur'an and Hadith, that you mentioned for their benefit. And if thousands of skilled debaters become involved, spreading uncertainty about Islam among Infidels who had previously been perceived as easy prey by Muslim propagandists, this can throw a spanner in the works of those apologists who are now lying in smiling, because unopposed, wait, in mosques all over this country. That would constitute a victory.

First published in