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Sacred Texts, Violent Ends: How Literalist Readings of the Bible and the Qur'an Undermine Global Peace

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Abstract

This study examines how scriptural literalism contributes to religious extremism and undermines global peace through a comparative analysis of two case studies: Christian zionist interpretations of biblical texts concerning Palestine and extremist readings of the Qur'anic 'Sword Verse'. The study addresses the problem of decontextualized interpretations of sacred texts that are used to legitimize violence and advance exclusivist political agendas. The objective is to identify the common interpretive patterns underlying such readings and assess their implications for peace and coexistence. Employing a qualitative methodology that integrates historical-critical analysis with interpretive inquiry, the study analyses primary religious sources and their contemporary applications. The findings reveal that literalist readings detached from their historical, linguistic, and ethical contexts facilitate the construction of ideological frameworks that justify violence and distort the broader peace-oriented teachings of both traditions. Despite their different religious settings, the two cases exhibit a shared interpretive tendency: the selective appropriation of scripture to support militant objectives. The study concludes that contextual and integrative approaches to scriptural interpretation, together with critical religious literacy and interfaith engagement, are essential for countering extremist narratives and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Scriptural literalism; Christian zionists; sword-verse; peace

Introduction

The relationship between religious interpretation and global peace remains one of the most critical yet undertheorized challenges facing contemporary society. According to the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng, "No peace among nations without peace among the religions,"[1] a claim highlighting the pivotal role of religious understanding in shaping international relations and social harmony. This observation has gained renewed urgency in the 21st century, as religious extremism continues to fuel global conflicts and deepen geopolitical tensions.[2]

Religion has never operated in only one direction. Across history, it has supported peace in some settings and justified conflict in others. This tension becomes more apparent when sacred texts are read literally and detached from their historical circumstances and wider spiritual principles. In *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Appleby argues that religious traditions contain resources for both violence and peace, while the method of interpretation often shapes which possibility emerges realized.[3] This study, therefore, examines interpretation rather than religion itself.

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1 Hans Küng, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 441.

2 On religious extremism, see Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

3 R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). The main argument of Appleby is that people from the same religious community can follow very different paths—some toward violence and others toward peacebuilding. He explores what religious terrorists and peacemakers share, why they respond differently to injustice, and why a deeper understanding of religious extremism is essential for analyzing local, regional, and international conflicts.

To investigate this dynamic, the research focuses on two case studies drawn from different religious traditions, which are Christian zionist interpretations of biblical texts concerning Palestine, and extremist readings of the Qur'anic 'Sword Verse'. These two cases were not selected arbitrarily. They represent the most prominent and geopolitically consequential instances in which scriptural literalism has been marshaled to legitimize exclusivist claims and justify violence in the contemporary world. More importantly, they share a common hermeneutical structure; in both cases, selective and decontextualized readings of sacred texts are employed to override broader ethical teachings, silence dissenting voices within the tradition, and provide religious sanction for political agendas. This structural parallel makes them uniquely suitable for comparative analysis, as it allows the study to identify a cross-traditional pattern rather than treating extremist interpretation as a problem peculiar to any single faith.

At the same time, the two cases differ in instructive ways. Christian zionism operates largely within a specific theological and geopolitical alliance, drawing on eschatological readings of the Hebrew Bible to justify territorial claims. Extremist readings of the Sword Verse, by contrast, have been deployed to authorize militant violence in diverse contexts. Examining these similarities and differences comparatively illuminates how scriptural literalism functions across different religious, cultural, and political environments, and why no single tradition holds a monopoly on either the problem or its solution.

This comparative approach shifts the inquiry away from whether Islam or Christianity is inherently violent, a question that often produces polemic instead of analysis. The study examines the interpretive conditions under which sacred scripture becomes a resource for extremism and considers how those conditions may be identified, challenged and changed. Through this lens, the research contributes to the broader discourse on religious interpretation, peacebuilding, and interfaith dialogue, and offers

insights into how contextual, integrative approaches to scripture might foster greater understanding and more peaceful coexistence among faith communities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Key Terms Defined

Central to this discussion are two fundamental concepts in religious textual analysis: interpretation (tafsir) and exegesis (ta'wil), both of which require careful examination within their linguistic and terminological contexts. The concept of interpretation (tafsir) emerges from a rich linguistic tradition of textual analysis. According to al-Zabidi, it derives from the root 'fasr,' which signifies explanation and disclosure.[4] This etymological foundation is further reinforced by Ibn Faris, who notes that the letters *fa', sin,* and *ra'* fundamentally indicate the elucidation and clarification of something.[5] Building on this linguistic foundation, Ibn Ashur elaborates that interpretation involves a transformative process of revealing textual meaning through clearer explanatory language, ultimately making the interpreted content more accessible to the listener.[6] Complementing *tafsir* is the related concept of exegesis (ta'wil). As al-Firuzabadi explains, *ta'wil* derives from the root meaning 'to return' (awl), suggesting a process of returning to the original meaning.[7] In its technical application, *ta'wil* encompasses two distinct but related meanings. The first involves the straightforward interpretation and explanation of textual meaning, whether this interpretation aligns with or diverges from the apparent meaning. The second, more specialized meaning refers to the methodological process of directing a word from its predominant meaning to a less obvious one, guided by supporting

4 Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-'Arus min Jawahir al-Qamus* (Kuwait: Matba'at Hukumat al-Kuwayt, 2001), 22:154.

5 Ahmad ibn Faris, *Mu'jam Maqayis al-Lughah*, ed. 'Abd al-Salam Harun (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), 4:504.

6 Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur, *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah li-al-Nashr, 1984), 1:10.

7 Majd al-Din al-Firuzabadi, *Al-Qamus al-Muhit* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 2005), 963.

evidence. This latter understanding holds particular significance in jurisprudential principles and scholarly discourse.[8]

This literal approach finds its theoretical articulation in the work of Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri, who defines literal interpretation as "the believer's insistence that their sacred text's meaning is clear and simple, carrying a direct, explicit message (like a scientific rule or algebraic language) that can be accessed directly without significant intellectual effort or rational consideration."[9] Al-Masiri's analysis reveals that adherents of literal interpretation maintain that "what appears in their sacred text manifests literally in human, historical, and material reality... and that metaphors in sacred texts are not perpetually metaphorical but represent actual, material reality."[10]

Significantly, he observes that this method of interpretation eliminates the duality between the text and reality, as well as the distance between them. "It reduces the material reality of the sacred text (which transcends the material world) and confines the sacred text to the material reality, with the scope narrowing or widening according to the interpreter's inclinations."[11] This literal interpretative methodology, which prioritizes shaping historical understanding and contemporary reality through the lens of sacred texts rather than contextualizing texts within their historical moments, has found particular resonance within Christian zionism.

Christian zionism, also known as the Christian Right, encompasses Christians who demonstrate strong support for the establishment of the state of Israel, regardless of how this support manifests.[12] This term describes a religious movement within American society rather than a specific organization, group, or church, and has been present since America's founding.[13] The concept of extremism, while notably complex and

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8 Manna' al-Qattan, *Mabahith fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Kaherah: Maktabah Wahbah, 1995), 317-318.

9 Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri, *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Yahud wa al-Yahudiyyah wa al-Sahyuniyyah* (Kaherah: Dar al-Shuruq, 1999), 4:40.

10 Al-Masiri, *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Yahud.*

11 Al-Masiri, *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Yahud.* 4:40-41.

12 Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: IVP Academic, 2004), 13-14.

13 Fu'ad Sha'ban, *Min ajl Sahyun* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2000), 389.

challenging to define,[14] encompasses "political, religious, etc. ideas or actions that are extreme and not normal, reasonable, or acceptable to most people."[15] The etymological roots of extremism can be traced to the Latin term *extremus*, which denotes a position far removed from the center. This positioning helps explain why extremism is typically understood in opposition to moderation and mainstream thought.[16] Significantly, Coleman and Bartoli emphasize that the process of labeling individuals or activities as 'extreme' and determining what constitutes 'moderate' or 'ordinary' remains inherently contentious. These designations are deeply context-dependent, varying across societies and historical periods. The complexity of defining extremism stems from its relational nature, what one society considers extreme might be viewed as moderate in another context. This contextual dependence makes it crucial to consider historical, social, and cultural factors when analyzing extremist ideologies or behaviors.[17]

Biblical Literalism and the Crisis of Palestine

The intersection of biblical literalism and contemporary geopolitics finds one of its most profound and contentious manifestations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Christian zionism has emerged as a significant force shaping Western, particularly American, attitudes and policies toward the region. This movement's interpretation of scripture has led to an unconditional support for the modern state of Israel, often viewing its establishment and expansion as the fulfillment of divine prophecy. Interestingly, Christian support for the zionist vision of establishing control over Palestine preceded widespread Jewish support for zionism. The theological foundations of Christian

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[14] W. Stephens, S. Sieckelinck, and H. Boutellier, "Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44.4 (2021), 352-382.

[15] Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2020.

[16] D. B. Baisagatova et al., "Correlation of Concepts 'Extremism' and 'Terrorism' in Countering the Financing of Terrorism and Extremism," *International Journal of Environmental & Science Education* 11.13 (2016), 5903-5915.

[17] Peter T. Coleman and Andrea Bartoli, "Addressing Extremism," in *Extremism*, ed. Noël Merino (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2014), 15-16.

zionism emerged during Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century. This movement allowed the general public to read the Bible directly after centuries of restriction, encouraging a literal rather than metaphorical interpretation that had been dominant in Roman Catholicism.[18]

The Reform movement led to the emergence of the Puritans, who sought to cleanse the Church of England of Catholic influences. Their rightward movement within Protestantism earned them the name 'Puritans.'[19] As early settlers in northeastern North America, the Puritans significantly influenced American religious thought, notably by elevating the Old Testament to a status nearly equal to that of the New Testament.[20] Al-Masiri identifies several factors linking Protestantism and the zionist movement: the Reform movement's influence on Jews; the emergence of zionist restorationist thought within Protestant ideology; the zionist movement's connections to Protestant countries; England's adoption of the zionist project (followed by the United States) after brief competition with Germany; Catholic opposition to zionism; the relationship between modern Jewish migration and Anglo-Saxon Protestant colonial settlement patterns; and the connection between Protestantism and Jewish groups through capitalism's development in Protestant societies, as described in Weber's thesis, along with Protestant extremists' literal interpretation of the Old Testament.[21]

The strengthened relationship between Christianity and Judaism, fostered by the Puritans, led to what became known as 'Western Christianity' or 'Judeo-Christian heritage.' The Puritans passed down five fundamental beliefs to American society:

i. A belief in a comprehensive divine plan for the world, with America having a predestined purpose since creation.
ii. A conviction in their divine selection to escape the corrupt old world and establish God's kingdom on

[18] Sizer, *Christian Zionism,* 26-27.
[19] Sha'ban, *Min ajl Sahyun*, 66-79.
[20] Sha'ban, *Min ajl Sahyun*, 66-67.
[21] Al-Masiri, *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Yahud*, 3: 16.

earth, drawing parallels with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to Canaan.

iii. A belief in their special covenant with God as partners in executing His mission.

iv. A commitment to enlightening all people on earth and lifting them from ignorance.

v. A belief that this covenant transformed American society into a religious community representing the earthly church of saints.[22]

These beliefs stem from a literal and futuristic interpretation of the Bible. According to certain prophetic interpretations of the Old and New Testaments, God has established a divine plan that will culminate in the final chapter of the universe. This plan is fundamentally structured around God's relationship with Israel.[23] This divine plan culminates in three major events. First is the Rapture, during which Christ will appear in the clouds and gather His believers to heaven. In this event, the dead believers will ascend first, followed by the living - fulfilling Christ's promise to return for His faithful followers (Revelation 3:10, 2:3-14; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.[24] The second event is the Tribulation, a seven-year period characterized by worldwide suffering and tragedy. During this time, the Antichrist will establish his rule from the temple in Jerusalem (Revelation 13:4-8; Matthew 21:24; Daniel 9:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.[25] The Tribulation culminates in Christ's glorious return, leading an army of saints and believers against Satan's forces in the Battle of Megiddo (also known as Armageddon) near Haifa in Palestine (Revelation 16:16.[26] The final event is the Millennium, a thousand-year reign of Christ from the temple.

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22 Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 68-69.
23 Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 321.
24 Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 322.
25 Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*.
26 Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 322, 392.

This period will be marked by universal peace and harmony under Christ's throne.[27]

These events form the core of Dispensationalism, a theological framework that views history as a divine plan extending from creation to the end of time. This theological perspective divides humanity into two distinct groups: the Jews as God's chosen people and the rest of humanity. Within this framework, divine favor is determined by one's relationship to the chosen people - those who love them are loved by God, while those who oppose them face divine opposition.[28]

In his seminal work Christian zionism: From the Roadmap to Armageddon, Stephen Sizer provides a critical analysis of the literal futurist biblical interpretation that underpins Christian zionism, identifying five fundamental flaws.

> i. Changing literalism: Literal futurist interpreters of the Book of Revelation, such as Hal Lindsey, have repeatedly adjusted their readings to match contemporary political and military developments. Lindsey initially speculated cautiously about biblical symbols, suggesting locusts might symbolize advanced helicopters, but later asserted that John actually saw modern weapons like jets and missiles. Similarly, Lindsey shifted his identification of prophetic threats from Russian Communism in 1970 to a Russian-Muslim alliance by 1999, adapting to geopolitical changes. His attempts to date the Second Advent based on Matthew 24:34, where Jesus states, "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened," also failed. After 1988 passed without Christ's return, Lindsey revised his definition of a 'generation' and shifted the starting point from 1948 to 1967. [29]

[27] Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 321.
[28] Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 242.
[29] Sizer, *Christian Zionism,* 124-125.

ii. Symbolic literalism: Christian zionists who insist on literal biblical interpretation have not always been consistent. David Brickner interprets Daniel 9:24-27 figuratively, treating 'weeks' as seven-year periods rather than literal weeks. He also introduces a 2,000-year 'parenthesis' between the 69th and 70th weeks, claiming the prophetic clock stopped inexplicably. Kenneth Barker, editor of the NIV Study Bible, justifies this gap by arguing that the 70th week could not have been fulfilled because the Messiah's work in Daniel 9:24 remains incomplete. Critics note that imposing a 2,000-year gap to preserve literal interpretation is itself highly non-literal. John Goldingay argues that Daniel's 'weeks' should be understood as 'chronography', a stylized scheme for interpreting history, not literal chronology. Hal Lindsey applies similar methods to Revelation, claiming a first-century person could not comprehend modern technology. He suggests John 'actually saw' advanced weapons and described them using first-century phenomena: thermonuclear war looked like a volcanic eruption, locusts represent helicopters (Revelation 9:3-11), and horses prepared for battle represent attack helicopters. As for Revelation 6:1-2, Lindsey claims the 'bow' wielded by the Antichrist is a code for long-range weapons like ICBMs. He even interprets Revelation 9:17's description of fire, hyacinth, and brimstone as referring to the Chinese national flag. In Psalm 83, he equates ancient nations with modern enemies: Philistia represents Palestinians, Tyre represents Lebanon, and Assyria represents Syria. It remains unclear on what basis Lindsey decides when a literal interpretation becomes figurative, beyond fitting a predetermined eschatology. [30]

iii. Contradictory literalism: Dispensationalists claim to use a consistent, plain literal interpretation of Scripture, yet they often reach very different, and even contradictory, conclusions.

[30] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 126-128.

M.R. DeHann	Hal Lindsey
'In Revelation 9:13-21 we have a description of an army of two hundred million horsemen ... seems to be a supernatural army of horrible beings, probably demons, who are permitted to plague the unrepentant sinners on the earth.'	'The four angels of Revelation 9:14-15 will mobilize an army of 200 million soldiers from east of the Euphrates ... I believe these 200 million troops are Red Chinese soldiers accompanied by other Eastern allies.'

Regarding Revelation 9:13-19, for instance, M.R. DeHann and Hal Lindsey disagree sharply: DeHann (along with LaHaye) sees the 200 million as "a supernatural horde of demonic horsemen," while Lindsey and Schuyler English take them to be literal Chinese soldiers, though Lindsey adds that the 'horses' symbolize mobilized ballistic missile launchers. [31]

iv. Enhanced literalism. This involves dispensationalists modifying biblical texts to support their interpretations. Lindsey demonstrates this by inserting 'national' into his interpretation of Romans 11, reinterpreting Matthew 24:15-18 to predict a future Temple and reading Daniel 11:40-45 as prophesying a Russian-led Islamic invasion of Israel. He also links 'Gog and Magog' in Ezekiel 38 to Russia. This interpretation, popularized by Scofield's Reference Bible, has been challenged by scholars who note its absence from Revelation 4-19.[32]

v. The final flaw, arbitrary literalism, describes the inconsistent application of biblical passages to modern events. Lindsey exemplifies this by connecting prophecies to contemporary Israel, Muslim fundamentalism, and global politics without substantial evidence. He even interprets Revelation 12:14-17's 'great eagle' as representing an American airlift to save Jews. This approach extends to other dispensationalists who identify Iraq as 'Babylon' (drawing on Revelation 18 and Isaiah 13) and link Saddam Hussein to biblical prophecy. [33]

[31] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 128-130.
[32] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 130-131.
[33] Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 132-133.

Stephen Sizer's analysis reveals that Christian zionist leaders employ biblical literal interpretation without adherence to consistent methodological or scientific principles. The first two flaws, changing literalism and symbolic literalism, demonstrate how interpretations are frequently modified to accommodate changing historical and political circumstances. Predictions that were once tied to the Cold War, Soviet Communism, or specific dates for Christ's return were later revised when events failed to unfold as anticipated. At the same time, interpreters who claim to follow a strict literal reading often resort to symbolic explanations whenever a literal reading becomes difficult to sustain. Sizer contends that this selective movement between literal and figurative interpretation undermines the claim that dispensationalism is based on a straightforward, objective reading of Scripture. Instead, the method appears to be driven by a pre-existing prophetic framework into which biblical texts are fitted.

The third and fourth flaws, contradictory literalism and enhanced literalism, further challenge the reliability of the dispensationalist interpretation. If a genuinely literal method were being applied consistently, one would expect interpreters to arrive at broadly similar conclusions. Yet prominent dispensational scholars often disagree sharply on the meaning of the same passages, producing competing interpretations that range from literal armies to supernatural demonic forces. Sizer also criticises what he calls 'enhanced literalism,' whereby interpreters introduce concepts not explicitly present in the text, such as a future rebuilt Temple, a national rather than spiritual understanding of Israel, or the identification of Russia with Gog and Magog. In his view, these additions reveal that dispensational readings are not simply derived from Scripture but are influenced by theological assumptions and contemporary geopolitical concerns.

The final flaw, arbitrary literalism, encapsulates Sizer's overall critique. He argues that Christian zionist interpreters often establish direct connections between biblical prophecies and modern political events without clear exegetical justification. The identification of contemporary nations, political leaders, military technologies, and international conflicts with biblical symbols frequently appears speculative and dependent on current events rather than on the original context of the biblical text.

Consequently, these prophetic claims rest more on subjective and changing assumptions than on a coherent and academically defensible hermeneutical method.

Al-Masiri provides insight into this interpretative method, describing how literal interpreters "extract a passage from the sacred text, isolate it from its inherent pattern and general vision, then twist the text's meaning to serve their purpose. Such interpreters, having freed themselves from other constraints imposed by the sacred text through its holistic meaning, freely impose their desired interpretations, whether as prophecies of historical events or newly discovered natural laws."[34] This approach removes texts from their historical and linguistic contexts, combining disparate sacred texts to generate predictions about the future. This decontextualized literal interpretation serves to mobilize religious sentiment in support of nationalist policies and colonial expansion. Moshe Dayan's 1987 statement exemplifies this approach: "If we possess the Torah and consider ourselves the people of the Torah, we must possess all the lands specified in the Torah."[35]

The implications of this approach extend to justifying the displacement and removal of indigenous inhabitants, termed "holy genocide", following the biblical precedent of Joshua, who conducted what would now be termed ethnic cleansing (Joshua 10:28-43).[36] This pattern of biblical justification for displacement has historical precedent in the American context, where Puritan settlers, adhering to biblical literalism, conducted similar campaigns against Native Americans, drawing parallels to Joshua's biblical actions against the Amalekites and Palestinians.[37]

Other critics of Christian zionism present several arguments against literal interpretations of biblical prophecy. Donald Wagner challenges the dispensationalist practice of projecting Old and New Testament texts into the future, advocating instead for a focus on daily spiritual practice and trust in God. He argues that the New Testament presents concepts like the Temple, Jerusalem, and promised lands in allegorical or spiritual terms rather than literal

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34 Al-Masiri, *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Yahud*, 4: 41.

35 Roger Garaudy, *Al-Asatir al-Mu'assissah li al-Siyasah al-Isra'iliyyah*, 4th ed. (Kaherah: Dar al-Shuruq, 2002). 73.

36 Garaudy, *Al-Asatir al-Mu'assissah,* 63-82.

37 Garaudy, *Al-Asatir al-Mu'assissah,* 79.

ones.[38] This perspective is reinforced by Jonathan Kuttab, who questions the validity of treating prophecy as a tool for predicting political events. While dispensationalists defend literal scriptural interpretation by pointing to fulfilled prophecies about Christ's first coming, Kuttab emphasizes prophecy's role as a call to repentance rather than future prediction. He further contrasts Christian zionism's concept of God's special covenant with Israel against a more universal divine love.[39]

Palestinian Anglican priest Naim Ateek offers a particularly strong critique, arguing that Christian zionism conflates the Gospel with imperialism, colonialism, and militarism. He explicitly rejects Christian zionist doctrines as false teachings that contradict biblical messages of love, mercy, and justice. Ateek calls for liberation from militaristic ideologies and occupation, advocating instead for global healing and prayerful remembrance of both Palestinian and Israeli suffering.[40] This criticism finds scholarly support from Dr. J. Calvin Keene, former head of the Department of Religious Studies at St. Lawrence University. Keene challenges the validity of supposed prophetic texts, arguing that they are either too vague, already fulfilled in their historical context, or misinterpreted beyond their original meaning.[41] Professor Fouad Sha`ban builds on this analysis, noting how American fundamentalists, both Christian and Jewish, present these prophetic texts to believers who lack the means to verify their interpretations.[42]

There are six political implications of Christian zionists based on their literal and futurist interpretation of the Bible:

i. Viewing Jews as God's chosen people, they advocate material support for Israel, often leading to uncritical endorsement of its policies, including those seen as apartheid.
ii. They actively promote Jewish resettlement in Israel, partnering with organizations like the Jewish Agency.

[38] Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133.
[39] Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*.
[40] Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 135.
[41] Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*, 315.
[42] Sha'ban, *Min Ajl Sahyun*.

iii. They believe the biblical land of Israel belongs solely to Jews, justifying annexation and settlement expansion.
iv. Jerusalem is seen as the exclusive Jewish capital, prompting efforts to pressure Western governments to move their embassies there.
v. The construction of the Third Temple and the reinstitution of sacrifices are supported by dispensationalists who view these as prophetic necessities.
vi. Convinced of an impending apocalyptic war, they reject peace efforts with Palestinians, considering compromise as siding against God and Israel.

While not all Christian zionists share these beliefs to the same extent, their widespread influence, particularly among American Evangelicals, fosters an unwavering support for Israel with potentially destructive consequences.[43]

The Sword-Verse

The interpretation of religious texts, particularly passages that appear to address conflict and warfare, requires careful and nuanced scholarly analysis. Within the Islamic tradition, certain Qur'anic verses have been the subject of intense debate, especially when detached from their textual and historical contexts. Among these, the Sword-Verse occupies a central place in contemporary discussions because some militant and extremist groups have invoked it to justify violence, forced conversion, and expansionist agendas. Isolating the verse from its broader Qur'anic framework and specific historical circumstances, these groups portray it as a universal command to fight non-Muslims, thereby lending religious legitimacy to acts of militancy and, in some cases, terrorism. [44]

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43 Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 252-253.

44 'Abdullah 'Azzam, *Al-Difa' 'an Aradi al-Muslimin* (n.p.: Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, n.d.), 36-37; Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Faraj, *Al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah* (London: Al-Ansar Publications, 2000), 53-56.

Such interpretations are rooted in a rigidly literalist approach that fragments the unity of the Qur'anic message. Rather than reading the verse in light of the Qur'an's overarching ethical and theological principles, literalist readings focus narrowly on isolated textual fragments and detached linguistic meanings. This method overlooks the interconnected nature of Qur'anic discourse and the historical context in which the verse was revealed. As a result, a text addressing a specific historical situation is transformed into a timeless mandate for confrontation, stripping it of its moral, legal, and contextual qualifications.

A key component of this interpretive approach is the claim that the Sword-Verse abrogates approximately 140 Qur'anic verses that advocate peaceful coexistence, religious freedom, patience, and dialogue.[45] Although this assertion has been challenged by numerous Muslim scholars throughout history, it continues to play a significant role in extremist narratives because it allows a single verse to override a large body of Qur'anic teachings that promote tolerance and restraint. Consequently, the rich ethical vision of the Qur'an is reduced to a simplified narrative centered on conflict and domination.

A sound understanding of the Sword-Verse, therefore, requires a contextual analysis that incorporates linguistic, historical, and theological considerations. Islamic exegetical traditions have long regarded context not as a supplementary aid but as an essential methodological principle for determining textual meaning. Through examining the verse within its immediate textual setting, its circumstances of revelation, and the broader objectives of the Qur'anic message, scholars are able to challenge reductive interpretations and recover a more balanced understanding of the text. This approach reflects the methodological insights of classical Muslim exegetes, who recognized that meaning emerges through a gradual movement from the specific to the general and from the immediate context to the broader theological framework. Like the assembly of a complex intellectual puzzle, each contextual element contributes to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the Qur'anic discourse.

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[45] Mustafa Zayd, *Al-Naskh fi al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Kaherah: Dar al-Wafa', 1987), 2: 507-508.

Contextualizing the Sword-Verse

The interpretative analysis of the Sword verse necessitates a comprehensive examination of its historical and linguistic context to understand its relationship with Qur'anic principles of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. The verse states:

فَإِذَا انسَلَخَ الْأَشْهُرُ الْحُرُمُ فَاقْتُلُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَيْثُ وَجَدتُّمُوهُمْ وَخُذُوهُمْ وَاحْصُرُوهُمْ وَاقْعُدُوا لَهُمْ كُلَّ مَرْصَدٍ ۚ فَإِن تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ فَخَلُّوا سَبِيلَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ

Al-Tawbah 9:5

Translation: Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, seize them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, then let them go their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

This verse, named for its martial implications regarding idolaters,[46] appears in Surah al-Tawbah, which was revealed in the ninth year of the Medinan period. As one of the final revelations, the surah primarily addresses the challenge of hypocrisy within the Muslim community, earning it the title *al-Fadihah* (The Exposure).[47] It delineates the ultimate framework for Muslim relations with both idolaters and People of the Book.[48] The historical context reveals a complex narrative of interfaith relations. The Makkan period was characterized by systematic persecution of early Muslims and deliberate obstruction of the Prophet's mission by the city's idolatrous leadership.[49] This

[46] Isma'il ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* (Kaherah: Mu'assasah Qurtubah, 2000), 7: 150.

[47] Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 2006), 10: 93.

[48] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, trans. Adil Salahi (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2004), 8:2.

[49] Muhammad ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Alfred Guillaume, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 143-145.

oppression culminated in the Muslim migration to Madinah, where they established a secure community.[50]

A significant diplomatic milestone was the Treaty of Hudaybiyah in 6 AH, establishing a ten-year peace accord between Muslims and the Quraysh.[51] However, this peace was shattered when the Quraysh supported their allies, the Bakr tribe, in attacking the Prophet-allied Khuza`ah tribe. This breach led to the Conquest of Makkah and subsequent military engagements at Hunayn and Ta'if in 8 AH.[52] The immediate context of the verse's revelation followed the Battle of Tabuk (9 AH), when the Prophet, concerned about idolatrous practices at the Ka`bah, sent emissaries to announce a four-month grace period for existing treaties. This ultimatum precipitated widespread acceptance of Islam across Arabia.[53]

More specifically, the textual framework of the Sword Verse passage articulates a diplomatic protocol governing Muslim-idolater relations. The opening declaration addresses treaty violations by specific idolater groups who had conspired against the Muslim community.[54] These groups were granted a four-month grace period for conducting affairs and resolving their positions.[55] This diplomatic recalibration, announced during the Grand Pilgrimage on either the Day of Sacrifice or the Day of 'Arafat, established a clear timeline for political transition.[56] Significantly, the passage demonstrates a nuanced approach to diplomatic relations. Those who maintained their treaties and refrained from hostile activities were explicitly exempted from these measures, with their agreements honored in full.[57] This differential treatment reflects an appreciation of political allegiance and treaty obligations.

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50 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 118-124.

51 Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 499-507; al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*, 10: 89-99.

52 Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*, 10:99-100.

53 Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 8:33, 47.

54 Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 8:32.

55 Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, trans. and ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2004), 3:188; Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 8:49.

56 Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an*, 10:104-105.

57 Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 8:32.

The verse establishes a graduated response system based on the degree of hostility demonstrated by various idolater groups. As noted by al-Sha`rawi, these groups fell into three distinct categories: active opponents of Islam, passive antagonists who refrained from direct confrontation, and neutral parties. This categorization informed the implementation of proportional measures, ranging from military engagement to surveillance.[58] Taken from the passage of the Sword verse, those idolaters who deserve death are identified with seven specific characteristics: oath-breaking, explicit hostility toward Muslims, commodification of divine revelations, obstruction of religious practice, corruption (fasiqun), transgression (mu'tadun), and leadership of opposition forces. However, the text simultaneously provides mechanisms for reconciliation, offering protection to those seeking understanding of Islamic teachings and safe passage for those requiring it.

More importantly, a crucial distinction in interpreting the Sword-verse lies in its specific application to certain categories of idolaters, rather than encompassing all non-Muslim religious communities. Of particular significance is the Qur'anic treatment of Jews and Christians, who are accorded the distinctive honorific title of *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book). This theological categorization, appearing more than fifty times throughout the Qur'anic text,[59] establishes a fundamental distinction between polytheistic practices and religious traditions possessing divine scripture.

No Compulsion in Religion

The contextual interpretation of the Sword-Verse becomes particularly important when examined in light of Islam's foundational commitment to religious freedom. Although some extremist ideologues have portrayed the verse as a universal command to compel non-Muslims to embrace Islam, such a reading contradicts both its historical context and the broader teachings of the Qur'an. Central to the Islamic conception of

[58] Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Tafsir al-Sha'rawi* (Kaherah: Dar Akhbar al-Yawm, 1991), 8:4877-4878.

[59] Muhammad al-Zayn, *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Ma'ani al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 1:167-177.

religious liberty is the Qur'anic declaration: "There is no compulsion in religion." Some proponents of militant interpretations have claimed that this verse was abrogated by the Sword-Verse; however, this assertion overlooks the contextual nature of Qur'an 9:5 and its specific application to hostile groups that violated their treaties with the Muslim community. The phrase *la ikraha fi al-din* constitutes a clear and categorical rejection of coercion in matters of faith, establishing religious choice as a fundamental principle of Islamic teaching.[60] This principle is further reinforced by the Qur'anic recognition of human diversity as part of the divine will: "Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue in their differences" (11:118). Likewise, the concept of *taʿaruf* (mutual acquaintance and understanding) in Qur'an 49:13 affirms the legitimacy of religious and cultural plurality and encourages constructive engagement among diverse communities.

From an Islamic theological perspective, faith is meaningful only when it arises from free conviction rather than external pressure. Genuine belief is an inward act of the heart that cannot be imposed by force. Indeed, the very concept of Islam, derived from the notion of willing submission to God, presupposes voluntary acceptance rather than coercion. Consequently, forced conversion is not only ethically objectionable but also devoid of religious value. This understanding is fully consistent with the contextual reading of the Sword-Verse advanced in this study. Rather than prescribing a universal policy toward non-Muslims, the verse addressed a specific political and military situation involving treaty violators who had engaged in hostility against the Muslim community. Its provisions were therefore contingent upon particular circumstances and cannot be divorced from the broader Qur'anic framework that upholds freedom of belief, human diversity, and peaceful coexistence. Read in this light, the Sword-Verse functions as a contextual directive concerning security and treaty enforcement, not as a theological justification for religious compulsion or forced conversion.

[60] Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur, *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah li-al-Nashr, 1984), 3:26.

Conclusion

This article has examined two seemingly distinct manifestations of scriptural literalism, Christian zionist interpretations of biblical prophecy and extremist Muslim interpretations of the Sword-Verse. Although these cases emerge from different religious traditions, historical experiences, and theological frameworks, the comparative analysis reveals a similar interpretive pattern. In both instances, sacred texts are detached from their historical and textual contexts and transformed into instruments for legitimizing exclusion, domination, and violence. The comparison demonstrates that the problem does not lie in the scriptures themselves but in methods of interpretation that isolate particular passages from the broader ethical and theological vision of the religious tradition. In the case of Christian zionism, selective literal readings of biblical prophecies have been used to provide theological justification for territorial claims and political dispossession. Such interpretations often privilege particular prophetic texts while overlooking broader biblical themes of justice, compassion, and the equal dignity of all human beings. Treating ancient prophecies as direct mandates for contemporary political projects, these readings depart from interpretive approaches that consider the historical circumstances, literary forms, and moral objectives of scripture. A comparable dynamic can be observed in extremist interpretations of the Sword-Verse. This happens via extracting the verse from its historical setting and ignoring its connection to treaty violations and military aggression, militant groups transform a context-specific directive into a universal command for perpetual conflict. This reading disregards the Qur'an's wider teachings on religious freedom, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence, thereby reducing a complex ethical and legal discourse to a simplistic narrative of confrontation. When placed in comparative perspective, both case studies reveal a common interpretive pathology: the selective appropriation of scripture to advance ideological and political objectives. In each case, isolated passages are elevated above the broader moral framework of the religious tradition, allowing exceptional texts to override foundational principles of justice, mercy, peace, and respect for human dignity. Although the specific outcomes differ, territorial expansion and political dispossession

in one case, and religiously justified militancy in the other, the underlying interpretive mechanism remains remarkably similar.

The article, therefore, underscores the importance of contextual interpretation as a safeguard against the misuse of sacred texts. A responsible interpretive approach requires attention to historical context, linguistic nuance, textual coherence, and overarching ethical objectives. Such an approach not only provides a more accurate understanding of scripture but also helps prevent religious texts from being mobilized in support of violence and exclusion. To place these two case studies in comparative dialogue, the research highlights that decontextualized literalism is not confined to any single religion; rather, it is a broader interpretive phenomenon that can distort religious teachings and threaten efforts toward peace, justice, and interreligious coexistence.

The article highlights several key areas for reform aimed at promoting contextual religious understanding and reducing interpretive misuse of sacred texts. First, educational reform is essential. Religious education should move beyond rote memorization toward approaches that prioritize contextual interpretation, critical thinking, and familiarity with advanced interpretive methodologies. Integrating interfaith learning within curricula can further enhance awareness of diverse traditions and foster intellectual openness among students. Second, greater collaboration between religious scholars and peace studies researchers is needed. Such interdisciplinary engagement can deepen understanding of how interpretive methods influence conflict dynamics and support the development of frameworks for assessing the social impact of religious interpretations. Third, policy and diplomatic training should incorporate religious literacy. Diplomats and policymakers require a nuanced understanding of interpretive traditions to engage effectively with religious communities and address faith-based tensions. This should be complemented by the inclusion of religious leaders in peace-building initiatives and the support of moderate voices in public discourse. Fourth, media and communication strategies must promote responsible and context-sensitive religious reporting. This includes countering decontextualized or extremist interpretations online and encouraging platforms that present

balanced and informed perspectives on religious texts. Fifth, institutional capacity should be strengthened through the establishment of specialized centers dedicated to the study of religious interpretation and conflict resolution, alongside networks that support best practices in religious education and dialogue. Finally, community-based initiatives should encourage interfaith dialogue and grassroots engagement that foster peaceful readings of religious traditions and build resilience against extremist narratives.

Overall, these recommendations emphasize that sustainable peace requires strengthening contextual and critical approaches to religious interpretation across educational, scholarly, policy, media, institutional, and community levels. Moving beyond literalist readings is not only vital for safeguarding the integrity of religious traditions but also for promoting global peace, social cohesion, and human dignity.

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