

Them and us: When citing texts in times of war, play fair

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

While doing research for a talk on religion and violence, I kept running into accounts of people who selectively quote the Qur'an to show how it commits Muslims to killing "us" infidels. That research inspired dour thoughts of the sort that I do not often let intrude on this page.

On policy: since 9/11 anyone who whispers that the nation has not acted well gets dismissed as treasonously unpatriotic. Count me out. I devoted years to writing the history of religion in America, a beloved place whose ground I kiss when I return from travels.

On religion: if you see ambiguities in our holy book as well as others', you get dismissed as a heretic. Critics of such openness insist that "their" Allah is murderous and "our" God is never so. For me and my kind, the loving God of Israel, revealed also to Christians, is to be loved. However, we also believe that that God is a God of truth and is not served by malign distortions. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor's God or Book, nor witness at all until thou comest clean on what thy book portrays, a holy warrior God."

In *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, Leo Lefebure cites Susan Niditch's distillation of biblical Israel's attitudes toward war. One model demanded "omnicide," the utter destruction of the enemy—male and female, child and adult—as a sacrifice to God. (See Deut. 2:34-35; 3:6-7; Josh. 6:17; 8:2, 24-28; 10:28-40; 11:14.) The death of the enemy, infants and all, pleases God.

The second model calls for the annihilation of enemies as sinners condemned by divine justice. (See Deut. 13:12-18; 20:10-18.)

The priestly tradition of Israel insisted on the elimination of enemies because they were unclean. (See Num. 31.) All males must be killed, but "keep the virgins alive for yourselves." There are other words for that in warfare.

Next, the "bardic tradition glorified war as beautiful and noble. . . . War is a game." The positive side here is that war must be just and prisoners are allowed to return home. (See 1 Sam. 17:1-54; 2 Sam. 2:12-16; 2 Kings 6:22-23; 2 Chron. 28; Gen. 14; 1 Sam. 30.)

The fifth model focuses on the underdog who plays the trickster, using deception is a matter of course. We call it guerrilla warfare. (See Gen. 34; Judg. 3:12-20; 4-5; 14-15; 19-21; Esth. 8-9.)

The ideology of expediency sees all means as necessary and justified in war. Compare Sherman's "War is hell." In the case of David, ruthlessness brings success. (See 2 Sam. 5:6-8; 8:2.)

Finally, observe the ideology of nonparticipation by the Israelites (Ex. 14-15), who stand on the sidelines while God does the actual killing and gets all the glory.

Do we expose to the view of Qur'anists and others "our" warrior God of 1 Samuel 15:3? God told Saul to kill all the Amalekites, including infants and children. To which Martin Buber responded: "Samuel has misunderstood God." Buber said that an observant Jew, "when he has to choose between God and the Bible, chooses God." And "nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul because he has not murdered his enemy."

Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, like Judaism and Christianity, all have their Bubers. Their sacred texts, like ours, have nonwarrior revelations of gods or God. When citing texts in times of war, play fair. Shalom.