

# DEATH TO UNBELIEVERS? A LOOK AT THE QURAN'S MOST MISREAD PASSAGE

## Faith & Values

Aziz Junjo  
Special to The Seattle Times

At a recent interfaith gathering, a few guests privately expressed sincere concerns about the often quoted Quranic passage that refers to the killing of unbelievers — a passage I am frequently asked about.



While none of those asking about this passage had had the opportunity to read the entire Quran with understanding, in taking a few lines out of context they sadly came away with an erroneous interpretation, as many non-Muslims and a few misguided Muslims do today. Muslims believe the Quran to be the preserved and

unchanged word of God, a book of moral and spiritual guidance that mentions and confirms three previous Holy Scriptures by name: the Torah, Psalms and the gospel given to Jesus. The Quran was revealed at the peak of the Arabic language in terms of its expression, vocabulary, artistic and poetic value, and Mus-

lims consider it their Lingua Franca.

The Quran is written in pure, rich, lyrical Arabic that is read from right to left, and its complexity has posed many difficulties for translators.

Every word and sentence has deep meanings that speak to the past, present and even the future, but which repeatedly emphasize the monotheistic belief in only one God.

Muslim children have always been encouraged to memorize all or parts of the Quran in Arabic. When recited aloud, its rhythmic tones make it easy for even non-Arabic speakers to learn the words by heart.

God says in the Quran, "And We have certainly made the Quran easy to remember, so is there any who will remember?" (54:17)

As a child growing up here in the 1960s, when there were no mosques in the area, I used to sit with an Arabic linguist who attended the University of Washington and who taught me the Quran in Arabic.

While memorizing it was easy, interpreting and understanding it was anything but. Some parts referred to specific historical situations, while others offered universal spiritual principles.

Today, the most quoted — and the most misinterpreted — Quranic passage (2:190-192) is the one giving permission to fight the unbelievers. What many don't know is that it speaks only to a specific time, and only at the city of Mecca, when the idol worshippers of Mecca had broken a truce with the Muslims and did horrible injustices. The passage speaks to the Muslims with numerous con-

ditions, including that fighting in self-defense was a last resort.

I am most impressed with an analysis of this passage by Lesley Hazleton, of Seattle, an agnostic Jew and an award-winning British-American writer.

Over three months, she read in their entirety four well-known translations and a transliteration of the Quran, along with the Arabic text, then offered an interpretation of this disputed verse.

She describes the conditions of this verse as: not that you must kill, but that to do so at that time was allowed only under many conditions: including only after a defined grace period had passed; only if no other pact was in place; only if the idol worshippers stopped you from going to the Kaba (in Mecca); and only if they attacked you first — and even then, God is

merciful, forgiveness is supreme.

Her findings reveal that the verse is allowing Muslims to defend themselves only with peace as their ultimate goal, which mirrors the interpretation of Islamic scholars today.

God speaks to all of humankind in the Quran without regard to race, color, social or financial situation or even genealogy. The clear unveiling of its truthful message can only come by reading it cover to cover with understanding.

From the beginning of creation God has sent prophets, messengers with divine scriptures, to guide mankind. Muslims believe his final unchanged text is in the Quran.

Aziz Junjo is host of "Focus on Islam," a weekly cable-television show, and a frequent speaker. Readers may send him comments to [fathhoolums@seattletimes.com](mailto:fathhoolums@seattletimes.com).