

Martyrs, Virgins and Grapes

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By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF AUG. 4, 2004

"The virgins are calling you," Mohamed Atta wrote reassuringly to his fellow hijackers just before 9/11.

It has long been a staple of Islam that Muslim martyrs will go to paradise and marry 72 black-eyed virgins. But a growing body of rigorous scholarship on the Koran points to a less sensual paradise -- and, more important, may offer a step away from fundamentalism and toward a reawakening of the Islamic world.

Some Islamic theologians protest that the point was companionship, never heavenly sex. Others have interpreted the pleasures quite explicitly; one, al-Suyuti, wrote that sex in paradise is pretty much continual and so glorious that "were you to experience it in this world you would faint."

But now the same tools that historians, linguists and archaeologists have applied to the Bible for about 150 years are beginning to be applied to the Koran. The results are explosive.

The Koran is beautifully written, but often obscure. One reason is that the Arabic language was born as a written language with the Koran, and there's growing evidence that many of the words were Syriac or Aramaic.

For example, the Koran says martyrs going to heaven will get "hur," and the word was taken by early commentators to mean "virgins," hence those 72 consorts. But in Aramaic, hur meant "white" and was commonly used to mean "white grapes."

Some martyrs arriving in paradise may regard a bunch of grapes as a letdown. But the scholar who pioneered this pathbreaking research, using the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg for security reasons, noted in an e-mail interview that grapes made more sense in context because the Koran compares them to crystal and pearls, and because contemporary accounts have paradise abounding with fruit, especially white grapes.

Dr. Luxenberg's analysis, which has drawn raves from many scholars, also transforms the meaning of the verse that is sometimes cited to require women to wear veils. Instead of instructing pious women "to draw their veils over their bosoms," he says, it advises them to "buckle their belts around their hips."

Likewise, a reference to Muhammad as "ummi" has been interpreted to mean he was illiterate, making his Koranic revelations all the more astonishing. But some scholars argue that this simply means he was not "of the book," in the sense that he was neither Christian nor Jewish.

Islam has a tradition of vigorous interpretation and adjustment, called *ijtihad*, but Koranic interpretation remains frozen in the model of classical commentaries written nearly two centuries after the prophet's death. The history of the rise and fall of great powers over the last 3,000 years underscores that only when people are able to debate issues freely -- when religious taboos fade -- can intellectual inquiry lead to scientific discovery, economic revolution and powerful new civilizations. "The taboos are still great" on such Koranic scholarship, notes Gabriel Said Reynolds, an Islam expert at the University of Notre Dame. He called the new scholarship on early Islam "a first step" to an intellectual awakening.

But Muslim fundamentalists regard the Koran -- every word of it -- as God's own language, and they have violently attacked freethinking scholars as heretics. So Muslim intellectuals have been intimidated, and Islam has often been transmitted by narrow-minded extremists.

(This problem is not confined to Islam. On my blog,

www.nytimes.com/kristofresponds, I've been battling with fans of the Christian fundamentalist "Left Behind" series. Some are eager to see me left behind.)

Still, there are encouraging signs. Islamic feminists are emerging to argue for religious interpretations leading to greater gender equality. An Iranian theologian has called for more study of the Koran's Syriac roots. Tunisian and German scholars are collaborating on a new critical edition of the Koran based on the earliest manuscripts. And just last week, Iran freed Hashem Aghajari, who had been sentenced to death for questioning harsh interpretations of Islam.

"The breaking of the sometimes erroneous bonds in the religious tradition will be the condition for a positive evolution in other scientific and intellectual domains," Dr. Luxenberg says.

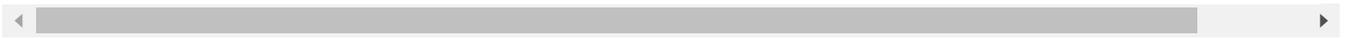
The world has a huge stake in seeing the Islamic world get on its feet again. The obstacle is not the Koran or Islam, but fundamentalism, and I hope that this scholarship is a sign of an incipient Islamic Reformation -- and that future terrorist recruits will be promised not 72 black-eyed virgins, but just a plateful of grapes.

William Safire is on vacation.

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