

## CHRIST IS OUR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF: RELATIVE VIOLENCE IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

I'm writing a book on the origins of religious violence and my thesis is that there has been far more religiously motivated violence in the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—than the Asian religions. Draft chapters can be viewed at [www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm).

A person on our local list-serve Vision2020 had this to say about relative violence in Islam and Christianity:

"Up to the eleventh century Islam had a sizable lead. From 1095 to 1291 the Church picked up the pace and nosed ahead. It was neck and neck till 1834 and the end of the Spanish Inquisition. After that Allah's chosen made it no contest."

There are more than a few problems with this summary history.

Islam could not possibly have had any sort of lead before the 11th Century because Christianity had a very good head start. Under Theodosius I, being a pagan was a capital crime, and even Christians were arrested if they practiced even the most minor of pagan practices.

On December 25, 390, Theodosius ordered the slaughter of 7,000 pagans in Thessalonica. The British historian Hugh Trevor Roper called Theodosius "the first Spanish Inquisitor," and "the Christian monarch who introduced the world to religious totalitarianism."

Bishop Ambrose, who baptized St. Augustine, made Theodosius do penance for the atrocities at Thessalonica, but he still proclaimed that "Christ was now at the head of the [Roman] legions."

This reminds me of the sign outside a fundamentalist church in L.A., right after the invasion of Iraq: "Christ is our Commander-in-Chief." I'm assuming that our born-again president would have to agree with this demotion.

Under Muslim rule Jews and Christians were generally asked to offer a special tax, not their heads. The slaughter of 4,000 Jews in Muslim Granada in 1066 was the exception

rather than the rule, and Jews generally had much better lives in Muslim Spain than anywhere else in Christian Europe.

In 1099, men, women, and children were slaughtered indiscriminately when Christian forces captured Jerusalem. An eyewitness reported that the Crusaders "rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies."

When Saladin retook the city in 1187, Christians were only required to pay a ransom and then free to return home. Some of Saladin's officers paid for those who could not afford it, and about 7,000 others were sold into slavery.

In Muslim India Buddhist and Hindus were, incredibly enough, declared "People of the Book," and the tax on non-Muslims was only sporadically enforced and even more infrequently collected.

Most of the ancestors of Muslims in Pakistan, Bangladesh (especially here), India, Indonesia, and Malaysia freely converted to Islam. Areas in India where forced conversions were attempted are now the places where one finds the fewest Muslims per capita.

Some Mughal emperors ordered the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist temples, but local resistance and intimidated Mughal functionaries meant that relatively few temples were liquidated. Early Christian emperors were much more successful in destroying pagan temples, including the one in Alexandria that housed the finest library in the ancient world.

Curiously, the Vision2020 post above ended Christian atrocities in 1834, but during the Taiping Rebellion, Chinese Christian armies were responsible for killing 10-20 million people between 1852-1864. I would hazard a guess that more Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian temples were destroyed by the Taipings in 12 years than 600 years of Muslim rule in India.

Some have claimed that the Taipings were not really Christians, but that is simply not the case. They took great pains to eliminate Chinese religious influences; they enforced

the 10 Commandments at the point of a sword; and they followed the Bible very carefully, including the prophecies in the Book of Revelation.

Short of Osama bin Laden getting several nukes and using them, militant Muslims have a long way to go to match the historical Christian kill rate.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. See his columns as the Palouse Pundit at [www.NickGier.com](http://www.NickGier.com).