

## Out of Darkness Comes Light

by Ahmed Afzaal

Last year, a small crisis was created by Mr. Terry Jones, pastor of a nondenominational church Gainesville, FL, when he announced his plans to burn a copy of the Qur'an on the anniversary of September 11, 2001. Public outcry, not to mention the disapproval of General David Petraeus, eventually persuaded Mr. Jones to abandon his plan. Those of us who thought that the story had reached its conclusion have just been proven wrong, as Mr. Jones has once again found his way back into the news after he actually carried out what he had threatened to do last fall. This time around, the pastor conducted a mock trial of the Qur'an in which the jury, consisting of twelve members of his church, found the Islamic scripture guilty of "crimes against humanity," including the promotion of terrorism.



Mr. Jones is reported to have said that he and his followers decided to burn the Qur'an because the "court system of America does not allow convicted criminals to go free," and because "we feel a deep obligation to stay with the court system of America." Even though the media did not give Mr. Jones the same attention he received last year, and quite rightly so, the news of his action has already led to four days of violent protest in Afghanistan in which twenty people have reportedly died. Mr. Jones, who has received death threats, says that he is willing to die for his cause.

I do not believe that Mr. Jones and his beliefs and actions deserve to be taken seriously. The pastor clearly does not represent the overwhelming majority of Christians who live in the United States; he has only a negligible following and his action is being condemned by the leaders of mainstream churches from around the nation. The incident, however, is susceptible to being misinterpreted and/or exploited in the service of less than noble aims. The death threats to Mr. Jones should be denounced, but they do represent a serious problem, and there is certainly the possibility of further violence in relation to this incident. I would therefore like to make some remarks that I believe are pertinent.

First, let me note a few theological ironies underlying this sad and sordid affair. I find it very bizarre that, before having a copy of the Qur'an burned, Mr. Jones chose to conduct a mock trial of the Islamic Scripture. This was strange because one of the main polemical objections that evangelical Christians often raise is that Islam, being a religion of the Law, is inferior to Christianity, which is the religion of Grace. Even though this dichotomy is both false and dangerous, it is interesting to see that Mr. Jones had to resort to the principle of Law in this case, ignoring the principle of Grace and unconditional Love. His appeal to the US legal system was equally ironic, since, in American courts, the jury is supposed to consist of "one's peers." If the Qur'an is to be put on trial, it can only be judged by its peers, i.e., its equals. This means a jury consisting of other sacred and authoritative texts, including the Bible and the US Constitution. But if the Qur'an is guilty because crimes have been committed in its name, then, by the same logic, the Bible and the US Constitution would also face similar — if not worse — charges. And if it is the case that no community or nation is truly innocent, what gives anyone the right to cast the first stone?

I realize that Mr. Jones is a marginal figure, in the sense that the vast majority of American, both Christians and non-Christians, would never think of setting a copy of the Qur'an on fire. It is also true, unfortunately, that many who are denouncing this act are citing the safety of US troops abroad as their main reason for doing so; they are not pointing out the fallacies of Mr. Jones' beliefs about

the Qur'an and its alleged link with the violence committed in its name. Even though Mr. Jones is pretty much alone in his extremist act, I am concerned that his views on the Qur'an are not particularly unique to him; similar views seem to be held by a relatively large number of Americans.

Whenever it is claimed that the Qur'an is responsible for Muslims acting violently, at least two assumptions are implied: first, to say that "they" are violent is to tacitly claim that "we" are not, and second, to say that the Qur'an is the real culprit is to imply that Muslims are somehow ahistorical creatures whose actions are completely disconnected from the contingencies of their social, political, and economic conditions. The first assumption reveals an extraordinary degree of ignorance and even self-deception regarding the violent history of Christianity, as well as a deliberate tendency to ignore the violence perpetrated by the American empire itself; the second assumption is merely a semi-conscious attempt to avoid looking at the United States' own role in the world. The truth of the matter is that violence is not just a Muslim problem; it is a human problem. To think of violence exclusively as something that "they" do against "us" is not only to disregard the much greater violence of our own, but it is also a perfect recipe to perpetuate rather than solve the problem.

There are several issues surrounding Mr. Jones' action and the reactions that it sparked. Let me note three of them.

First, burning a copy of the Qur'an is a symbolic act, but that does not make it any less egregious. Symbols are repositories of meaning, whereas human beings are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. Attacking a community's symbols, particularly those that are experienced as manifestations of the Sacred, can have disastrous consequences. The Qur'an is much more than a collection of words printed on paper and bound between two covers; just as the Cross is not merely two perpendicular lines intersecting each other, and just as the US flag is not simply a piece of cloth with a particular red, blue, and white pattern. As Paul Tillich observed, symbols participate in the reality and power of what they represent. For Muslims, the Qur'an is not merely the "Word of God" but is also experienced as somehow participating in the very reality of the Divine. The Islamic Scripture, like the Christian Cross and the US flag, should be recognized as a repository of transcendental meaning held sacred by a large community; as such, attacking it can easily provoke negative reactions. Generally speaking, Muslims are not being uniquely irrational when they react with anger at the desecration of their sacred symbols; they are merely expressing what is most human in all of us. This is not to condone the violence, of course, but to point out the universality of the sentiment behind the reaction.

Second, a particular insult to a sacred symbol may itself be insignificant, but it can still stir up people's emotions if there is prior history of injury coming from the same general direction. The world has witnessed strong anti-Western reactions from Muslim communities in the Rushdie affair during the late 1980s, in the case of the desecration of the Qur'an at Guantanamo in 2005, in the Danish cartoons controversy in 2006, and in the online campaign to draw cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in 2010. In each of these cases, it appears that sections of Muslim communities were guilty of overreacting to what were trivial offenses. For some people, this only confirms what they already know to be true, i.e., that Islam is a fanatic, intolerant, violence-prone, art-hating, and modernity-resisting religion. A broader perspective on history, however, gives an entirely different picture.

The Muslim reactions to the desecrations of their symbols do not take place in a vacuum, but within the context of an uneasy relationship with the West that is characterized by a substantial disparity of power. There happens to be a widespread grief among Muslim communities that has been caused by the painful experience of political subjugation at the hands of European colonialism, as well as the social disintegration, economic deprivation, cultural collapse, institutional destruction, and intellectual mutilation that accompanied the political aspects of the colonial experience. At least part of what makes this legacy difficult to overcome is the continuation in the postcolonial period of the relationship of domination and exploitation that was first put in place by classical colonialism. Given this background, it can be seen how the desecration of a symbol is often



from this whole affair? I think it can. It is impossible to fool all the people all the time, and it is out of events like this that people of conscience are stimulated into learning about each other and into establishing better, more humane relationships.

**Ahmed Afzaal**, Ph.D., holds his doctorate in Religion and Society from Drew University, and is an assistant professor of Comparative Religion at Concordia College. Dr. Afzaal was born in Pakistan, where he studied science and attended medical school, and is the author of numerous articles on subjects including religion and social change.

**Views:** 361

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