

In defence of burning Korans

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I don't understand why so many Muslims and others, including Leonard Stern (Bad Christian, *Citizen*, 8 September), are upset about the plan a pastor in Florida has to burn a pile of Korans (Florida pastor says going ahead with Koran burning, *Citizen*, 8 September).

After all, Muslims believe that the Koran is the word of God. As the word of God, it cannot be destroyed. Of course, a Koran, a book, can be destroyed, but the Koran, the word of God, is indestructible.

It might be a pity were all copies of the Koran to be burned or otherwise to be lost to us. (If that were to happen, though, surely God would speak to another messenger. Not to speak to another messenger would be to abandon humanity.) But this is not a case in which all Korans are at risk.

I cannot help but think that all this fraught concern for a few sets of bound pages and ink is a plain instance of idolatry.

Muslims simply should not be concerned about the fate of any particular copy of their holy book.

Oh, but it's the disrespect to Islam and to their identity as Muslims that offends and angers Muslims, not simply the destruction of a bunch of books. What angers various non-Muslims is that the pastor intends to disparage, mock, and offend Muslims. We all, of course, Muslims included, recognize that any copy of the Koran is simply a material object. It's what the pastor is saying by burning the pile that upsets everyone.

Well, so he's going to disparage, mock, and offend people. Is that any reason to deny him the opportunity to do so? Certainly not. We should all be free to disparage, mock, and offend whomever we want, so long as we don't do it violently. Or else what are Canadians killing and dying in Afghanistan for?

Is anything that one might do that shows disrespect to Islam or to Muslims, and so is offensive to Muslims, properly to draw the ire of Defence Minister Peter MacKay?

Colleagues of mine have described the Koran as an incoherent pastiche of folk lore and bits plagiarized from two or three other religious traditions. One writer has argued that the Muslim (and Jewish) prohibition on pork arose from an association between pig flesh and human flesh. I've heard it said that there is little in either the Koran or Muslim tradition that supports tolerance of ways of life not sanctioned by the Koran. It's their secularity, not their religion, my colleague concluded, that explains the warmth and fondness that Canadian Muslims show their fellow citizens.

Should these various professors have thought twice before making their findings public? Or does disparagement of Islam or Muslims fail to be offensive (though it still might give offence) when the result of sound inquiry?

Academics insult people, intentionally or not, by doing their thing, pastors by doing theirs. So academics are allowed voice their criticism and, indeed, their disdain, in their preferred ways, but not pastors in theirs? So academics aren't to be allowed to do their thing?

Muslims ought not be offended by even the most mean-spirited Koran burning we can imagine, for to be mean-spirited is to fail to know God. Someone proposing to burn a Koran should, one would think, evoke pity and sympathetic concern, not anger.

Peter MacKay says the pastor shouldn't burn the Koran, for doing so will put Canadian troops at risk. This is hard to credit. Does MacKay think that, after the burning, those presently trying to kill Canadians will really try to kill them?

Muslim anger might well result in some deaths. (This vile absurdity should be the real story here.) That people kill people is absolutely horrible. But what are we to do here? Are we to remain hostages? Does blackmail trump everything?

Do remember that the pastor is planning to burn copies of a book. The thought of killing anyone hasn't crossed his mind.

Well, at least, some might urge, we should voice our opposition to what he plans to do, even though we must, regretfully, stand aside and let him do it. I say: Not a bit of it!

The only way I can see to get out of this crazy predicament in which people cannot say what they want about Islam or Muslims without putting life and limb at risk is to start putting life and limb at risk. They're deadly serious about copies of the Koran; we're deadly serious about freedom and civil society.

So go ahead, burn a pile of Korans, even if you are doing it in hate. Let's hope that the police protect us. Let us make disparaging Islam an everyday thing, so that no one cares anymore.

Do we really want to give in to maniacs and to live in fear?