Burning the Qu’ran, Burning the Bible **[1]**

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Last night I watched The Book of Eli [2] with some friends. I really enjoyed the movie, primarily because I am a huge fan of the post-apocalyptic genre (I am convinced there were some strong *Fallout* influences in that movie). While the writers definitely had a point that they were trying to make, I do not know what it was, and I think that one should not take the movie too seriously from a Christian theological perspective. In the movie, the protagonist Eli (Denzel Washington) is journeying "West", carrying the only surviving Bible in the world and guarding it with his life. All the other Bibles were destroyed after a destructive nuclear war which ravaged the world, as the people blamed it for the war. Driving back after the movie, I thought about the possibility that we shall soon see a whole lot of Bibles being burned.

The catalyst for this thought, was the story of a small church in America which wanted to burn 200 copies of the Qu’ran [3] tomorrow, on the 9th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks [4]. It is no mystery that nothing in sacred in this secular, globalised world any more: blasphemy is rife. But there are still some boundaries which do not get crossed. Burning religious books en masse is one of the few remaining. Reverend Terry Jones has been threatening this implied truce by wanting to burn copies of the Qu'ran to take a standpoint against Islam.

The Qu'ran

I have personally never even read the Qu'ran, so I am in no authoritative position to speak about it. But what I do know, is that the Qu'ran is considered by Muslims to be *holy*. Why? The Qu'ran contains the sayings of the prophet Muhammed, which are considered by Muslims to be the words of Allah. Mistreating the Qu'ran (for example, reading it while on the toilet), would be considered a blasphemy against Muhammed and Allah. Burning a Qu'ran would be a grievous blasphemy; one many Muslims would be willing to kill for to avenge.

The "Holy" Bible?

I may not know about the Qu'ran, but I do know about the Bible. Is the Bible holy, like the Qu'ran is?

When I was at school, the leader of the Bible study group which I attended confused me, for a while, about this. At one point, he said that the Bible was the Word of God and was therefore holy. At another time, he said that the Bible is just a book and there is nothing sacred about it, plonking it down on a coffee table to make his point. This confused me for a number of years, but looking back now, I know what he meant.

The Bible contains the Words of God. These words were inspired by God. They were written down by

men, but inspired by God. What is holy, is the message that these words bring. Writing these words down does not magically endow the paper, the ink and the binding with holy powers (although Hollywoods tries to convince us otherwise with its traditional vampire and horror movies)—as is the case with the Qu'ran, it seems. So the holiness lies in the *message* contained *within* the book, not the *object* itself. Therefore, in the movie *The Book of Eli*, (spoiler warning) Eli is able to deliver the Bible to its destination.

Burning Bibles?

So how would the burning of the Qu'ran in some small American church result in Bibles being burnt? I cannot say this for certain, of course, but I would expect certains groups (or at least one) to retaliate by burning Bibles. And I do not think that these groups would be Muslim, but Western and secular. They would accept the challenge if Reverend Jones were to throw down the gauntlet. They would use the liberties guaranteed by western countries [5] to show their opposition the Christian faith, which has traditionally agitated their liberal views.

Book Burning: What does the Bible say?

Many sceptics are eager to point to the flaws of the various churches in the past. Certainly, churches have historically burned book that opposed its view. The early church tirelessly tried to eradicate the gnostic teachings (and, by implication, its writings)1. The medieval/early renaissance church tried to suppress scientific and occultic practises which threatened its dominance in society.

But what does the Bible say about book burning?

In the ancient near east, there were not very many written books. They were very rare. In fact, the rarity of it itself endowed nearly any book with an almost mystical aura. So there were not very many books to destroy. Of course, books *were* destroyed on purpose: mostly by conquering armies trying to eradicate the conquered civilisation. But, in general, because books were so scarce2, they did not feature much in the lives of the ordinary people. But by the first century, the popularity of books was gaining momentum, and we actually find an example of book burning in the book of Acts, chapter 19. The apostle Paul preached in the city of Ephesus, and many people were converted from pagan religions and occultism. Those who were converted brought their books and burned them (Acts 19:17–20). I think there are a couple of important lessons which can be learned from this story:

- The people brought their *own* books, to which they at some point had some real spiritual attachment, and burned them.
- The church did not *instruct* them to do so. The people did it voluntarily as a sign of their repentance.

Now, I am not saying that this passage teaches wanton anarchy. What I do get from the passage, however, is that these people acted in *repentance*. They were not trying to provoke or suppress: book burning was *not* a weapon for them!

What is important to remember, however, is that this incident is *isolated* in the Bible and never alluded to again. It did not set a precedent. The principles which are (traditionally) associated with book burning (such as prejudice, hate, oppressiveness, elitism) are also not advocated in the Bible. What are advocated, though, are love, compassion, understanding and patience. Christians are not to provoke people through hostility. Neither should Christians force people to relinquish their view points: the job of the Christian is to expose a person to the truth of the risen Christ. If that person comes to accept Jesus as his Saviour, then the Christian can help the person to break free from his previous life.

The Hypocrites

So I condemn the proposed plan to burn copies of the Qu'ran in the name of the Christian faith. Anyone doing so is not exhibiting the characteristics of a true Christian.

But I have a bone to pick. This time not with a small church with only 50 members, but the leadership of the western world. See, everyone was very quick to condemn the burning of the Qu'ran. People had different reasons for this: some righteous, most not. But one generally got the feeling that the western leaders simply thought that the Reverend Jones and his congregation were simply not being "good sports" (although there were admittedly also a lot of safety concerns). So everyone was quick to defend the Muslims and protecting their right to having their holy book spared.

These are the same people, however, who support the Muhammed cartoons, dismissing opposition against it as an affront to freedom of speech. [6]

How does one reconcile these two conflicting standpoints? Hypocrisy is spoken in a single breath.

I have had a bee in my bonnet about the whole Muhammed-cartoon-issue for a while now. In the West, the general consensus is that Islam should "get over itself". Freedom of speech, yeah! But just as the burning of the Qu'ran is a desecration in the eyes of a Muslim, so is the drawing of a human figure, *especially* the one of their prophet. I could go on and on about this, but I am not going to.

European countries are also seemingly a gripped by xenophobia and try to suppress their Muslim minorities by imposing ridiculous bans on clothing [7] and buildings [8], all with weak excuses behind them, while silently killing off "freedom of speech and expression". My question is, when will the secular West start targeting its Christians?

The blasphemy of the Holy God whom I believe in is commonplace in the Western media today. That does not mean that I like it, nor that I am happy about it. I am certainly not proud of the "freedom of speech". I think it is a shame that this has happened and do not believe the world to be a better place. If a Muslim had stood against blasphemy of the God I worship as it was gaining popularity, I would have been thankful to that Muslim.

The only difference is that the God I worship does not need me to exercise His judgement on earth. His will come.

Aftermath?

Last night, as I was catching up on the day's news before going to sleep, I was relieved to see that the Dove World Outreach church has suspended its plans to burn the Qu'ran [9]. While I shall still be a bit tense until Saturday has passed, I am hoping that no more harm will come from this debacle.

- 1. It should be noted, however, that gnosticism was a dangerous perversion of Christianity itself, and not the church lashing out at some secular or pagan world view.
- 2. Ancient cultures relied more on oral tradition than written tradition. Indeed, some people argue that ancient cultures regarded oral traditions as more reliable than written down traditions. I cannot elaborate too much on this now, but in brief the thinking might have been as follows: people who write books usually do so in seclusion. So it was easy for a person writing something down to change it to his liking. Oral tradition, on the other hand, is a social thing. People hear the same stories told from childhood and eventually retell these stories themselves. If someone makes a mistake or changes something maliciously, then the audience would pick it up almost immediately. Additionally, not many people could read and write in ancient cultures, so they would be wholly reliant on a small group of people to preserve the history of the people, which was not desirable.
- . Photo credit: sayyed shahab-o- din vajedi [10].

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