

Muslims seek light amid political firestorm

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The crowd-control barriers and TV satellite trucks left after a Florida pastor called off plans to burn 200 Qur'ans, but American Muslims say the political firestorm in Gainesville was more than a momentary flare-up.

The incident laid bare the wildly different perceptions of Islam's sacred text between Americans—or at least some of them—and rank-and-file Muslims, not to mention the differing responses among Muslims at home and abroad.

But perhaps most troubling, Muslim leaders say the sacrilege of burning a holy text is less dangerous than the hatred or misunderstanding that motivated it, even after nine years of concerted outreach following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Even though Pastor Terry Jones's Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville promised never to set fire to a Qur'an, members of the fringe Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, did, along with an American flag.

Andrew Beacham, a Tea Party activist from Indiana, joined veteran antiabortion crusader Randall Terry at a small protest outside the White House, where Beacham ripped pages from a Qur'an. Vandals left copies of burnt Qur'ans at mosques in East Lansing, Michigan, and Knoxville, Tennessee.

The threatened bonfire showed the Qur'an's power to stir passions among Muslims, but the reaction can vary depending on Muslims' views of the Qur'an.

Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and to desecrate it is to desecrate the word of God. Some Muslims hold that because the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, translations are not the authentic word of God. Thus, burning an English-language translation of the Qur'an would, to some, be acceptable, however distasteful. Others say that Qur'ans are mere reproductions of God's word, not God's actual word.

"It's not the Qur'an that's being burned, it's the paper," said Imam Talal Eid, a Muslim member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Overseas, violent protests raged in Afghanistan that left two people dead. In the past five years, seven alleged incidents of Qur'an desecration—most notably reports of a Qur'an flushed in a toilet at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility—have led to violence and death, mainly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gaza Strip and Nigeria.

Muslim leaders tried to clamp down on efforts to burn Bibles in response. When a Muslim man in South Africa threatened to burn Bibles in response to Jones, Muslim groups sued to stop him. In Australia, two students were expelled from an Islamic school in Melbourne when they threatened to burn Bibles.

"Part of [the controversy] has to do with attitudes toward free speech in the Muslim world and in the West," said Shahed Amanullah, editor of *altnuslim*, a web magazine. "The Muslim world is still not used to the idea of free speech, whereas here in the West, we understand that someone is always going to do something sacrilegious, and we've all developed thicker skins as a result."

In the U.S., many Muslim leaders tried to ignore Jones's bonfire plan, not wanting to give him additional attention. Others tried to intervene, including Imam Muhammad Musri of the Islamic Society of Central Florida, who showed up unannounced at Jones's office to try to broker a cease-fire.

"Instead of protesting the Qur'an burnings—and playing into the hands of extremist publicity-seekers like Pastor Jones—American Muslims and Muslims around the world should . . . reach out to people of other faiths and beliefs to build bridges of respect and understanding," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Laleh Bakhtiar, the first American woman to translate the Qur'an into English, said the episode also highlighted a theological difference, found among Muslims and Christians alike, between belief in a vengeful God who demands action and belief in a loving God who counsels peace.

"If it's fear of God, then you get these extremists. When you teach love of God, then you become a moderate," said Bakhtiar. "The pastor is acting out of fear of God. And the Muslim people that protested this—they're also acting out of fear."

Eid, meanwhile, sees in Jones a hatred, ignorance of or even ambivalence toward Muslims and worries that Jones and his 50-member church, however isolated, tapped into the ugly underbelly of post-9/11 America.

"He's trying to hurt every Muslim," Eid said of Jones.

Amanullah, however, finds reason for optimism in the response from Christians and Jews, government leaders and, especially, Muslims themselves.

"There're some really amazing things that have come out of this," he said. "One is that the world is seeing Muslims reach out in the spirit of friendship, which completely blows away the stereotype. The other thing is seeing every denomination circle the wagons around Muslims, saying we have a respect for scripture, even if it's not ours." —RNS